



THE DE-ISOLATION OF ABKHAZIA

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Acronyms

CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
EU	European Union
EUMM	Monitoring Mission of the European Union
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IIFMCG	International Independent Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia
IPRM	Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PACE	Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe
UN	United Nations
UNOMIG	United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia
US	United States

Note on spelling: Geographic denominations are always a contentious issue in the Georgian-Abkhaz context. In this publication, the preferred spelling of the individual authors has been retained.

Introduction

This publication is the fourth in a series of ‘Dialogue through Research’ reports produced by Georgian and Abkhaz experts. The reports seek to shed new light on the conflict and to stimulate a different way of thinking about conflict-related issues.

The first three publications examined the themes of security guarantees (September 2009), international engagement in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict resolution process (May 2010) and the politics of non-recognition (March 2011)¹. The latter two themes in particular led dialogue participants to the conclusion that there could be no progress on improving Georgian-Abkhaz relations – and hence no prospect of a resolution of the conflict – until Abkhazia was ‘opened up’ more to the outside world. The need for greater ‘engagement’ has been a common message among conflict-resolution experts in recent years and has even been enshrined in official policies. Nevertheless, the trend on the ground suggested a risk of increasing alienation rather than rapprochement. Researchers therefore agreed it was necessary to examine more in-depth the arguments for and against isolation, as well as to explore how a coercive approach narrows the space for constructive engagement.

Both the Georgian and Abkhaz research groups examine the origins and original rationale behind the policy of isolation of Abkhazia, going back to the early 1990s. At the same time, they look at the motivations of different actors and indeed at how effective ‘isolation’ proved to be. Did the policy fulfil its objectives, and what effect did it have on transformation of the conflict? Acknowledging that isolation has only contributed to growing alienation and resentment, the researchers then go on to compare and contrast the recent European strategy of ‘non-recognition and engagement’ and the Georgian ‘Strategy on the Occupied Territories: Engagement through Cooperation’. The authors argue that despite the apparent similarities and complementarities between the two strategies on a superficial level, they actually have quite contrasting aims at their heart which reflect the ‘isolation/de-isolation’ debate. On this matter, both the Georgian and Abkhaz researchers offer a strikingly similar analysis.

In addition, the Abkhaz paper includes an assessment of the internal discourse on de-isolation. In particular, it looks at some of the legitimate fears of the Abkhaz people, offering some explanation for the phenomenon of ‘self-isolation’ and why internal political struggles that manipulate the dichotomy of Russia versus the West gain so much traction.

Taken together, the papers offer an insight that should help policymakers and students alike to understand some of the nuances of the de-isolation debate. Recommendations are made to encourage the international community – namely the EU and the US – to be better aligned in their policies and to consider more in-depth what meaningful engagement and a carefully managed and mutually beneficial ‘de-isolation’ could look like. While the two research groups differ in opinion in terms of questions – such as the conditionality and phasing of de-isolation and of the overarching goal – they clearly agree on the direction. We hope that this publication will help to put these arguments across to a wider audience, stimulating an honest and open debate both locally and internationally on the dire consequences of Abkhazia’s deepening isolation from the rest of the world.

¹ These publications can be found on International Alert’s website at <http://www.international-alert.org/ourwork/regional/caucasuscentralasia/caucasus>.

Part 1 – The Abkhaz Perspective

Current prospects for the de-isolation of Abkhazia

Introduction

Irakli Khintba

The issue of Abkhazia's isolation has remained relevant throughout the whole period since the end of the 1992–1993 Georgian-Abkhaz war. At various times in that period, Abkhazia has faced a humanitarian blockade and enormous pressure from all the external actors engaged in the conflict resolution process. Although Russia has made significant adjustments to its policies over the period, including the de-isolation of Abkhazia, Abkhazia continues to face *de facto* isolation from the West – that is, the European Union (EU), the individual European member states and the United States (US).

International experience clearly shows that isolation, and indeed sanctions, rarely achieve their objective². From a political perspective, attempts to isolate a country's administration inevitably lead to the isolation of the entire society, as people inevitably rally behind their rulers in the face of a common enemy.

Moscow's recognition of Abkhaz independence in August 2008 gave it unparalleled influence over Abkhaz affairs. Abkhazia has little alternative to its increasing (one-way) dependence on Russia given the continuing isolation from the West. Georgia also opposes Abkhazia's de-isolation on the basis that opening it up to the outside world would only distance it further from the former capital Tbilisi and perhaps even lead to the international recognition of the 'breakaway' republic's independence.

Although Abkhazia is interested in developing links with the West, domestic discourse on de-isolation is confused and beset by myths and 'historical grievances'. More often than not, it is instrumentalised by competing political forces and radicalised.

This abridged version of articles by Abkhaz authors meets a number of objectives: it begins by presenting an analysis of de-isolation in relation to the transformation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict; it then goes on to examine domestic Abkhaz discourse on interaction with the West; thirdly, it assesses Georgia's role in strengthening Abkhazia's isolation; and finally, it suggests potential means by which Abkhazia and the West can establish effective relations³.

² Every year seems to bring evidence of the failure of the isolation policy. In 2010 alone, the US abandoned its decades-long isolation of Myanmar in Southeast Asia. This isolation had only strengthened totalitarian-style authoritarianism, exacerbated economic problems and led to the political rapprochement of Rangoon and Beijing.

³ In this article, 'the West' refers to the significant external actors in the Georgian-Abkhaz context: namely, the US and the EU, as well as individual European countries.

Abkhazia's isolation/de-isolation and the transformation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict: an historical political analysis

Natella Akaba and Inar Gitsba

The international community has a number of different types of sanctions at its disposal, from trade, financial and transport sanctions to political sanctions. Almost all of these have been imposed on Abkhazia, combining to place it under a blockade lasting many years. Although the start of the blockade⁴ and isolation of Abkhazia is usually dated from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Summit decision of 19th September 1996, it in fact began much earlier. In the very first days of the armed conflict between the Georgians and the Abkhaz in mid- and late August 1992, the residents of the towns and villages of the Tkuarchal and Gudauta districts and parts of the Ochamchira and Gagra districts⁵ were cut off from the rest of Abkhazia and its land borders. At the same time, the Georgian military took control of Sukhum airport within a few days of the outbreak of war. From then on, and until the liberation of Gagra from Georgian military control in October 1992, virtually the only routes open to residents of the Gudauta district wishing to leave or return to Abkhazia were by air (via the Gudauta military aerodrome) or sea (on boats out of Gudauta arranged by the Russian military and representatives of humanitarian organisations). These were also the only routes by which humanitarian supplies could reach the population⁶ and the large numbers of refugees from Abkhaz areas under the control of the Georgian military.

It was not until the summer of 1993 that the Russian emergencies ministry, together with the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) and the United Nations (UN), began providing a relatively regular supply of humanitarian aid to the blockaded population, evacuating the sick and wounded and providing essential supplies. Once Abkhaz forces had taken control of Gagra, residents of Western Abkhazia and non-Georgian refugees were able to leave for Russia.

However, as quickly became apparent, this was only a brief respite. The Russian government imposed sanctions against Abkhazia in response to the Abkhaz military operation in September 1993 and the liberation of Abkhaz territory from Georgian troops. Abkhazia's electricity supply was cut off, telephone communications were cut and the border along the Psou River was again closed – a move which impacted heavily on a population still reeling from the other effects of the war. In December 1994, any person holding a Soviet-era passport and registered in Abkhazia was turned back from the Russian-Abkhaz border.

Abkhazia's position deteriorated after 19th January 1996, when Moscow, at the Tbilisi authorities' insistence, approved the 'Resolution of the Council of CIS Heads of State on measures to resolve the conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia'. This resolution gave legal backing to the isolation of Abkhazia from the outside world⁷. A crucial aspect of this document was its statement that 'Abkhazia is an integral part of Georgia' and that CIS member states would not, without the approval of the government of Georgia: a) conduct trade, financial, transport or other transactions with

4 The use of the term 'blockade' appears justified in the case of Abkhazia. One (Russian language) definition of this term is as follows: 'An economic blockade is a system of economic sanctions and measures imposed by certain states against a separate country for the purpose of its economic isolation'. A dictionary (finam.ru) definition is available in Russian at <http://dictionary.finam.ru/dictionary/wordf03264/default.asp?n=2>.

5 This refers to the non-Georgian population of Abkhazia.

6 The non-Georgian population in the Tkuarchal and Ochamchira districts, which was under a real blockade up to the very end of hostilities with the violation of all humanitarian law standards, faced particularly difficult privations. In the first months of hostilities, these people could rely on Russian helicopters to provide them with much-needed humanitarian flights from Gudauta to Tkuarchal, inside the blockade, and back. On 14th December 1992, one of these helicopters carrying mainly women and children out of Tkuarchal was hit by a Georgian missile over the Svan-populated mountain village of Lata. This caused the death of more than 60 people.

7 It should be noted that Belarus and Turkmenistan abstained, citing their neutrality status as the reason.

the authorities on the Abkhaz side; and b) hold any official contacts with representatives or officials of structures existing on Abkhaz territory, or with members of any military formations created by them. The CIS member countries called on the UN Security Council to support the enforcement action taken by CIS members against the authorities on the Abkhaz side and to recommend that all UN member states apply the actions listed in that document.

The blockade and isolation of Abkhazia is normally considered exclusively in terms of the sanctions imposed on it by the CIS. In fact, the global international institutions, such as the UN represented by the Security Council, also contributed to Abkhazia's isolation. The UN Security Council resolutions and speeches by the Secretary General during the period of open hostilities could scarcely be called objective since their criticism was directed exclusively at the Abkhaz side. As the Abkhaz political scientist Irakli Khintba rightly notes: 'tellingly, no UN Security Council resolutions on Abkhazia were adopted until the final phase of the war, when Georgian troops were starting to lose ground. There had been no response at all from New York to Georgia's attack on Abkhazia or the acute humanitarian crises during the conflict, despite Vladislav Ardzinba repeatedly reporting to Boutros Boutros-Ghali on the widespread human rights abuses committed by the Georgian troops'⁸.

Abkhazia was almost entirely cut off from the outside world⁹ until 1999, when the Russian government eased, although did not entirely lift, its sanctions. It was clear that the reprisal measures had not achieved the goals expected by those who had launched them. They had not made the administration or the population of Abkhazia more 'compliant' and had not allowed refugees to return to their homes. The report of the UN Needs Assessment Mission to Abkhazia, prepared in February 1998, also showed that the sanctions had had little effect, revealing that political positions had in fact become more entrenched. The report suggested that restrictions be eased in the interest of promoting reconciliation and of creating a better negotiating climate¹⁰. Interestingly, the 'Group of Friends of the UN Secretary General' on Georgia more than once recommended lifting the economic sanctions imposed on Abkhazia. This was also recommended in UN Security Council Resolution 1781 of 15th October 2007¹¹ – that is, after Moscow had lifted the policy of reprisals against Abkhazia. However, the administration in Tbilisi categorically refused to discuss lifting sanctions until Georgia's 'territorial integrity' was restored and refugees returned to the whole territory of Abkhazia.

It is regrettable that international observers and human rights experts 'overlooked' the fact that the imposition of sanctions led to the *de facto* internment of a significant proportion of the Abkhaz population. All men between 16 and 60 years of age and citizens of the republic who had been deprived of their passports during or after the hostilities were unable to travel outside Abkhazia. The sanctions clearly involved mass violations of one of the fundamental human rights – the right to freedom of movement.

In relation to the economic consequences of the sanctions, Abkhazia was no exception to the rule that a black market will always arise to fill the gap created when a free market economy cannot operate. As Jonathan Cohen notes, trade restrictions caused much hardship in Abkhazia but instead of forcing the Abkhaz to make concessions, they simply generated a siege mentality. 'It also contributes to the development of a criminal and national resistance economy that undermines prospects for the entrenchment of the rule of law'¹².

8 Irakli Khintba, 'The UN in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict: Past, present, future', p. 6 (forthcoming).

9 The Georgian administration actively ensured that the isolation and blockade of Abkhazia were comprehensive by passing the relevant statutes and submitting documents to block the use of Abkhazia's maritime ports and Sukhum airport by international traffic. The Abkhaz section of the Transcaucasian Railway was also blocked, which also tightened the blockade of Armenia.

10 United Nations Development Programme, 'United Nations Needs Assessment Mission to Abkhazia', Working Group III, March 1998.

11 Notably, the preamble states: 'Stressing that economic development is urgently required in Abkhazia, Georgia, to improve the livelihoods of the communities affected by the conflict, in particular refugees and internally displaced persons.' UN Security Council Resolution 1781 of 15th October 2007. Available at <http://www.unhcr.org/refworld/country,,,RESOLUTION,GEO,,4715b8db2,0.html>.

