



March 2015

# Dialogue and Diversity in Abkhazia

## Public opinion survey

### Summary of results



## The Association of Women of Abkhazia

The Association of Women of Abkhazia (AWA) was established as a non-governmental organisation in 1999, following a conference that was organised by a group of women dealing with the human and material losses, disabilities, psychological and physical trauma that their society had suffered as a consequence of the 1992-93 war.

AWA strives to

- protect the rights of women;
- promote better conditions and opportunities for women's participation;
- strengthen the social and political position of women through civil society development;
- encourage co-operation and networking, and
- participate in peacebuilding processes in the Caucasus region and internationally.

AWA provides social and psychological support to socially vulnerable women, offers free legal advice, and delivers a variety of educational activities, such as training seminars, conferences and public discussions. Its members co-operated closely with lawyers and members of the Abkhazian parliament to draft the Law on Gender Equality, which was adopted in 2009.

AWA activists believe in the potential in women to promote peace and security, and to transform cultures of war and violence into cultures of non-violence and collaboration. They therefore work to foster the (political) participation of women across Abkhazia and from all ethnic and religious backgrounds, including in remote and isolated villages.

## Conciliation Resources

Conciliation Resources is an independent organisation working with people in conflict to prevent violence and build peace. We provide advice, support and practical resources to help divided communities resolve their differences peacefully. In addition, we take what we learn to government decision-makers and others working to end conflict, to improve peacebuilding policies and practice worldwide.

# Preface

As a peacebuilding organisation, Conciliation Resources sees issues around minority rights and inclusion in the wider context of conflict transformation. Establishing a long-term, sustainable peace often requires a long process of supporting dialogue, repairing relationships, and addressing the underlying causes of conflict. Working with all those involved in and affected by a conflict is critical to bring about a lasting change.

The violation of human rights and civil liberties lies at the heart of many violent conflicts. Unmet social, political and economic needs may provoke opposition and civil unrest. Processes and institutions that promote people's rights and address exclusion are therefore an integral part of peacebuilding.

Conciliation Resources has been working on the Georgian-Abkhaz peace process since 1998, working closely with local partner organisations to promote dialogue across various ethnic and political divides, and supporting local actors to address inequality and political tensions in their communities.

Though inter-ethnic relations and minority inclusion had long been identified as a pressing issue by a number of Conciliation Resources' interlocutors in Abkhazia, there had been a lack of concerted, strategic work to improve the situation in this regard. Individual cases relating to social and political inclusion had been supported by the public chamber, and a couple of leading non-governmental organisations in particular had been vocal on the need for change in regard to managing diversity. And yet, the lack of structured co-operation, and the absence of a focus for collaborative discussion and strategising, had allowed work in this area to slip down the list of priorities. We were therefore grateful for the opportunity in 2014 to put issues of minority rights and inclusion back on the agenda in our work and that of our local partners.

## **Promoting 'Dialogue and Diversity' in Abkhazia**

This publication was produced as part of 'Dialogue and Diversity: building confidence between ethnic and religious groups in Abkhazia', a project funded through the Confidence Building and Early Response Mechanism (COBERM), a joint EU-UNDP initiative.

Over the course of 2014, the Association of Women of Abkhazia (AWA) worked together with other civic actors and in close consultation with Conciliation Resources, to reach out to diverse ethnic and religious communities in Abkhazia and bring them together for exchange of information and joint

analysis. The aim was to enhance the capacity of civil society actors in Abkhazia to facilitate inter-community dialogue, and to formulate priorities and suggestions for better integrating and taking into account the needs of diverse ethnic and religious groups.

In order to get a better picture with regard to diverse groups in Abkhazia, their perceptions and needs concerning Abkhazian society and their respective places in it, AWA began the project with a series of focus groups and in-depth interviews among representatives of a range of ethnic and religious communities. The results of this qualitative research are presented in more detail in this publication.

Apart from providing first-hand information on people's perspectives, the research process prompted a range of interlocutors to think, and generated interest in the topic among diverse circles within Abkhazia. Many of the respondents continued to play an active role in the project, mainly by engaging in a regular dialogue platform. This platform brought together around fifteen individuals representing seven ethnic/religious groups, who met every other month to discuss serious issues of concern, compare perspectives, voice grievances and find ways of supporting one another. This dialogue was sustained throughout the lifetime of the project, even during periods of political turmoil and instability in Abkhazia.