12 Jonathan Cohen (1999). 'Economic dimensions: Incentive or obstacle?' in 'A question of sovereignty, the Georgia-Abkhazia peace process', *Accord*, Issue 7, Conciliation Resources. Available at <http://www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/georgia-abkhazia/index.php>.

As sanctions tightened, the residents of the republic felt increasingly abandoned by the rest of the world. The queues and sums demanded at the border, particularly during the mandarin orange and mimosa seasons, were an attempt to humiliate the people and demonstrated a total disregard for human dignity¹³.

Whereas there was both anti-Georgian and anti-Russian sentiment when the blockade was at its height, attitudes gradually started to shift in Russia's favour as it eased its sanctions. The statement by the Russian Ministry of the Interior on 6th March 2008 that it would unilaterally lift sanctions against Abkhazia was greeted with jubilation and gratitude in Sukhum, but with indignation in Tbilisi. In our view, there were a number of factors behind Russia's decision to lift the sanctions. The primary factor was the West's recognition of Kosovo, which was made without consideration of Russia's opinion. The decision to hold the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi – situated just north of Russia's border with Abkhazia – was also important, as it made any further blockade and isolation of Abkhazia absurd.

Although the situation in Abkhazia improved significantly once Russia unilaterally lifted its sanctions, it is still too early to talk of the country emerging completely from its isolation. Despite Abkhazia's independence being recognised by the Russian Federation and a number of other countries, it continues to suffer the consequences of international isolation. The administration in Tbilisi continues to use every means available to it to block any attempt to develop a financial system for Abkhazia¹⁴. At the same time, it makes every effort to prevent the relicensing of Sukhum airport and the opening of Sukhum's maritime port¹⁵. If we add to this the difficulty and at times impossibility for residents of Abkhazia to obtain visas for many foreign countries, it is clear that Abkhazia's isolation is far from over.

13 Many people recall to this day that, during the blockade, a medical centre was set up close to the Russian-Abkhaz border, at which Abkhaz citizens were forced to undergo a test for HIV.

14 There are no automated teller machines (ATMs) in the country. Residents of Abkhazia cannot make purchases on the internet as there is no means of paying for them.

15 Even the opening of a Benetton shop in Sukhum provoked protests in Tbilisi, as did the news that Russian mobile phone network providers were operating in Abkhazia.

Georgian policy on Abkhazia: strategy or tactic?

Liana Kvarchelia

Two concepts have come to dominate Georgian political discourse on the so-called ‘conflict regions’ since August 2008: ‘the occupied territories’ and the proclaimed new approach to resolving these conflicts, under the so-called ‘strategy on the occupied territories’. The use of the term ‘the occupied territories’ represents a logical continuation of the Georgian policy formed after the Rose Revolution. This denied the existence of any conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia *per se* and portrayed the conflict to the global community as one primarily between Russia and Georgia. The ‘Law on the Occupied Territories’¹⁶ recognised Russia as a party to the conflict, in effect assigning Abkhazia and South Ossetia the role of an object rather than a subject in the conflict. This meant that the Georgian authorities were not only ignoring the will of the people in both republics, along with their right to self-determination; they were also denying their own responsibility for the outbreak of hostilities (in 1992 and 2008) and completely ignoring the entirely legitimate fears of the people of Abkhazia and South Ossetia regarding the threat posed by Georgia and their need for realistic security guarantees. The Georgian administration also appears to believe that more action is required to ‘return the territories’ than merely keeping the focus on the conflict between Russia and Georgia. Fearing that the situation may become ‘Kosovised’, leading to international recognition of Abkhazia, the administration in Tbilisi has approved a series of documents¹⁷ since August 2008, strengthening the policy of isolating Sukhum¹⁸.

The ‘Law on the Occupied Territories’ is an attempt by the Georgian administration to provide a legal basis to regulate and restrict contacts between the outside world and Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, its demand that Russia be recognised as an ‘occupying force’ put the international community in a difficult position. Despite its criticism of Russia for recognising the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the international community considers this a step too far. The report of the International Fact-Finding Mission¹⁹ on the events of August 2008 quite deliberately assigned a large portion of the responsibility for initiating military action to Georgia. The Law was also criticised from the perspective of international standards²⁰.

Comments from influential international institutions directed at the Georgian authorities regarding the ‘Law on the Occupied Territories’ and the publication of the report of the International Fact-Finding Mission on the events of August 2008 signalled a new tendency among the international community to regard actions by the current administration in Georgia fairly critically. To avoid accusations that they were adopting a non-constructive position, Georgia had to contrive somehow to present the world with a ‘new’ concept that, while essentially operating in Georgia’s interests, would simultaneously appear to be a constructive step towards the transformation of the conflict. The ‘State Strategy on the Occupied Territories’ was designed to do just that. The rhetoric that accompanied the development of the Strategy was clearly aimed at a positive reception by the West and at improving the image of the administration in Tbilisi, with the occasional reference to ‘confidence building’ and the needs of the ‘population living in misery’. Some ‘softening’ of the

16 See legislation at [http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/2009/CDL\(2009\)004-e.asp](http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/2009/CDL(2009)004-e.asp).

17 These documents were the ‘Law on the Occupied Territories’, the ‘State Strategy on the Occupied Territories’ and the Order of the Government of Georgia enacting rules for organisations conducting activities in the occupied territories of Georgia.

18 We have in mind primarily the attempts to restrict contacts with the EU and Turkey.

19 Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia.

20 In his report of 3rd February 2009, the UN Secretary-General noted that some prohibitions in the ‘Law on the Occupied Territories’ cause concern in the international community in terms of humanitarian organisations’ access to zones suffering from conflict. The Venice Commission also commented on this, noting a set of provisions which should be brought to the attention of the Georgian authorities. See the European Commission for Democracy through Law (Venice Commission) Opinion on the Law on Occupied Territories of Georgia. Adopted by the Venice Commission at its 78th Plenary Session, Venice, 13th–14th March 2009. Available at [http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/2009/CDL\(2009\)004-e.asp](http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/2009/CDL(2009)004-e.asp).

tone was also needed to ensure that both Georgia and the world community could reasonably expect ‘constructive action’ from Abkhazia and South Ossetia in response to Georgia’s ‘peace’ initiatives.

A further factor behind the publication of the Strategy may have been the statement by EU representatives that the EU would adopt a policy of ‘engagement without recognition’ in relation to Abkhazia. Increasing references to ‘non-recognition but engagement’ issued from the lips of some European bureaucrats – instead of the traditional expressions of support for ‘territorial integrity’ – are likely to have been met with consternation in official circles in Georgia. The Georgian authorities have no desire for Abkhazia to be perceived in the West as an independent actor. Similarly, it is opposed to any interaction between Abkhazia and the EU that would contribute to the de-isolation of Sukhum by exploding the myth assiduously constructed by Georgia of ‘a black hole’, ‘an occupied territory’ with a ‘puppet regime’. Ultimately, such developments could lead to the widening of Abkhazia’s international contacts. At the very least, the Georgian administration cannot see how direct interaction between the EU and Abkhazia could possibly promote Georgian policy.

The preamble in the official document, entitled ‘the State Strategy on the Occupied Territories’ (hereafter referred to as ‘the Strategy’), begins by stating the humanitarian aim of securing a bright future for citizens. However, its political component is quickly manifested in the statement that the population of ‘the country’ (Georgia) includes the residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as in a number of direct references to the so-called ‘Law on the Occupied Territories’ (hereafter referred to as ‘the Law’). The Strategy states that all contact between the population of the ‘occupied territories’ and the outside world may only take place via Georgia, with Georgia’s consent or mediated by the Georgian authorities. The de-isolation and improved wellbeing of the population of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are made directly conditional on its willingness to collaborate with the Georgian authorities and obey Georgian law. While proposing extensive collaboration with the population, the Tbilisi administration at the same time reduces interaction with the official authorities of Abkhazia to a minimum. This can only be interpreted as an attempt to de-legitimise the official bodies operating in Abkhazia. The proposal, in fact, can be regarded as a transitional model, under which the citizens of Abkhazia gradually withdraw from the Abkhaz legal framework and come under Georgian jurisdiction²¹. ‘Reintegration’, according to the document, is conditional on ‘de-occupation’ – that is, the withdrawal of Russian troops, whose presence the population of Abkhazia sees today as the most lasting guarantee yet against the Georgian threat.

It is clear then that this is not a new Georgian strategy, but merely a new tactic to which the Georgian administration has had to resort following its failed attempt in August 2008 to ‘restore its territorial integrity’ through the use of force. The Georgian authorities might have been better advised to de-politicise the Strategy completely and present its sole aim as ‘collaboration to restore confidence’. Although this would probably not generate much optimism on the Abkhaz side – as the Georgian agenda is too obvious for that and the level of trust between the two societies is virtually nil – it would at least have given the Georgian authorities more standing in the eyes of international observers, at little risk to them. However, the Georgian administration, alarmed that international circles appeared to be undecided over opting to establish contacts with Abkhazia²², felt that even the restrictions and bans contained in the ‘Law on the Occupied Territories’ and the ‘Engagement Strategy’ did not go far enough. They were followed by the ‘Modalities for Engagement’²³ for international organisations in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which require any activity conducted by international organisations in the two republics to be subjected to thorough clearance by the Georgian administration. This includes

21 This aim should be supported by transition structures such as a ‘Financial Institution’ and ‘Cooperation Agency’.

22 The idea of ‘engagement without recognition’ was first raised by Peter Semneby, EU Representative in the South Caucasus. It was supported in European expert and journalist circles. The initiative was analysed in more detail and supported by the US experts: Alexander Cooley and Lincoln A. Mitchell. ‘Engagement without recognition: A new Strategy toward Abkhazia and Eurasia’s Unrecognized States’, Center for Strategic and International Studies, *The Washington Quarterly*, October 2010, pp. 59–73.

23 Regulation of the Government of Georgia – On Approval of Modalities for Conducting Activities in the Occupied Territories of Georgia, 15th October 2010. Available at <http://www.smr.gov.ge/uploads/file/041010/Modalities%20for%20Engagement.pdf> [26Kb PDF].

reserving the right to ban the activities of any international organisation. Emerging so soon after the Strategy, the Modalities are clear evidence that Georgia is using it to seize the initiative from the EU and ensure that any international proposals on the de-isolation of Abkhazia are couched in Georgian terms of 'de-occupation' and 'reintegration'.

Official international criticism of the Georgian administration's restrictions on the activity of international organisations is traditionally never made public. This is a pity since it means that the Georgian authorities do not view it as a warning that might lead to specific sanctions. However, the Georgian administration cannot entirely disregard the views of official international institutions, although the authors of the Modalities may feel that the document has received too much publicity for it to be abandoned entirely without losing face. In fact, the impression is emerging that the Modalities are not being applied as comprehensively as originally anticipated, with officials not insisting on strict compliance given the negative perception of the document by Western organisations.

In an alarming trend, however, attacks by the Georgian authorities on individual international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) working in Abkhazia and Georgia have increased. These INGOs are perceived both by Georgian and Abkhaz civil society organisation as neutral and non-partisan. Clearly, it is precisely this lack of bias that makes these organisations so disliked by the Georgian authorities. Attacks on these organisations may indicate that the Georgian authorities are attempting to 'save face' following their reluctant relaxation of the 'modalities' regime, by forcing 'unsuitable' international organisations to leave the region and attempting to marginalise Georgian activists engaged in conflict-related issues.

The effectiveness of the Georgian Strategy should be assessed against its true aims. The Georgian administration (and society) now clearly see 'restoration of territorial integrity' ('reintegration') as a long-term prospect for obvious reasons. Concerned to prevent any further recognition of Abkhazia, the Georgian authorities are likely to see their short and medium-term aims as the isolation of Abkhazia and its marginalisation in the eyes of the international community. The Strategy itself may well merely be a propaganda exercise designed by the Georgian administration to acquit itself of responsibility in the eyes of its own society for the 'loss' of Abkhazia. It presents its society with a 'peace plan' but can always put the blame for the 'failure' of the idea on Russia. The Georgian administration understands very well that the idea of 'reintegration' can only provoke protest from Abkhazia. However, if so, the Abkhaz side will share the 'blame' with Russia for the failure of the Georgian 'peace' initiative.

Georgia's position is based on a set of fears, which are themselves inconsistent. On the one hand, the administration in Tbilisi fears 'creeping' recognition of Abkhazia and is attempting to isolate it from the Western world. On the other hand, the authorities in Georgia are worried that Russia's position in the region will be strengthened, but still create obstacles to any expansion of the EU presence in Abkhazia. This position makes sense if Georgia expects the underlying contradictions in Abkhazia's relations with Russia to deepen, leading to Abkhazia gradually 'drifting' towards Georgia.

For all the difficulties of building relations with a much more powerful ally (and, while Abkhazia is still only partially recognised, practically the only ally available), Abkhaz society sees Russia as the guarantor of its security. Georgia, on the other hand – the main opponent of Abkhazia's right to self-determination – is seen by Abkhazia as a political and military threat. The sometimes faltering progress on establishing the Russian-Abkhaz partnership may lead to false hopes in Georgia that Abkhazia may be willing to return to 'Georgia's bosom' once it realises all the challenges this asymmetrical relationship entails. In fact, Abkhaz society does not view a 'return' to Georgia as a viable alternative to the alliance with Russia. One possible interpretation is that Tbilisi is well aware that Abkhazia is lost to Georgia and that there are no realistic prospects of 'reintegration'. If so, statements that Russia is set to absorb Abkhazia can only be designed, apart

from providing some rather dubious ‘moral’ satisfaction, to ‘absolve’ the authorities in the eyes of Georgian society of blame for their failure to fulfil their promise that they would celebrate the new year in Abkhazia²⁴.

To sum up, the approach taken by the administration in Tbilisi to the conflict in Abkhazia is a relatively utilitarian one, dominated by short and medium-term goals. Thus, any decisions or tactical moves are primarily aimed at bolstering the authority of the present administration. Naturally, conflict transformation will not be a priority under this approach.

Any change to the existing paradigm would require all sides engaged in the conflict and its resolution to take certain steps.

- Firstly, the policy of denying the existence of a Georgian-Abkhaz conflict should be abandoned. The approval of the ‘Law on the Occupied Territories’ and lobbying by the Georgian authorities for various international institutions to pass resolutions on ‘the occupied territories’ is only exacerbating the conflict and making the prospect of resolving it even more remote.
- The Georgian authorities must recognise that the conflict cannot be resolved without Abkhaz participation. This involves rethinking the format of the Geneva talks, where participants are currently represented in a private capacity. Changing the format would ensure that the sides take increased responsibility for the process and its outcomes. The signing of an agreement on the non-use of force between Tbilisi and Sukhum could be a major contribution to confidence building between the sides.
- The view is growing within Abkhaz society that the conflict with Georgia is over following the war in August 2008 and Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia’s independence. However, this glosses over the current and future challenges facing the Abkhaz state which need to be assessed on a more constructive basis. An internal public debate is needed on what is meant by the term ‘sustainable peace’ and what the price might be of failure to resolve the conflict.
- The fact that the Georgian Strategy links Europe’s policy of ‘engagement’ to the Georgian concept of ‘reintegration’ has discredited the European initiative in the eyes of Abkhaz society. This in turn has restricted opportunities for real interaction between the EU and Abkhazia. It is therefore crucial that the EU strategy is clearly articulated and presented as an independent initiative in its own right, rather than one committed to a goal of ‘restoring the territorial integrity’ of Georgia. The EU strategy should also avoid making the cornerstone of its policy facilitating collaboration between Abkhazia and Georgia. The priority should instead be to open channels of communication between Abkhazia and Europe, the countries of the Black Sea basin and the South Caucasus. This will itself lead to the creation of a more favourable climate for interaction between Abkhazia and Georgia²⁵.
- The wording of the Georgian Strategy means that it could be interpreted as covering almost all possible forms of communication between Abkhazia and the Western world. This is presumably to thwart any independent attempts by Abkhazia to interact, in particular, with the EU. The authorities and opposition forces in Abkhazia should recognise this and avoid ‘playing into’ the hands of the Georgian authorities by cutting themselves off from contact with the international community and refusing to deal with the finer points of European policy.

24 See ‘Saakashvili’s Televised Phone-in’, Civil Georgia, 25th January 2011. Available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=23082> =.

25 Collaboration cannot be expected beyond a real need for it. Current examples of collaboration based on real needs are interaction over the Ingur hydroelectric power station and the five-sided incident prevention mechanism. It is essential to establish realistic, constructive goals and reject, initially, repressive measures.

De-isolation in Abkhaz public discourse

Arda Inal-Ipa

Following the emergence of the European strategy of ‘engagement without recognition’ – which was meant to herald the end of the policy of isolating Abkhazia – the phrase ‘de-isolation of Abkhazia’ was heard increasingly in Abkhaz political and public discourse. Although the term was very popular with Abkhaz politicians, public opinion was rather more complex²⁶.

Within the context of the political aspirations of Abkhazia’s political elite, de-isolation is viewed as an important outcome of international recognition of the republic’s independence, rather than an independent (interim) goal in its own right. Nevertheless, a number of ‘parameters’ of de-isolation are often presented as specific aims of Abkhaz foreign policy or the negotiation process. Chiefly, these are the free movement of the citizens of the Republic of Abkhazia, the opening of transit corridors (maritime, rail, air) and associated plans for economic development. Abkhaz politicians rarely, if ever, question the extent to which the state is ready for wider collaboration with the outside world, or whether in its current condition it is able to meet international economic and legal standards.

On the other hand, policymakers also say little about the fears associated with the prospect of a wider opening up of Abkhazia and the safeguards this would require. Their silence is more than offset by loud expressions of concern in some sections of society in Abkhazia over the potential negative consequences of the complete de-isolation of Abkhazia. Not that the public ignores or underestimates the beneficial aspects of de-isolation: opportunities in the field of education, healthcare and business development are met with particular interest. However, the beneficial prospects for individuals are often overshadowed by gloomy predictions about maintaining collective national values. As a result, de-isolation is often seen as a process by which Abkhaz life and customs will disappear forever under the aggressive influence of globalisation, which will have an adverse effect on Abkhaz culture and language along with its distinctive, traditional social institutions.

At the political level, many people are concerned that Georgia might exploit Abkhazia’s openness for its own purposes. Some even feel that the process of de-isolation might force Abkhazia to interact with Georgia and even lead to the peaceful ‘annexation’ of Abkhazia, unless mechanisms are put in place to prevent this. This reflects concerns that this will inevitably exacerbate the already worrying problem of the Georgian refugees.

There are also concerns that the Russian Federation’s sponsorship – particularly important in areas where Abkhazia’s opportunities are significantly restricted due to its partial recognition – and Russian economic assistance might be significantly reduced or withdrawn completely if Abkhazia starts to develop contacts with Western countries. This would jeopardise a number of large government projects currently being implemented with Russian funding.

For its part, private business is very concerned that it will be unable to compete outside Russia, despite the prospect of greater market expansion and new technologies²⁷.

26 This article attempts to analyse the sources of the ambivalent attitude in Abkhazia to prospects of de-isolation on the basis of material from earlier sociological surveys. Dozens of individual interviews and a number of focus groups explored the problems of the political recognition of Abkhazia. The role of the international community in Abkhazia’s internal development provided a wide-ranging pool of secondary material on the topic which is here separated, synthesised and analysed.

27 This article does not address the question of which groups or social classes in Abkhaz society are more likely to have a positive or negative attitude to the prospect of the de-isolation of Abkhazia, although in certain circles a particular view may prevail; this would be the subject of a separate study.

The rather guarded response to de-isolation seen in some sections of Abkhaz society reflects fears rooted in Abkhazia's dramatic history from the mid-19th century to the present day. In difficult times, 'self-isolation' was historically viewed as a way of preserving the ethnic culture. Historical events over the last two centuries have led to a complex and varied ethnic mix in Abkhazia²⁸. Migration processes originally initiated by Tsarist Russia and later by Soviet Georgia resulted in the Abkhaz becoming a minority in their own country²⁹. This led gradually and naturally to the development of a closed Abkhaz society – an instinctive response aimed at cultural survival, preserving the language and culture, and its own distinctive way of life. However, this tactic is no longer appropriate in the face of new challenges. The Georgian nationalism of the *perestroika* era, the break-up of the Soviet Union, the Georgian-Abkhaz war and the creation of an independent state have set new goals for Abkhaz society. Once the Abkhaz state became independent, this was followed by a clash between the paradigm of a closed culture and the need for a modern state able to unite all its citizens and take responsibility for their wellbeing.

Anti-Western attitudes in certain sections of society are another key factor affecting the current negative attitude to de-isolation. How can we explain the anti-Western attitudes of a significant portion of Abkhaz society – and not just the older generation, which might be explained in terms of residual inertia – which compare to attitudes in the Soviet Union during the Cold War? One reason might be, in our view, that the Abkhaz public views Russia with approval as a result of Moscow's real efforts to defend Abkhaz national interests – as demonstrated by the reinstatement of Abkhaz schools in the 1950s, the peacekeeping mission following the Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992–1993 and the recognition of Abkhaz independence in 2008. Secondly, the Western countries supported Georgia in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict for almost two decades by providing it with military, financial and intelligence assistance. Abkhazia was particularly shocked at the global community's failure to respond to the entry of Georgian troops into Abkhazia in August 1992. There is a widely-held belief in Abkhazia that had it not been for the unconditional assistance provided to Georgia by the Western countries, Georgia might have been less inclined to resolve problems using military force and more willing to compromise and collaborate. In view of the above, anti-Western attitudes can also be seen as an expression of solidarity with Russia in the context of the West-Russia competition.

However, public attitudes are often characterised by unjustified generalisations. For example, the caution and suspicion that was felt in regard to the West's role in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict resolution process was transferred to attitudes towards the prospect of more active cooperation with the West now that Abkhazia is partially recognised. Although this might at first appear to be inconsistent with Abkhazia's apparent interest in widening its international recognition, there is some logic to it: keeping the country closed might help to protect the country against potential hostile acts by Georgia's traditional partners.

There are not just external reasons behind Abkhazia's ideological withdrawal behind the 'borders' of the non-existent Soviet Union. Internal factors, mainly psychological in nature, also make Abkhazia reluctant to establish contacts with the Western world. Sociologists ascribe the emergence of political discontent in individuals to a number of factors: namely, a lack of relations, the inability to join and participate in political associations, and the complexities and inconsistencies inherent in a political system in which it is not clear how to achieve one's political aims. This results in a loss of self-esteem that can lead to the individual withdrawing and becoming disillusioned, reducing expectations and reassessing their own political goals. If the

28 The main stages in this process could be identified as: the Caucasus war in the 19th century, the so-called 'Muhajir' period, which involved the expulsion and forced resettlement of the Abkhaz to the Middle East; the reverse resettlement from Turkey of the Orthodox population from various ethnic backgrounds; and the resettlement of the Georgian population from the internal districts of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) in the Stalin era. There were significant changes in the composition of the population during the Georgian-Abkhaz war in 1992–1993.

29 In addition to this, the Abkhaz language and culture, despite some well-publicised but superficial measures to support them, faced huge repression in the 1930s, 1940s and early 1950s. As a result of this, the Abkhaz language and culture could not compete with Russian and Georgian influences.

person is also conscious of political and economic discrimination, their feelings of isolation from the political system will be reinforced. This will, in many cases, provoke an irrational moralistic and exaggerated response to the system, with the person feeling under threat from the system, perhaps fearful of losing their freedom. All these factors combine to form a sense of political alienation, which expresses itself in the rejection of the existing political system, whether in the form of apathy or extremism.

Although a direct analogy cannot be drawn between the mechanisms by which social attitudes and emotional states emerge and develop at the individual and societal level, it can still be useful as a pointer in helping us to understand the situation. The blockade and long years of non-recognition have contributed to the development of a certain public attitude to the outside world, from which Abkhazia was isolated. Many years of conflict, during which the rights of the Abkhaz people were ignored by the international community, have created a peculiar mindset. This mindset is highly politicised in relation to the conflict at the domestic level, but politically alienated in terms of international processes. The rejection associated with political alienation is expressed, in this case, in a perception that much of what originates in or is associated with the West is toxic and is thus criticised without any attempt to understand it.

This prejudiced view of de-isolation, in the sense of widening contacts with Europe, is reinforced by the discourse in the Russian media, which dominates the Abkhaz media. In contrast to the political rapprochement that is taking place between Russia and Europe/the US, the attitude of the Russian media to the West is not always friendly. This impacts on the many consumers of Russian media in Abkhazia, and the local media often reinforces further the rejection.

Finally, another key factor is Georgia's manipulation of information – that is, its portrayal of events in terms of the dichotomy 'pro-Russia equals anti-Western', or that 'anyone not with Georgia is against the West'. Georgia works hard, with considerable success, at pinning this association of the West with Georgia in Abkhaz minds. A typical example of this is the Georgian state 'Strategy'³⁰, which combines European initiatives on de-isolation with Georgia's political agenda.

Unfortunately, many concerns over the prospects of international de-isolation are based not on real threats, but on fears, prejudices and stereotypes that are inherited from the past. The following paragraphs attempt to assess whether there is a rational basis for these concerns, taking the most hotly discussed issues as examples.