Participants also attended joint training sessions, which enhanced their understanding of various approaches to inclusion and mechanisms for civic engagement, and gave them opportunities to generate ideas for collaborative activities to engage their respective communities, the general public and those in positions of decision making. Small-scale initiatives promoting inter-community dialogue thus involved more than 300 representatives of a variety of ethnic/religious groups in four regions of Abkhazia, among them a high percentage of youth and 'multipliers', such as those working in the teaching profession.

On the whole, participants have come away from this experience with a greater sense of confidence, mutual understanding and motivation to keep active and connected. Their dialogue continues, and further consultations with policymakers are planned to take forward action to help people in Abkhazia work toward a society that is truly 'shared' by all its subjects in an inclusive and collaborative fashion.



## Key observations

Though it did not last long, a number of practical lessons and suggestions can be drawn from this project that might be relevant for other local and international actors engaged in the Georgian-Abkhaz context:

**The fact that diverse groups of Abkhazian society largely share key concerns and interests is not sufficiently acknowledged and utilised.** On a number of occasions, people involved in the project found that, notwithstanding their different backgrounds and affiliations, there are more things they have in common than that divide them. Respondents would often refer to the shared Soviet past, the hardships of the war and post-war period, and how people pulled through, supporting one another. However, in today's Abkhazia, many of the rural communities are fairly homogenous in terms of ethnic composition. They often live isolated from each other, with little interaction. This lack of information leaves room for myths and stereotypes. The past year has shown that small-scale initiatives can make a real difference in breaking perceived exclusion and helping people with little or no exposure to other cultures and perspectives to connect and collaborate. It would be fairly straightforward and inexpensive to establish more sustainable and regular mechanisms for exchange between local communities, led by civil society, schools and/or local authorities.

The media could play a more constructive and active role in promoting ethnic and religious diversity in Abkhazia. Regular TV programmes and newspaper columns dedicated to the life of various communities residing in Abkhazia, their concerns and hopes for the future, could positively impact on how people relate to one another.

Project participants also suggested political measures that could be taken to introduce more systemic changes:

- A Parliamentary commission on inter-ethnic relations could be reinstituted to ensure the needs of diverse ethnic and religious groups are taken into account when legislation is being defined and adjusted.
- It would be beneficial to introduce cultural diversity in the school curriculum, e.g. providing information on various nationalities that make up Abkhazian society and have played roles in its history and development.

**Issues around the Abkhaz language, its vulnerability and revival, concern not only ethnic Abkhaz but the population of Abkhazia as a whole.** The precarious state of the Abkhaz language can

be a point of contention and controversy. 'Dialogue and Diversity' participants of various backgrounds felt strongly they needed to find ways of making this serious issue a unifying factor for Abkhazian society, rather than a divisive one. In fact, the qualitative research has revealed a great degree of understanding and sympathy on the part of non-Abkhaz respondents regarding Abkhaz concerns about their language and its future survival. They acknowledge that their own native languages are not facing such threat, as they are widely spoken in their 'historical homelands'. Many Armenians, Estonians, Georgians, Greeks, Russians and Ukrainians expressed interest and readiness to learn the Abkhaz language, or at least for their children to do so. However, the lack of adequate language-learning programmes, methodology and qualified teaching personnel poses severe obstacles. While these problems affect Abkhaz and non-Abkhaz residents alike, there are particular difficulties when it comes to teaching and learning Abkhaz as a foreign language:

- Apart from the need to overhaul the education system and modernise textbooks and approaches to teacher training, participants felt it would be beneficial specifically to train non-Abkhaz teachers to teach the Abkhaz language in their respective communities.
- 'National schools' were a topic that often came up in the context of language proficiency and related problems. Participants held various, sometimes conflicting views in this regard, and thought it would be helpful if Abkhazians could learn more specifically from international experiences of managing education in multi-lingual settings.
- One particular recommendation concerned Abkhaz language programming on Abkhazian TV channels, where introducing subtitles in Russian was deemed to be helpful.

**Involving Georgians from Gal/i in a wider 'multi-ethnic' context builds confidence and is less threatening than bi-lateral interaction.** It has proven effective to engage Gal/i residents in the context of this project alongside a range of ethnic/religious groups living in Abkhazia. This multi-ethnic approach is perceived by many to be less threatening and confrontational. It has provided Georgians in Abkhazia a safe space to engage in a constructive and frank manner, comparing perspectives and concerns with fellow residents of Abkhazia. During 'Dialogue and Diversity' sessions and training workshops, Georgian participants were very vocal in expressing their needs and fears, which indicates a great level of confidence in the rest of the group. With regard to follow-up activities and local initiatives, the Georgian participants

were among the most active in reaching out at the community level, which is a sign of commitment and self-confidence. It is particularly encouraging that the initiatives were carried out in consultation, and partly in collaboration, with local schools and local authorities, which will hopefully enable participants to sustain good relationships with these interlocutors in the future.