- Language – Increasing familiarity with the Russian language poses a far greater threat to the Abkhaz language than de-isolation towards Europe. In fact, de-isolation could well help to maintain Abkhaz as a functioning language by allowing access to experiences of retaining and developing languages around the world.
- Dilution of cultural identity – Abkhazia is in fact already a multi-cultural society, where other cultures impact on Abkhaz culture but Abkhaz culture also impacts on the other ethnic communities in Abkhazia.
- Development of Abkhazia's own economy – Diversifying economic collaboration will allow the country to move away from an artificial system of subsidies to an intensive market system. Of course, legislation will be required to regulate business practices, provide protection against foreign monopolists and support local entrepreneurs.

Some sections of Abkhaz society seem to hold the irrational belief that 'isolation' can be a substitute for the lack of any effective domestic strategy for developing areas such as the language, culture and the economy. Despite its concerns at the growing monopolistic influence of Russia – a

30 The 'State Strategy on the Occupied Territories'.

far more powerful (and unilateral) factor than the diversification of economic and cultural links – Abkhaz society still does not see de-isolation as an alternative.

De-isolation thus exposes the ambivalence and contradictory nature of public concerns and attitudes. This is linked, in our view, to the lack of clarity over the Abkhaz national project. Isolation from the outside world could only achieve one goal: the preservation of social rituals. This is certainly of interest from an ethnographic point of view, but is it really Abkhazia's overall objective? Assuming that Abkhazia's ultimate political objective is widespread international recognition, the establishment of political, economic and cultural relations with the countries of the CIS, the Black Sea basin, Europe and the Middle East, among others, de-isolation becomes an essential interim objective.

Traditional social institutions and mechanisms need to adapt to changing conditions if they are to be preserved and fulfil their social function. The modern state, however small, should not aim to become a museum exhibit; it is a living, developing social organism. Rather than sealing itself off from the outside world, this young state needs to look for partners and use all the opportunities to develop.

Some in Abkhaz society believe that the country should refrain from closer interaction with the surrounding world, because de-isolation would require the country to comply with international standards of behaviour. This makes it clear that, for these citizens and despite public declarations of support for democratic values, the national project is actually about creating a mono-ethnic state that has nothing to do with democratic standards. The problem is not that the goals of preserving the Abkhaz culture and language are conceptualised and articulated as one of the main functions of the Abkhaz state. This is entirely justifiable, indeed essential³¹. The question is how these problems are to be resolved. For example, measures proposed to reinforce the position of the Abkhaz language are not based on an inclusive approach, where knowledge of the state language is encouraged and incentivised, perhaps through measures such as a system of salary increments. Instead, it is based on an exclusive approach, where government offices would sack citizens who do not have a knowledge of the language. Are such tactics really likely to improve the language situation and its impact on the demographic situation in the country as a whole?

This issue exposes the uncertainties and lack of clarity over what the Abkhaz national project is really about. If the model for the national project is a mono-ethnic state, the isolationist paradigm should be maintained. If it is a civil society model, it will lead to the creation of an open society state. If the objective is formulated in terms of creating a modern Abkhaz nation based on the combined interests of all resident communities, taking responsibility for the preservation and development of Abkhaz culture, this may bring together the positive elements of both models³².

In our view, there has long been a need for a frank public discussion on the political objectives that could form the basis of a robust domestic and foreign policy for Abkhazia. Abkhaz public attitudes to Russia and the West are not the result of a 'civilisational choice', but are instead determined by their role in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. To be precise, they are determined by the Abkhaz people's need to survive. Therefore, it is still not clear what pattern will be selected by Abkhazia in the future. The key decisions, in our view, relate to how Abkhazia intends to build relations not only with the outside world, but in particular with all the residents within the country. Paradoxical as it may seem, if Abkhazia is to come to terms with de-isolation (in terms of widening its external contacts and its foreign policy), it will first have to identify its domestic political objectives.

31 Following the very difficult periods of repression against Abkhazia, special state-implemented measures are essential to reinstate and support the Abkhaz language and culture.

32 Unfortunately, the problem of consolidating the Abkhaz nation has long not been viewed as a priority within society, since all attention and all potential international problems have been conceptualised exclusively in terms of the Georgian-Abkhaz dichotomy. It has taken a relatively long time for the Abkhaz to emerge from the role of victims and objects of national pressure to become active subjects in interethnic relations, feeling responsible for the nature of these relations and considering what role is played by the representatives of non-Abkhaz communities in the social, economic and political life of the country.

De-isolation via the West: opportunities and restrictions

Irakli Khintba

Resolving the ethno-political Georgian-Abkhaz conflict is a Sisyphean task. Every time a fragile basis for a peacebuilding process is achieved, it is rolled back to its former position when harsh ‘political teleology’ re-asserts itself – that is, regarding how to overcome the issue of political status. Clearly, both sides have diametrically opposed views of the desirable outcome of a resolution (or settlement) of the conflict, with Georgia wanting to restore its ‘territorial integrity’ and Abkhazia seeking international legitimation as an independent state. Therefore, the most realistic strategy for finding a mutually acceptable solution may in fact be the transformation of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

Conflict transformation, unlike settlement and resolution, does not propose rapid and preset solutions. It is essentially about changing the context of the conflict, leaving the prospects for resolving issues of political status open. The process involves proposing changes in the situation that can affect the way the conflict is perceived by the different sides³³. This could involve presenting maximum opportunities for the development of the conflicting societies, the realisation of their potential, the removal of injustices and the transformation of the structural causes in order to minimise the tension in the conflict.

The logic and practice of conflict transformation would suggest that the concept of ‘territorial integrity’ cannot be used as an instrument to resolve the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Accepting this need not automatically involve accepting the strategy of recognising Abkhazia; rather, it might dictate the need to reject outmoded and ineffective approaches to the conflict, including perhaps the continuation of Abkhazia’s isolation.

Isolating Abkhazia is based on a mistaken and essentially naïve premise: ‘exhausted’ by the lack of contact with the outside world and wary of the growing pressure from Russia, the Abkhaz themselves will make an ‘historic choice’ in favour of Georgia, which at that point will develop into a modern democratic state with a flourishing economy.

This ignores the ethnic factor in the conflict and is thus divorced from reality. Another, no less serious, conceptual error committed by supporters of isolation is their conviction that screening the country from outside contacts might turn the population against the political elite, which would be presented as the guilty party. However, the opposite is normally the case in societies on the path to statehood and implementing a national project. In the first place, the population normally assigns the authorities an *a priori* ‘ideological’ legitimacy; in the second place, the existence of an external threat makes it even easier for elites to achieve this legitimacy on their own. Thus, in these conditions, isolation produces nothing but an outburst of anti-Western feeling, a deterioration in governance and democracy, and an escalation of the conflict.

De-isolating Abkhazia would shift the country from a ‘zero-sum game’ to a ‘positive-sum game’ between the leading entities in the conflict. Before Abkhazia can expand its channels of communication with the outside world, it must first diversify its foreign policy. Europeanisation, democratisation and access to Western resources to modernise the economy would all have a positive effect on the value system of Abkhaz society. These processes will help to reduce feelings of vulnerability and remove the ‘siege mentality’, allowing independent decision making to be

33 Hugh Miall (2004). ‘Conflict transformation: A multi-dimensional task’ in *The Berghof Handbook for Conflict Transformation*. Moscow: Nauka Publishers, p. 78.

strengthened. They would increase pragmatism and flexibility during negotiations and provide an opportunity for wider compliance with the rights of the people currently living in Abkhazia.

However, any prospects of de-isolation are conditional on and subject to certain key principles and axioms under the Abkhaz national project. These red lines include, for example, the full-scale return of refugees as a condition of de-isolation. Similarly, engagement with the West via Tbilisi and other concessions would not be tolerated by Abkhaz society, and indeed could lead to conflict. Pressure, maximalism and increased expectations of a change in the Abkhaz position are counterproductive in this asymmetrical ethno-political conflict. No one is going to sacrifice 'national interests' for what ordinary people perceive as ephemeral aims of de-isolation. Society first needs to experience the real fruits of de-isolation and interaction with the West.

The year 2010 was a momentous one in Russian-Abkhaz relations. Recognition by Russia was followed by heated discussions on the independence of the Abkhaz authorities in decisionmaking. On the one hand, the Russian security guarantees and financial support created real opportunities for the Abkhaz economy to develop gradually and for relative political stabilisation. On the other hand, a significant portion of Abkhaz society, particularly the rightwing and extreme rightwing opposition, accuse the political elite of losing their autonomy in relations with Russia³⁴.

The major political forces in Abkhazia are starting to use both Russia and the West (as well as Georgia, as both cause and effect) as counters in persuading the public to share their views. The authorities accuse their opponents of being 'anti-Russian' to pre-empt criticism directed against themselves, mainly on charges of corruption and failing to defend maximalist conceptions of 'national interests'. The rightwing, patriotic and traditionalist opposition, although critical of the authorities, wants to avoid being seen as anti-Russian. To counter this, it stirs up public dissatisfaction with the West based on all-too-familiar stereotypes of the 'wily and cunning' EU, NATO and the US, which are bent on dragging Abkhazia into Georgia 'by hook or by crook'.

These current trends in domestic politics betray the regrettable poverty of the Abkhaz ideological framework and would seem to support the theory, in existence for more than 20 years, that Abkhazia is 'pro-Soviet'³⁵. This is, however, a superficial and mistaken view. In the early 1990s, Abkhazia was not indeed committed to the preservation of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Its apparent pro-Soviet stance was a tactical move rather than a value-based choice — that is, just in order to make it possible for Abkhazia to break away from Georgia. Even in the Soviet era, there had been periodic calls for unification with Russia with precisely the same aim. Vladislav Ardzinba did much to turn the country against Soviet-era values. As a leader of the nationalist project, Ardzinba, by definition, could not pursue the goal of Soviet cosmopolitanism, cultural universalism and de-ethnicisation. The structural reason for this is that Abkhaz society is naturally and systemically democratic. Its small size, strong horizontal communications, the closeness of the authorities and the people, the distinctive and in many ways traditional nature of social relations, along with the strong social ligatures alleviated Soviet totalitarianism and today act as a brake on tendencies to slide into authoritarianism.

The fragile process of democratic transformation, compromised by the difficult post-war realities, did not receive the support it needed from the outside world. The post-war years of severe isolation engendered mistrust of the outside world within Abkhazia. Whereas Russia began to ease its stance on isolation from 1999 onwards, Western actors obstinately insisted on sticking to approaches that had already clearly failed. To this end, they maintained complete solidarity with

34 The toughening of the discourse around Russian-Abkhaz relations is in many ways linked to the rise of corruption during the uptake of Russian financial assistance. The report of the Accounts Chamber of the Russian Federation, along with the audit of expenditure of Russian funding conducted by the Abkhazian parliament, raised alarm bells regarding the misuse of funding (374 million roubles).

35 From the early 1990s, hostile commentators attempted to present Abkhazia as a 'Soviet enclave' that Russia is attempting to use as an instrument to prevent the Westernisation of Georgia.

Georgia on political issues and made any support for Abkhazia, including the democratisation process, conditional on unacceptable political demands.

As a result, progress in transforming the value system and mentality of Abkhaz society slowed down almost to a halt. At the risk of over-simplification, Abkhaz identity today can be described as being broadly based on three pillars: traditions and language (*apsuara*), ethnic consciousness and the struggle for Abkhaz independence. European values ('universal human values') are not a major component of this important triad, precisely because of the West's persistent isolation of Abkhazia. This failure to adapt in a globalised world increases the risk of the de-modernisation of Abkhaz society.

An analysis of political processes, including the statements and actions of political figures in Abkhazia, suggests that although they vaguely recognise the need for de-isolation, they are not yet at the stage of identifying how this might translate into practical options. Since there appears to be little (overt) demand from either the ruling elite or society as a whole for modernisation, little practical advantage can be gained by de-isolation. Despite the alarm increasingly expressed over the threat of absorption by Russia, Abkhaz society seems to feel comfortable with financial and military guarantees from Moscow, while mistrusting the West and remaining oblivious to the need to build contacts with Europe or the US.

Contemporary party politics in Abkhazia, forged in the complex post-war context, are another consequence and cause of its isolation. Most political power is concentrated in the extreme nationalist rightwing or revolves around the non-ideological centre which proposes watered-down, 'catch-all' programmes. On the other hand, liberal democratic forces, which could adopt a pro-European position, are not politically institutionalised. Populism, alarmism and conspiracy theories thus have the platform and hearing they need.

It is essential to point out that, all too often, it is the Western actors themselves who by their own actions force Abkhazia out of the civilisational and political space of Europe, thus discrediting supporters of closer links between Abkhazia and Europe/the US. The year 2010 saw a number of official documents approved, including the NATO Parliamentary Assembly Resolution, which referred to the 'occupied territories'. Moreover, a number of US officials made statements that used the term 'occupied territories' in relation to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Elsewhere, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Catherine Ashton, welcomed the Georgian strategy 'on the occupied territories'. All of this overshadows the positive changes in Western policy towards the conflict whose nuances are visible only to specialists.

The lack of progress on implementing the EU strategy of 'non-recognition and engagement' has already led to emotional statements by Abkhazia's President, Sergei Bagapsh³⁶, and to a statement by the Foreign Minister, Maksim Gundjia. In his statement, Minister Gundjia expresses scepticism over the formulation itself, noting its 'declarative and politicised' nature and deploring the European countries' unwillingness to 'begin the process of recognising Abkhazia'³⁷. However, all this contrasts with the more pragmatic position adopted by Abkhazia's Prime Minister, Sergei Shamba, who in March 2010 assured Peter Semneby that 'we will do everything we can to make Europe understand that Abkhazia is a reliable partner and neighbour in line with European standards'³⁸. This uncertainty over the Abkhaz official position may be regarded as a reaction to the extremely slow pace of change in international approaches to Abkhazia, but also as a result

36 In President Bagapsh's view, the attempt to separate collaboration into political and humanitarian aspects does not lead to any positive results. 'We see politically naïve and partisan actions by European structures in support of Georgia, despite the tragic events for which the Georgian side is to blame.' See 'Sergei Bagapsh and Peter Semneby exchanged opinions on resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict', *Apsnypress*, 12th December 2010. Available in Russian at <http://apsnypress.info/news/2143.html>.

37 See 'Maksim Gundjia's commenting on the Abkhazia-EU issue', Ministry of Foreign Affairs website. Available at <http://www.mfaabkhazia.net/en/node/659>.

38 See 'Sergey Shamba: We'll do everything for Europe to understand that Abkhazia is a reliable and up to European standards partner and neighbor', 12th March 2010. Available at <http://www.abkhaziagov.org/en/news/detail.php?ID=29604>.

of the country's own weak, rather ad hoc foreign policy strategy and differences within the ruling elite. There is some evidence that the Abkhaz political class has a mostly intuitive, unreflecting understanding of the need for interaction with the West (and Europe in particular). However, it also fears, perhaps groundlessly, that this 'vector' would not be supported by Abkhaz society and could damage relations with Russia.

Although the political positions and decisions of Western actors in relation to the conflict as a whole have not changed, analysts detect certain shifts in tactics and the strategic vision of the transformation process in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. These relate mainly to the EU strategy of 'non-recognition and engagement', which along with important ideas on the de-isolation of Abkhazia also proposes very suggestive changes in formulations. Most notably, it no longer refers to the maintenance of 'territorial integrity' but a 'policy of non-recognition' (with, in our view, obvious connotations). Analysts also detect changes in assessments by US experts³⁹. Despite differences in certain nuances and formulation, these reports contain important premises: the conflict should not be viewed exclusively as a Georgian-Russian conflict; the Abkhaz side must be recognised as an entity in the negotiation process; and Abkhaz society must be de-isolated and enjoy the same benefits as any other citizens of the civilised world.

We attempt below to reconstruct what might be the outcomes of Abkhazia's de-isolation from a Western perspective.

- Firstly, the goal could be to instil European, universal human values in the Abkhaz population which would bring greater prospects of a democratic transformation. The goal would be to transform the instrumentalist view of democracy (as a means to an end) into a value-based view – 'the recognition of necessity'. This could be achieved by bringing Abkhazia's education, administration and healthcare systems into line with European standards.
- Secondly, impact at the systemic (contextual) level and initiatives on guarantees of the non-resumption of hostilities and other political conflict regulation mechanisms would act as an incentive for the conflict transformation process.
- Thirdly, de-isolation of Abkhazia can be presented as a commitment to the values of Western civilisation: fundamental rights and freedoms of the individual, in particular the right to free movement for the republic's population.
- Fourthly, the goal of de-isolation may be to bring about a pluralisation of the geopolitical context in the South Caucasus. However, such a process would have to be carefully designed to avoid impinging on Russia's interests. Interaction between Russia and the EU in the region can be regulated both by the new Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), currently being prepared, and within the frameworks of various collective security models.
- Fifthly, de-isolation of Abkhazia might give the West extra leverage not only over Abkhazia, but also over Georgia in terms of adjusting its internal development as well as in conflict transformation/conflict resolution. Easing the isolation of Abkhazia could help to influence any political or socio-economic developments in Georgia.

It is important to recognise, however, that there are certain obstacles that must be overcome if the de-isolation process is to work.

³⁹ Mention should be made here of the articles by Alexander Cooley from Columbia University: see Alexander Cooley and Lincoln Mitchell, 'How to save Abkhazia from being permanently absorbed into Russia', in *American Interest*, Summer (May/June) 2010, Vol. V, No. 5, pp. 69–72. The recent report by Samuel Charap and Cory Welt should also be mentioned, published under the auspices of the influential think tank the Center for American Progress: see Samuel Charap and Cory Welt, *A More Proactive US Approach to the Georgia Conflicts*, Center for American Progress, February 2011.

1. Georgia's insistence that Abkhazia be recognised as 'an occupied territory' and its efforts to isolate it – Georgia's attempt to substitute 'de-isolation' for 'de-occupation' discredits possible European and US approaches to opening up Abkhazia. The concern for the Abkhaz is the extent to which the Georgian and European strategies overlap. Some advisers, such as Antje Herrberg, clearly do their employers more harm than good when they state that: 'The EU's own strategy of "engagement without recognition" should be used to complement and reinforce the Georgian strategy – and not contradict it'⁴⁰.
2. **Reluctance to 'offend' Russia** – Given the high priority for the EU of relations with Russia and the 'resetting' of Russian-US relations, the West is clearly aware of Russia's interests in the South Caucasus and Western measure of responsibility for certain actions. As a result, Georgia is still far from becoming a member of NATO and its relations with the EU are not yet at the levels it might have expected. Unsurprisingly, Abkhazia's de-isolation is a far lower priority for Washington and Brussels than relations with Russia. So the West may prefer not to intrude on a space that Russia has designated as its 'sphere of privileged interests'.
3. **Reluctance to incentivise statebuilding: concerns that de-isolation will strengthen self-determination** – The EU and the US usually adopted a mainly 'externalistic' approach to a Georgian-Abkhaz settlement, touching only on external political and legal frameworks. Systemic support for the process of democratic consolidation in Abkhazia and incentivising modernisation would be viewed as pandering to state-building in a 'separatist region'. Direct interaction between Abkhazia and the EU raise similar concerns for the Georgian authorities. This conflict between geopolitical interests and internal development is a serious obstacle to the conflict resolution⁴¹.
4. **The view that 'Abkhazia is already in Russia's hands and nothing can be done about it'** – Some Western experts and politicians feel that 'the opportunity has been lost' and that the reality of the situation following the August war means that de-isolation will no longer be able to translate the idea of a 'multi-vector' Abkhaz foreign policy into practical action. In addition, as the political scientist Nicu Popescu noted, 'the EU has a preference of getting involved in conflicts where it can make a difference, i.e. conflicts which would be potentially solvable'⁴². With no prospect of reconciliation in the underlying Georgian-Abkhaz ethnic conflict, there are no optimistic forecasts on this score.
5. **Inconsistencies within the Western community – the EU and the US** – The repeated statements by Peter Semneby on the need to take into consideration the ethnic aspects of the underlying Georgian-Abkhaz conflict⁴³ are inconsistent with the actions and statements of Catherine Ashton, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, who welcomed the Georgian 'Strategy on the Occupied Territories'. Moreover, the possibility of the EU playing a positive role in Abkhaz affairs could be in some doubt if the office of the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus is abolished. Delegating the functions of the South Caucasus regional office to the national Georgian level (for example the EU Delegation in Georgia) will make collaboration with the EU extremely difficult, if not ceased entirely by Sukhum. Furthermore, the divergence of views within the EU between member states (new Europeans and 'old democracies') and the officials responsible for implementing the European

40 Antje Herrberg (2010). 'Taking cooperation seriously: Georgian strategy towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia is not as weak as many think', *Caucasus Security Insight*, International Institute for Strategic Studies. Available at <http://www.iiss.org/programmes/russia-and-eurasia/about/georgian-russian-dialogue/caucasus-security-insight/antje-herrberg/taking-cooperation-seriously/>.

41 As Magdalena Frichova Grono correctly notes, success in the country's development of a democratic, modern and law-based state in its own right must be the priority and not the geopolitical conceptions of world powers. Magdalena Frichova Grono. 'Abkhazia and the promises of princes', *Open Democracy*, 27th January 2011. Available at <http://www.opendemocracy.net/magdalena-frichova-grono/abkhazia-and-promises-of-princes>.

42 Nicu Popescu. 'The European Union and conflicts in the South Caucasus', *Caucaz Europeanews*, 8th January 2007. Available at http://www.caucaz.com/home_eng/breve_contenu.php?id=291.

43 Peter Semneby. 'We must seek out and find common interests', *Kavkazsky Meridian*, 6 (98), June 2010, p. 1.

Commission's external relations policy, as well as the EU's cumbersome and uncoordinated mechanism for external relations, are also important institutional reasons for the lack of Western engagement.

As for the US, despite declarations of its commitment to 'resetting' its relations with Russia, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton reinforced the use of the term 'occupation' when speaking about Abkhazia and South Ossetia⁴⁴.

The range of options

What then are the most realistic options for the de-isolation of Abkhazia and what concrete steps could be taken? The following points attempt to answer these questions.

1. The most important and immediate objective may be to prepare an 'Abkhaz strategy' for engagement with the EU. This would indicate key areas for collaboration as well as Abkhazia's vision of the legal and political mechanisms for such collaboration. The main items on the agenda could be 'cooperation for modernisation', education, standards of effective governance, conditionality for any support of democracy, and the participation of the EU in the process of transformation and political resolution of the conflict, providing it adopts a position of neutrality on Abkhazia's status. The need to separate political issues from humanitarian ones remains on the agenda.
2. It is important what kind of messages emanate from the Abkhaz authorities. One of these signals was the concept of a 'multi-vector' foreign policy, presented in 2006. Moreover, 'wikileaks' documents make it clear that the Abkhaz administration intimated clearly to European and US diplomats in the period preceding the August 2008 war that Abkhazia was genuinely interested in closer contacts and relations with the West. However, these signals went unheard. Today, the uncertainty around the strategy of 'engagement without recognition' is clearly a source of irritation to the Abkhaz authorities.
3. Bearing in mind that the 'Sukhum-Moscow axis' today is virtually the 'backbone' of the political and socio-economic development of Abkhazia, any interaction with the EU must include a consideration of Russian interests in the region. At the same time, Abkhazia should not remain a hostage to geopolitical stereotypes: 'if you want to be friends with Europe you'll have to turn your back on Russia'. The administration in Abkhazia needs to show its population examples of where Russia has succeeded in positive and pragmatic collaboration with the West. It needs to explode the myths that the 'Washington Obkom' or 'wily European strategies' can only damage society.
4. Implementing socially-oriented projects involving human capital might be a more reliable way to achieve the 'mental de-isolation' of the Abkhaz population. A promising project could be the opening of a European university in Abkhazia where students could receive a high-quality education, perhaps in the English language. Opening up access for the Abkhaz to educational and scientific centres in Europe and the US, and stepping up exchange programmes, would be no less important.
5. An EU Information Centre (EU House) could perhaps be opened in Abkhazia, similar to the centre in Northern Cyprus; support could be given to the opening of Abkhaz delegations in one or two countries in the EU and the US along the lines of the delegations of Nagorny Karabakh in the US, France, Germany and Australia.

⁴⁴ Tbilisi expresses the hope that 'the US Senate in early 2011 will consider and adopt a special resolution referring to Abkhazia and South Ossetia as "regions of Georgia occupied by the Russian Federation"':

6. The Geneva talks must continue, particularly given that some progress has been made on achieving guarantees of the non-use of force.
7. Information is crucial if Abkhazia is to break through into the Western world. Americans and Europeans know little about Abkhazia. The activities of the US public relations (PR) agency 'Sailor Company', which was hired to promote Abkhazia's image abroad, have met with little success. This is perhaps mainly due to the lack of funding for this activity (US\$120,000 a year)⁴⁵.
8. The administration in Abkhazia needs to take a responsible approach to how its rhetoric and political practices might be perceived in the West. Abkhazia can only be brought into the 'civilised fold' if both the authorities and the expert community take an open-minded, honest and sober view of events.
9. In fact, one of the most immediate objectives is to raise the profile of de-isolation within Abkhaz society. As noted above, for ordinary people in Abkhazia, recognition and strengthened relations with Russia mean that opening up to the rest of the world has receded in importance. This is partly due to ignorance of how important de-isolation of Abkhazia is, if only in terms of the prospects of further international recognition and the protection of Abkhaz sovereignty. It could be useful to run seminars and expert discussions on this topic. There is also a need to conduct a serious quantitative and qualitative sociological study to identify the motivations, interests, needs, goals and fears of the Abkhaz population over 'de-isolation through the West'.

⁴⁵ For comparison, in 2010 the Georgian government spent US\$1.5 million on lobbying in the US alone, making it one of the chief clients for this type of service by US PR and lobbying agencies. See Joshua Kucera. 'Caucasus, Central Asia: Look who's doing the K Street Shuffle', *Eurasianet*, 10th February 2011. Available at: <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/62871>.

Part 2 – The Georgian perspective

Prospects for Abkhazia's De-isolation in the context of the Non-Recognition Policy

Introduction

Archil Gegeshidze

Perceptions of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict and the policy adopted by the major players in relation to Abkhazia have always dominated discussions within political circles and the expert community. This increased after the events of August 2008, when it became clear to everyone that the conflict was not merely a local one and had the potential to impact on wider international relations. Politicians and political scientists on both sides of the Atlantic began to look for ways to defuse the tension and instigate a conflict resolution process through the constructive engagement of the major interested parties. Without entertaining any illusions as to the possibility of a rapid resolution of what are politically sensitive issues, observers nevertheless agree that the situation as it stands remains dangerous and unsustainable.

These factors launched an intellectual process of searching for ways to move on and out of the situation. A number of concepts, approaches and slogans began to appear. One formulation that enjoyed a great deal of popular support was ‘engagement without recognition’, around which ‘new strategies’ could be constructed. These could then be presented to policymakers. Everyone waited eagerly for this formulation to be fleshed out. The word ‘engagement’ was particularly intriguing, since the question of ‘recognition’ or ‘non-recognition’ of Abkhazia was more or less clear – the recognition process had effectively stopped with four entities recognised under international law, headed by the Russian Federation, having recognised Abkhazia’s independence⁴⁶. The precise meaning of ‘engagement’, on the other hand, is not as clear-cut. Georgian government officials in Tbilisi interpret ‘engaging’ Abkhazia as furthering its ‘ties’ to Georgia by increasing contacts in areas such as healthcare, education and business. This was in fact the purpose behind the State Strategy on the Occupied Territories. The Strategy is not yet in operation, as it does not thus far enjoy the full support of the international community on all its aspects and the authorities in the Abkhaz capital Sukhumi have responded angrily to the document itself. The main reason for this is the isolationist nature of Tbilisi’s policy towards Abkhazia which goes back to the first days following the end of the 1992–1993 war. The Strategy is viewed in Sukhumi as a tool for the reintegration of Abkhazia as a constituent part of Georgia – this was, in fact, Georgia’s openly avowed aim in the preamble to that document.

However, in Western capitals it is felt that given the changes since the end of the war, it would be wrong to leave Abkhazia in isolation. If Abkhazia is left to Russia’s ‘tender mercies’, it will be doomed to inevitable annexation and complete absorption by Moscow, which is unacceptable in purely geopolitical terms. Despite this, however, the West is still in no hurry to open the door to Abkhazia, since it has no clear idea of how to ‘engage’ with Abkhazia. In addition, Georgia, whose territorial integrity the West supports in principle, makes no attempt to conceal its dissatisfaction with any potential loss of control over the process. In the face of this dilemma, the West appears wrong-footed and passive, but the ‘caravan’ stills lurches on – as the alienation between Georgians and the Abkhaz increases, this further reduces the chances of an eventual reconciliation between them.

This spurred academics to attempt to analyse the origins of the policy of isolating Abkhazia. Such an analysis examined the nature and effectiveness of this policy, identifying the motivations behind the approaches currently taken by the authorities in Tbilisi and the West and assessing the feasibility of a paradigm shift within which ‘engagement’ of Abkhazia could be successful. To find out the answers to these questions, a survey was carried out by a team of Georgian

⁴⁶ In 2010, as part of a project by the British international non-governmental organisation ‘International Alert’, the Georgian authors conducted a special study aimed at assessing the viability of the policy of non-recognition of Abkhazia. One of the study’s main conclusions was that the policy of ‘non-recognition’ is based on long-term political factors and considerations under international law (see <http://www.international-alert.org/ourwork/regional/caucasuscentralasia/caucasus>).

experts, composed of Archil Gegeshidze, Ivlian Haindrava, Vakhtang Kolbaia, Nino Shushania and Ketevan Tsikhelashvili. Four articles were produced on the basis of the survey and are due to be published in full in one edition. The survey results are not a collective effort, nevertheless. Each section in the study is a reflection of the author's opinions, which may not necessarily be shared by other participants in the research project. This summary attempts to present a condensed version of the main arguments and conclusions on the whole range of issues. However, it makes no claim to be a synthesis or comprehensive summary.

Preconditions for Abkhazia's isolation

The drive to isolate Abkhazia was always a component in, or more precisely a means of, achieving a more complex strategy by Tbilisi based on coercing and exerting pressure on the authorities in Sukhumi to prevent it seceding from Georgia. Apart from isolation, this strategy included methods of pressurising Abkhazia by political and diplomatic means, including at the talks process. Another key component of the policy of exerting pressure on Abkhazia was diversionary actions by partisan divisions located mainly in the Gali district. However, it should be noted that pressure was put on Sukhumi not by Tbilisi alone: the Russian Federation, the CIS countries and the international community, guided by their own interests, supported or sympathised with this approach, albeit to varying degrees. This approach would often form their firm position when taking decisions or approving documents at international forums. Over time, however, the motivations of the major parties changed and, at the same time, the purpose and nature of the policy of coercion itself changed.

The tactic of coercion, especially its non-military component in the form of isolation by means of economic and non-economic sanctions, began to be widely applied after the Second World War. Although 'peaceful' sanctions rarely succeed in their objective, the tactic of coercion remains in the political arsenal of the UN and the major powers around the world. The decision to exert pressure on the authorities in Sukhumi was therefore not entirely unexpected and was certainly not unique. The decision was justified by reference to the ethnic cleansing carried out by the Abkhaz authorities. Nonetheless, some observers believed and continue to believe that there was no real justification at the time for pressurising Sukhumi, especially by Tbilisi. However, the circumstances that drove the government authorities in Tbilisi and other interested parties to employ this strategy are worth mentioning.

- Soon after the conclusion of the Quadripartite Agreement on the Voluntary Return of Refugees and Displaced Persons on 4th April 1994, it became clear that the Abkhaz side – steadfastly ignoring the calls of the international community⁴⁷ – had no intention of fulfilling its obligations and was hindering full-scale return by all means at its disposal.
- The Sukhumi authorities were constantly terrorising the Georgian population in the Gali district as they returned to their own houses on their own initiative. As part of its tactics of using force to squeeze out the Georgians, the Abkhaz police (militia) and paramilitary groups [also referred to as 'irregulars' or 'informal armed formations'] regularly ran amok in the Gali district, subjecting the local population to violence and torture. Unfortunately, there were also fatalities, as documented in the UN Secretary General's Report of 2nd January 1996 and in the UN Security Council Resolution No. 1036 of 12th January 1996.
- The Abkhaz side repudiated the protocol – which it itself had countersigned and initialled⁴⁸ – prepared with Russia's mediation. Under this protocol, the status of Abkhazia was defined as being part of a unified federative Georgian state.

⁴⁷ See, for example, UN Security Council Resolution No. 1036 of 12th January 1996.

⁴⁸ The protocol was signed on 24rd July 1995.

- Russia, perhaps to make up for providing crucial assistance to the Abkhaz side during the war, actually maintained an impartial and sometimes harsh attitude to Sukhumi in the initial post-war years. This stance by Moscow became clear during the talks process and also when key documents were approved at a number of international forums⁴⁹. This created a favourable basis for the preparation and execution of a strategy of pressure on the Abkhaz authorities.
- As the calls from the international community were ignored by Sukhumi, an adjustment to the conflict resolution process was required. At that time, the CIS countries, with few exceptions, were concerned over centrifugal forces inside their own borders and sympathised with Georgia in its struggle to restore its territorial integrity. Thus, at the CIS summit in 1995, at the initiative of Kazakhstan, a memorandum⁵⁰ was passed censuring separatism and calling for joint action against separatist regimes. At the subsequent meeting of the heads of state of the CIS in Minsk, a special declaration on similar lines was adopted⁵¹. This presented Georgia with an important additional diplomatic resource for exerting pressure on Sukhumi.
- The growing political and social tension caused by a large contingent of forced migrants from Abkhazia living in misery, with the losses and humiliation from the defeats in the war still fresh in their memories, fed the revanchist mood in Georgian society. The ‘war party’ gained strength and the strategy of coercion and isolation of Abkhazia became the only option on the table.

Meanwhile, the strategy of the Abkhaz authorities was becoming clear. They were aiming to maintain the demographic balance of Abkhazia, which had changed as a result of the exodus of the Georgian population, by drawing out the talks process. The authorities had to gain time: firstly, it was hoped in Sukhumi that the forces supporting it within the Russian elite might gradually coalesce; secondly, it was anticipated that the motivation of the Georgian refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs) to return to Abkhazia would eventually decrease; and thirdly, the de facto authorities needed time to attract members of the Abkhaz diaspora from Turkey and the Middle East as well as related ethnic kin from Russia to settle in the houses abandoned by the Georgian refugees. By that time, the process of resettlement was gathering speed and, by the end of 1995, up to 2,000 people had already come from abroad⁵².

This was the context in which Georgia’s policy towards Abkhazia was forged and how Abkhazia’s isolation gradually became a key component. The final touches were put on the policy of isolation after the well-known resolution was adopted at the CIS summit on 19th January 1996, imposing sanctions against the Abkhaz authorities. Soon after, a Georgian Presidential Decree of 31st January 1996 was announced, closing the port of Sukhumi and the Abkhaz section of the Russian-Georgian border; in addition, the airport was unable to operate in the absence of a special operating licence from the International Civil Aviation Organization.

Objectives and nature of policy of isolation

Over the two decades since the start of open conflict in Abkhazia, its dynamics and nature have fluctuated. The motives and objectives of the stakeholders implicated in the conflict have fluctuated accordingly.

⁴⁹ Special mention should be made of Russia’s support when Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) resolutions were adopted at two consecutive summits in 1994 and 1996 – at the summits, the Abkhaz authorities were condemned for carrying out ethnic cleansing against the Georgian population.

⁵⁰ Memorandum on maintaining peace and stability in the Commonwealth of Independent States (Almaty, 10th February 1995).

⁵¹ Statement by the Council of the Heads of State of the Commonwealth (Minsk, 26th May 1995) on overcoming the threat of separatism as an important condition of securing stability in the Caucasus and resolving conflict in that region.

⁵² From the notes of the author’s personal conversation with a senior official of the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG), Tbilisi, 1995.

The policy of coercion was relatively harsh in the first stages of its development. As was noted above, at that time Russia occupied a more principled position in relation to Sukhumi. If the overall aim of the policy of coercion and pressure on the Abkhaz side was to force it to abandon the idea of independence, the objective behind the isolation of Abkhazia – a component of this policy – was to achieve the first aim more rapidly. There were concerns in Tbilisi that over time the political mood in Moscow might shift in favour of Sukhumi. As a result, pressure needed to be ratcheted up to achieve the results in the short time left, including by means of isolation.

In ‘structural’ terms, the isolation of Abkhazia was complex. Its principal element was the CIS ‘sanctions’ regime, introduced at the start of 1996. A more detailed analysis of this regime is given below. There are also five other factors behind the policy of isolation, as follows:

1. UN Security Council Resolution 876 of 1993, which, censuring Sukhumi’s violation of international humanitarian law, called on ‘all states to prevent the provision from their territories or by persons under their jurisdiction of all assistance, other than humanitarian assistance, to the Abkhaz side and in particular to prevent the supply of any weapons and munitions’⁵³;
2. the Georgian Presidential Decree on the closure of the Sukhumi port and the Abkhaz section of the Russian-Georgian border;
3. Tbilisi’s decision not to apply to the International Civil Aviation Organization for a special locator code⁵⁴ for international carriage of goods and persons at Sukhumi Airport;
4. the closure of the Trans-Caucasian Highway and Railway, preventing regional trade with and via Abkhazia;
5. the almost total absence of economic cooperation between the parties to the conflict, apart from the joint operation of the Inguri dam hydroelectric power station.

The CIS ‘sanctions’ regime was complex in nature – it contained political, economic and military aspects. It provided in particular for: (a) an embargo on the sale and supply to Abkhazia of weapons and other war *matériel*; (b) a ban on trading, financial, transport and other operations with the Abkhaz authorities; (c) a ban on delegations of the Abkhaz authorities and persons officially representing these authorities visiting their territories. It should, however, also be noted that this regime did permit the transactions referred to in point 2 of the above paragraph where these were agreed by the government of Georgia.

From a legal perspective, these measures were neither sanctions nor indeed a blockade, since the decision to impose them is the prerogative of the UN Security Council. The word ‘sanctions’ is quite deliberately not used in the document itself⁵⁵. The position with Georgia was that the state had lost control of part of its territory and it was using international legal and political instruments to limit outside intervention in the situation by developing measures designed primarily to ensure that authorisation would routinely be sought from Tbilisi; restrictions on imports of commodities into Abkhazia to achieve the ‘desired socio-economic effect’ were secondary to this. In other words, these measures *de facto* enshrined the principle of the Georgian authorities’ prerogative over Abkhazia as an integral part of its territory. It is crucial to note that the regime, at least in principle, permitted imports to Abkhazia of food and essential supplies in the form of humanitarian

53 Available at <http://www.un.org/Docs/scres/1993/scres93.htm>.

54 Refers to the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) four-letter alphanumeric code designating each airport around the world. The ICAO codes are used by air traffic control and airline operations, as well as meteorological services, to transfer navigational and meteorological information on airports and flight planning, designating civil airports on radio-navigational charts and as the addresses for airports in the international Aeronautical Fixed Telecommunications Network (AFTN).

55 These measures were generally referred to in the CIS as ‘impact measures’ [мерами воздействия].

assistance, which is excluded in a conventional blockade. The Abkhaz authorities did not agree to these conditions for the very same reason: Sukhumi did not want to relinquish its own claims over sovereignty. As a result, the ‘sanctions’ from outside were supplemented by an element of self-isolation, which taken together put the population of Abkhazia in a dangerous socio-economic position. This was exploited by Abkhazia’s ruling elite, which, artfully playing the ‘victimisation’ card, managed to have the process referred to unofficially as a ‘blockade’.

The regime itself was soon eased, however. Pro-Abkhaz forces in Moscow had in fact started to coalesce, and this was beginning to be reflected in Moscow’s policy. First the rules on the border crossing at Psou River were relaxed; this was followed by the opening of railway communications. In parallel, foreign ships began to arrive at Abkhazia’s maritime ports, tourists started to arrive from Russia in increasing numbers and Russian passports were issued to the local population. All this occurred in violation of the ‘sanctions’ regime and Georgian national law. By 2002–2003, Abkhazia’s isolation in its previous form had almost disappeared and was having virtually no socio-economic impact.

Today, with Abkhazia recognised by the Russian Federation, the ‘structure’ and ‘nature’ of its isolation have changed significantly. Although some old elements of the isolation still formally exist – for example, the Georgian Presidential Decrees referred to above are still in force – they have little impact. With its doors ‘wide open’ to Russia, huge opportunities are opening up for Abkhazia’s socio-economic development in the short term. Tbilisi’s and also the West’s resources for pressure and/or coercion on Sukhumi are dwindling accordingly. In the long term, however, new features of the isolation will lead to problems for Sukhumi. The fact is that Tbilisi, having lost the ability to coerce Abkhazia through economic pressure, is attempting to gain the political support of the West for Georgia’s territorial integrity and to make Abkhazia’s relations with the international community (now without Russia) a hostage to this support. For its part, the West, in the absence of its own policy of ‘engagement’ with Abkhazia, is forced to deal with Tbilisi. As a result, Tbilisi is acquiring indirect leverage over the Abkhaz authorities by blocking Sukhumi’s relations with the West.

Unlike current relations with Georgia, relations with the West are particularly important for Abkhazia in a number of ways. Firstly, collaboration with the West is essential for institutional development and modernisation, which relations with Russia cannot provide. Secondly, only too aware of its vulnerability in the face of Russia’s increasing influence, Abkhazia needs to diversify its international relations, primarily with the influential Western powers and institutions. Thirdly, the elite groups within Abkhaz society are keen to see restrictions on freedom of movement into the Western world relaxed for intellectual tourism purposes, to gain access to educational institutions or Western healthcare services. Thus, the policy implemented by the international community (primarily the West) of non-recognition of Abkhazia is a new but crucial element in the policy of isolation, which is holding Sukhumi back from its mission of full international de-isolation and development.

Effectiveness of policy of isolation

Non-governmental circles in Georgia have questioned for some time whether there is any sense in conducting an isolationist policy towards Abkhazia. For the sake of balance, it should be noted however that in the initial stages the policy of pressurising Abkhazia, including its isolation, did achieve clear results – the Abkhaz side agreed to discuss the issue of status and at times even examined options for federative relations with the Georgian central authorities. If it had not been for the covert or overt sabotage by Russia, the policy of pressurising Sukhumi might well have succeeded eventually. One need only recall the events around the 2004–2005 presidential elections in Abkhazia, when Moscow for its own interests forced recalcitrant Abkhaz politicians to back down. The government officials in Tbilisi believed in the ‘coercive effect’ of isolation right up to

1999, when a referendum was held and the population of Abkhazia remaining after the war voted for an independent republic. It was only after the Abkhaz authorities dropped the status issue at the talks that doubts over the effectiveness of the ‘sanctions’ began to prevail. This scepticism was particularly apparent when the process of ‘passportisation’ began in Abkhazia [and South Ossetia] in the early 2000s. No one any longer entertained any illusions that ‘sanctions’ would make Sukhumi come to an arrangement. Even so, the main reason for this scepticism was not that the policy of isolation was ineffective, but that it was clearly counterproductive in terms of the peaceful resolution of the conflict. This was particularly exposed by the events of August 2008, when it became clear to all involved that if the conflict was ever to be resolved, this could only be through reconciliation and mutual compromise between the parties. Evidence that the isolation of Abkhazia was counterproductive is as follows.

1. Although the policy of isolating Abkhazia is implemented not only by Georgia, but also by the West under the policy of ‘non-recognition’ coordinated with Tbilisi, the perception of the Abkhaz elite is that Georgia remains the principal obstacle to building relations with the outside world. This perception, and a more or less total loss of mutual trust, is making any potential compromise between the parties even more remote. In addition, as already noted, the process of alienation is accelerating and may eventually make the reconciliation process totally impossible.
2. Sukhumi is increasingly seeing Russia as its only protector and patron. Russia is taking advantage of the circumstances to gain control of the situation in Abkhazia and has achieved a virtual monopoly. It is symptomatic that Abkhaz officials are no longer talking about a multi-vector external policy for Abkhazia.
3. Having, with Russian help, fenced themselves off from Georgia, the ‘isolated Abkhaz’ no longer see Georgia as a threat or a development resource – indeed, Sukhumi views anything associated with or emanating from Georgia with either indifference or categorical rejection. A glaring example of this is the ‘Georgian State Strategy on the Occupied Territories’⁵⁶, which Sukhumi calls ‘a road map of the loss of sovereignty and reintegration into Georgia’ and ‘a guideline of what Abkhazia should not do’⁵⁷. As a result, the Strategy, which actually contains many entirely constructive ideas, and the associated Action Plan⁵⁸, which sets out in detail the methods, instruments and specific areas of collaboration, are not being implemented on the ground to any significant extent.
4. The EU’s declared policy of ‘non-recognition and engagement’ shared the same fate as Georgia’s state strategy and was criticised and viewed with scepticism by Sukhumi. In the absence of any concrete mechanisms for ‘engagement’, the Abkhaz authorities reject the existing procedures for establishing contacts and collaboration with Europe via Georgia as a matter of principle. But this is caused by the limited potential for the international community and the EU in particular to influence Abkhazia’s political stance.
5. Incidents with foreign ships breaking the Georgian embargo on Abkhaz ports create ‘diplomatic friction’ in relations with other states. This issue is frequently on the agenda in relations with Turkey. The latter is one of Georgia’s most important partners and, at the same time, has significant leverage over the situation in the region. Occasionally, relations flare up following an incident.
6. The rules on movement across the line of division on the Inguri River have been tightened. This primarily creates inconvenience for the inhabitants of the Gali district and their

56 Available at <http://www.smr.gov.ge/uploads/file/SMR-Strategy-en.pdf> (82Kb PDF).

57 ‘Sukhumi slams Tbilisi’s Strategy Paper’, *Civil Georgia*, Tbilisi, 3rd February 2010. Available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=21944>.

58 Available at http://www.smr.gov.ge/uploads/action_plan.pdf (65Kb PDF).

relatives on the opposite side of the river. This leads to the physical isolation of the Gali population and risks of a decrease in human security.

7. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society activists in Georgia engaged directly on issues related to conflict transformation are placed in the most unenviable position. They are the victims of the ‘Modalities for Conducting Activities in the Occupied Territories of Georgia’⁵⁹. These allow the Georgian authorities not only to control their activities, but also simply to stop the NGOs and civil society activists from participating in projects that are deemed unsuitable and/or incompatible with ‘Georgia’s state interests, peaceful conflict resolution, de-occupation or humanitarian aims’.
8. In the economic and business sphere, the ‘Law on Occupied Territories’ and the ‘Modalities for Conducting Activities in the Occupied Territories’, the basic legal instruments within Tbilisi’s isolationist policy, can only produce an effect that is directly opposite to that declared in the Strategy and its Action Plan: Georgian business persons are placed in an impossible situation, since they are obliged to act within Georgian law but are thereby *de facto* unable to work legally on the territory of Abkhazia; on the other hand, Russian business persons, who are acting under Russian and Abkhaz law, do not face these restrictions.

It is clear that the policy of isolation in its present form is neither an instrument of coercion on Sukhumi nor indeed a resource for promoting conciliation between the conflicting sides.

Issue of Abkhazia’s (de)isolation in new paradigm of Georgian authorities

There is still a public consensus within Georgia that reunification of the country should be the national objective and is probably still the main motive of the authorities. Given the new geopolitical realities following the events of 2008, it is important to note that, although they are aware that there is little prospect of resolving the conflict in the near future, for the overwhelming majority of citizens the country’s territorial integrity remains the highest priority. From Tbilisi’s perspective, therefore, any ‘political formula for the resolution of the conflict’ would include Abkhazia’s status within a unified state and the return of refugees and IDPs.

Meanwhile, one of the consequences of the events of August 2008 is an abrupt change of the perception in Tbilisi of the structure of the conflict – one of the key parameters in the new paradigm. The main ‘counterpart’ is seen as Russia, while the authorities in Sukhumi [and Tskhinvali] are its ‘puppets’. Tbilisi needs to play the ‘long game’ with the principal counterpart – Russia. However, in terms of their relations with Sukhumi, the Georgian authorities, although they continue to ‘ignore’ the conflict, still feel the need to counter the process of alienation of Abkhaz society – a process that is rapidly gaining momentum. At the same time, the emphasis is on ‘the suffering population’, the ‘victim of a malicious policy of assimilation by our main (common) enemy’ (i.e. Russia). It is striking that the ‘puppet authorities’ in Sukhumi are not viewed in any way as ‘victims’; on the contrary, they are ‘confederates of the main enemy’. Consequently, they must be ignored.

Tbilisi’s differing perceptions and attitudes to Moscow and Sukhumi lead to different sets of ‘objectives’. In relation to Moscow, the minimum aim of the ‘long game’ is clearly the withdrawal of Russian troops from Abkhazia and South Ossetia, – that is, de-occupation; the maximum aim is for Moscow to revoke its recognition of their independence. As for Abkhazia, the aim is to keep it ‘in check’. In other words, Georgia must keep Abkhazia in isolation from the outside world or in ‘managed de-isolation’ so as not to ‘lose it’ ultimately. Nonetheless, by applying ‘soft power’, it must engage Abkhazia in a process that will gradually increase its ties with Georgia. Now that Russia is clearly a more enticing prospect for Abkhazia than Georgia on virtually all measures, Georgia has nevertheless continued its

⁵⁹ Available at <http://www.smr.gov.ge/uploads/file/041010/Modalities%20for%20Engagement.pdf> (26Kb PDF).

attempts to isolate Abkhazia from the rest of the world (apart, naturally, from Russia where Georgia is powerless). This policy appears to be based on the hope that circumstances will change over time and Georgia will regain its attractions for the Abkhaz.

For the sake of balance, it should be noted that the Georgian authorities are not intending to use direct pressure on the Abkhaz side as part of the ‘binding tactics’, particularly since Tbilisi lost all of its leverage as a result of the August events. On the whole, however, Tbilisi has not abandoned its policy of pressure and continues its attempts to squeeze Abkhazia by indirect means by maintaining the isolationist approach. However, it is clear that a tougher line was taken on isolating Abkhazia soon after the end of the Russian-Georgian war.

Tbilisi’s policy on the conflict can be broken down as follows.

1. A policy directed at the de-occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia – while carefully avoiding a precise definition of what is to be understood by de-occupation, that is, whether this is simply the withdrawal of Russian troops to their pre-war positions⁶⁰ or Russia’s renunciation of its recognition of the independence of these territories. The principal target audience for this component of the policy is the international organisations (UN, EU, NATO, OSCE, PACE, etc.) and major world powers (the US, Germany, France, the United Kingdom, Italy, China). Georgian diplomacy is constantly addressed to them, citing the aggression, ethnic cleansing and occupation. Apart from this, this is also the formal objective at the Geneva talks.
2. A policy of ensuring security along the confrontation lines and resolving short and medium-term humanitarian issues – the principal forum for this is the Geneva talks but also the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) created as a result of these talks.
3. The isolation of Abkhazia [and South Ossetia] – the following instruments are used for this.
 - 3.1 The policy of non-recognition – two aims are set under this component:
 - a) **securing the non-recognition of the independence of Abkhazia [and South Ossetia] by the international community** – in contrast to the first component, the target audience here is also the neighbouring countries and the countries of Central Asia. Moreover, following the recognition of the independence of Abkhazia [and South Ossetia] by some states in Central America and Oceania, the focus is now on all entities under international law. With this aim in mind, diplomatic relations were rapidly established with more than 50 countries around the world and this process is still continuing. In some key countries, diplomatic missions were opened prematurely;
 - b) **restricting the movements of the inhabitants of Abkhazia [and South Ossetia] by blocking the issuing of visas to persons holding Russian passports** – this primarily affects persons convicted of committing war crimes or ethnic cleansing.
 - 3.2 Law on the Occupied Territories – this law, which came into effect on 31st October 2008, is designed to regulate activity in Abkhazia [and South Ossetia] and restricts a series of freedoms and types of activity on the relevant territories⁶¹.

⁶⁰ According to the requirement in clause 5 of the ceasefire agreement of 12th August 2008.

⁶¹ For example, Article 4 of the Law restricts freedom of movement on the occupied territories (i.e. Abkhazia and South Ossetia) for citizens of foreign states and stateless persons, thereby banning immigration without the control and authorisation of the Georgian authorities. Article 5 of the Law states that any transactions on property not covered by Georgian law are void. Article 6 bans economic activity on the occupied territories not covered by Georgian law and also transport communications, the use of natural resources and the organisation of money transfers. Article 8 requires that births, marriages and deaths be registered on the basis of the relevant Georgian laws. Exemptions are granted only in the case of emergency humanitarian aid and/or with special permission by the Georgian authorities ‘if this is in the interests of the state of Georgia, the peaceful resolution of the conflict, de-occupation or humanitarian aims’.

4. Another component of Tbilisi's policy is the tactic of 'binding' Abkhazia [and South Ossetia] – this intends to create the conditions for amicable rapprochement between Sukhumi and Tbilisi. This has to do particularly with services offered by Georgia to the Abkhaz side in the humanitarian sphere and also mutually advantageous economic projects. This tactic is planned to be implemented using the 'Strategy on the Occupied Territories', specially developed for this objective.

As already noted, the overall isolationist nature of Tbilisi's policy means that the Strategy has 'stalled' and there are, as yet, no prospects of it getting off the ground⁶². Despite the West's official support for the Georgian Strategy⁶³, concerns over its feasibility in its current format and thus its effectiveness are slowly but increasingly being aired.

Issue of (de)isolation in the West's paradigm

Over the entire period following the outbreak of conflict in the 1990s, the West's attitude to conflicts in Georgia slowly but surely changed. Following the events of August 2008, this process was accelerated. Over the almost three years that have passed since the Russian-Georgian war, the West's paradigm has undergone three stages of evolution as follows.

1. Initially, the West was 'responsive' (reactive). Firstly, the West, being unable to avert the crisis, was forced to simply respond to the drama as it unfolded. It should however be noted that compared with the US, which restricted itself to the symbolic deployment of warships just off Georgia's territorial waters, the EU looked more active, passing a unanimous resolution to send a monitoring mission of 200 staff to Georgia. Secondly, the West had to respond to Russia's decision to recognise the independence of Abkhazia [and South Ossetia] and the deployment of military bases there. All Western (and not only Western) institutions and governments without exception criticised these decisions. Thirdly, a response followed the closure of all previously existing peacekeeping and negotiation processes. Initially, the West was successful, ending the war and persuading the warring parties to sign the relevant documents⁶⁴. Moreover, soon after the war ended, discussions were launched on securing stability in the region under the auspices of the major international organisations in Geneva. Fourthly, the West responded to the enormous material damage caused in Georgia as a result of the war; the donor conference convened on its initiative granted Georgia a financial assistance package of US\$4.5 billion.
2. The West then moved into a phase of 'evaluation and coming to terms with' the events. The chief result of the reappraisal related to the context and nature of the conflict. Although Russia's destructive role in the pre-war period of 'mediation' was nothing new to informed observers, this was only recognised after the event in Western political circles. The conflicts in Georgia are now linked or seen by them as part of a [wider] Georgia-Russian conflict. One source of inspiration for the process of reappraisal was the report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, which was set up at the initiative of the EU⁶⁵.

⁶² The Georgian authorities do not at present show any signs of being prepared to modify the policy. In an interview given to the Georgian information agency 'Pirveli' on 27th January 2011, the new State Minister for Reintegration, Ekaterine Tkeshelashvili, reaffirmed their commitment to the policy. Available in Georgian at http://pirveli.com.ge/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=62523&Itemid=47.

⁶³ 'The EU welcomes the spirit of the initiative as a constructive step towards easing tensions, building confidence and reaching out to the residents of the Abkhaz and South Ossetian regions', said Catherine Ashton, EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, in her speech delivered on behalf of the EU on 10th March. See 'EU Hails Tbilisi's Abkhaz, S. Ossetia Strategy', *Civil Georgia*, 11th March 2010. Available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22072>.

⁶⁴ This refers to the six-point agreement on 12th August 2008 and the supplementary agreement of 8th September of the same year which provides more detailed conditions for the stabilisation of the situation.

⁶⁵ See website www.ceiig.ch.

3. Following the process of reappraisal and ‘coming to terms’ with the events, the West’s paradigm evolved and formed the basis for a new ‘proactive’ policy, which is still in the process of development. Despite this, a number of components are already under consideration. In particular, the US and the EU (along with the overwhelming majority of the international community) are conducting in close coordination a policy of non-recognition of Abkhazia [and South Ossetia]; they also criticise Russia’s military presence on Georgian territory. At the same time, on the West’s initiative, a ‘resetting’ of relations with Russia has begun – the aim here is to engage this important but ‘recalcitrant’ partner in a constructive process of global collaboration. As the process of ‘resetting’ deepens, the West’s position on respecting Georgia’s territorial integrity and non-recognition of the independence of Abkhazia [and South Ossetia] remains unchanged; it is fixed at all levels of the dialogue with Russia. At the same time, however, there is still a flaw in the West’s paradigm in terms of its impact on the status quo, which Russia is pushing to legitimise.

In the search for an effective approach, the Western community has proposed the concept of a new attitude to the conflicts in Georgia. To avoid any confusion, it should be pointed out right away that two almost identical formulas emerged at virtually the same time in academic circles in the US and in the EU: ‘engagement without recognition’ (US) and ‘non-recognition and engagement’ (EU). The first is a well articulated concept⁶⁶, while the second refers to fragments of a potential future EU policy⁶⁷. Despite the fragmentary nature of the vision behind the European formula, it shares a number of points with the first (US) concept:

- (a) in both cases, the ‘absorption’ of Abkhazia by Russia is acknowledged to be unacceptable;
- (b) keeping the conflict ‘frozen’ is acknowledged as dangerous; and
- (c) the resources and policy of the Georgian authorities are not considered to be adequate either to prevent the above threats or even less to resolve the conflict.

The combined thrust of all this is the idea of remaining true to the principle of the non-recognition of Abkhazia, while at the same time engaging it in the process of ‘westernisation’ of its value systems and governance. In other words, it amounts to the de-isolation of Abkhazia towards the West, counter to Tbilisi’s existing isolationist approach.

Judging from the tone of comments from Georgian officialdom, Tbilisi is closely watching these developments – although it has no real control over the action the EU might take.

Conclusion

Tbilisi and the EU are proposing a policy of ‘engagement’ of Abkhazia which certainly indicates their intention to ‘de-isolate’ it. It is true, however, as is clear from the above analysis, that the move towards de-isolation is viewed rather differently in Tbilisi and Brussels. For Tbilisi, ‘de-isolation’ would mean with respect to Georgia and also the West, but always via Georgia. For Brussels, it would mean de-isolation with respect to the West directly – that is, not necessarily via Georgia alone. Incidentally, the Brussels approach by definition could not encompass a position in which the path to the West is open to Abkhazia, and the West ignores the erection of a new ‘Berlin wall’ on the Georgian side. Consequently, in certain circumstances the emergence of ‘some synergy’ is entirely possible. This depends on Georgia modifying its position that the de-

⁶⁶ A. Cooley and L. Mitchell, ‘Engagement without Recognition: A New Strategy toward Abkhazia and Eurasia’s Unrecognized States’, *The Washington Quarterly*, October 2010.

⁶⁷ In the absence of a publicly accessible document, the fragments of the policy can be found in statements by the former EU Special Representative for South Caucasus, Peter Semneby. See, for example, Peter Semneby, Speech in front of National Assembly of Council of Europe in Paris, 17th January 2011.

isolation of Abkhazia can only occur 'via itself' and Abkhazia modifying its policy of total self-isolation from Georgia. It is likely that the EU would do all within its means to facilitate these modifications. Of course, the Russian Federation would also have a crucial say in whether these synergies actually materialise.

However, the preconditions required for both sides to modify their position are in place. Although everyone laments the lack of progress in Georgian-Abkhaz relations, there have been some encouraging signs in recent months. On 23rd November 2010, the Georgian President, Mikheil Saakashvili, in a speech given to the European Parliament, stated that Georgia would never resort to violence to restore its territorial integrity and sovereignty⁶⁸. Despite the sceptical tone of their comments regarding this statement by Saakashvili, the leaders of Abkhazia [and South Ossetia] still felt the need to respond: on 6th December 2010, Sergei Bagapsh [and Eduard Kokoiti] also ruled out the use of force against Georgia (except in the case of self-defence)⁶⁹. It is not yet clear whether and, if so, when these statements will be documented in writing in the Geneva (or other) process (Georgia is demanding, not without justification, that Russia also enter into a similar commitment), but the leaders are bound by their public statements.

At the same time, it is important to note that it is not necessary and perhaps counterproductive to de-isolate Abkhazia immediately, before specific guarantees are in place. The Abkhaz elite is inclined to believe that, with partial recognition and the growing Russian military presence in the region, the 'Georgia factor' has lost all significance. If full international recognition is granted, it could entirely turn its back on Georgia and forget about it. This is precisely what Tbilisi fears and, to avoid losing Abkhazia forever, it prefers to 'keep it in check' within its isolationist policy. Consequently, the West's policy – 'engagement without recognition', which is now in the development stage – must include conditionality on the extent of Abkhazia's de-isolation. In other words, bearing in mind the Abkhaz elite's belief referred to earlier, the 'engagement' of Abkhazia with the Western world must be gradual and be accompanied by initiatives that encourage Sukhumi towards dialogue and collaboration with Tbilisi – including ideas along the lines of those set out in the 'Strategy'.

It is important to note here that, together with Abkhazia's reintegration into Georgia, the aim of the West's new strategy must include the reconciliation of the Abkhaz and the Georgians through conflict transformation. The roots of the conflict go so deep that its resolution – that is, the resolution of the issue of Abkhazia's status – is unrealistic in the foreseeable future. This approach could include in the initial stages the introduction by Western institutions and governments of a simplified procedure for Schengen and US visas for Abkhaz citizens and the provision of access to university education⁷⁰. As Sukhumi's interest in deepening ties with the West increases, issues such as the property of refugees and IDPs left in Abkhazia, along with the human security of the inhabitants of the Gali district can be resolved in parallel. In later stages, when/if a general atmosphere of trust is established between the conflicting sides, it will become possible to achieve a mutually acceptable form for institutionalised guarantees of bilateral security for Tbilisi and Sukhumi. Clearly, for this to happen, the current 'resetting' of relations between the West and Russia needs to succeed and create the preconditions for a mutually acceptable resolution of the question of the withdrawal of the Russian military bases. The trajectory proposed here would inexorably bring about more favourable conditions for the transformation of the conflict and reconciliation, with a 'non-recognised' Abkhazia coming closer and becoming more accessible and the 'non-recognising' Georgia no longer posing a threat to Abkhazia, instead becoming a resource for its development and increased wellbeing.

68 This speech is available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22883>.

69 'Bagapsh, Kokoity Ready for Non-Use of Force Pledge', *Civil Georgia*, 6th December 2010. Available at <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=22930>.

70 On this, see the aforementioned Cooley and Mitchell, 2010.

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