In the past, the efforts of Conciliation Resources and other actors that have focused on more bilateral interaction between Gal/i and Sukhum/i have encountered obstacles, not least because they were too easily perceived in relation to the wider conflict, and Georgian-Abkhaz relations overall. We consider that a more inclusive engagement of Georgians in a multi-ethnic framework is the way forward to forming improved and trusting relationships that can allow people across Abkhazia to articulate their needs and grievances, and find mutually acceptable solutions.

**A lack of robust and transparent structures and procedures for governance leaves room for selective application of existing legal frameworks. This practice is often perceived as discriminatory and can give rise to ethnic/religious tension.**

The provision of equal rights and opportunities requires strong institutions and personnel that put

approaches and policies into practice with integrity and in a transparent manner. While Abkhazians are guaranteed equal rights before the law, in practice a combination of favouritism and corruption can lead to unequal treatment, which often manifests through existing clan structures. Ethnic Abkhaz, who tend to have the strongest networks and personal links with the ruling elite, on the whole appear to enjoy privileged treatment.

A lot more could be done to ensure all Abkhazians are guaranteed equal opportunities, regardless of their ethnic or religious affiliations, for instance through enhancing civic awareness, information about and access to public services. Abkhazian civil society has stressed the need to establish effective and inclusive mechanisms for civic control and monitoring.

Ultimately, people need to feel sufficiently included and protected in order to engage in open and honest discussions about Abkhazia's future and what type of society they want to build together, following which values, applying which principles, and forming which kind of relationships with other actors in the neighbourhood. And this type of discussion is crucial for people in Abkhazia to find ways to live in peace and with a sense of security in the wider region.

Although there is no clearly-defined or consistent distinction in the use of the terms 'Abkhaz' and 'Abkhazian', in this publication we have used 'Abkhaz' to denote the ethnic Abkhaz population, individuals or their language, and 'Abkhazian' to refer without ethnic distinction to the residents of Abkhazia and its institutions.

This publication was made possible thanks to the financial support of the Confidence Building and Early Response Mechanism (COBERM), a joint EU-UNDP initiative, and the Netherlands' Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Contents of the following research summary are the sole responsibility of the author and cannot be taken to reflect the views of Conciliation Resources or the donors.

# Summary of results

Liana Kvarchelia

**Summary results of a public opinion survey on the situation of minorities in Abkhazia, carried out by the Association of Women of Abkhazia**

## Introduction

The purpose of the survey conducted by the Association of Women of Abkhazia (AWA) was to identify aspects of public perception of ethnic and religious minorities and their situation in Abkhazia. The qualitative research was carried out through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, with 20 in-depth interviews and 5 focus groups in total. 70 people were surveyed, including representatives of different ethnic groups (Abkhaz, Armenians, Estonians, Georgians/Mingrelians, Germans, Greeks, Jews, Poles, Russians), as well as followers of different faiths and traditions (Catholic, Jewish, Lutheran, Muslim and Orthodox Christian). The qualitative survey did not include any quantitative data and should be viewed as a reflection of a number of trends in the public perception of the important issue of cultural diversity in Abkhazia.

The survey's authors set out to identify the way in which different groups in society: 1) perceive the situation of various ethnic and religious groups in Abkhazia in relation to their rights; 2) determine the degree of minorities' participation in social and political processes; 3) understand the nature of the nation-building process in Abkhazia and related challenges and opportunities.

### What unites ethnic and other groups in Abkhazia?

The survey results support the suggestion that Abkhazian society has laid down sufficiently solid foundations for accord and cooperation between different ethnic and religious groups. The shared experiences, achievements and problems that the entire Abkhazian society has had to face in recent history, play a significant role. Many respondents, particularly the older generation, referred positively to the shared Soviet past, when several generations of residents were growing up in the spirit of internationalism.

Common interests linked to the need to defend Abkhazia from external threats and the shared experience of overcoming difficulties during and after the war also serve as unifying factors. It should also be noted that the Georgian-Abkhaz war did not just rally the majority of the current Abkhazian population, but also created interethnic tensions, in particular between the Georgian/Mingrelian population and the rest of the citizens.

Almost all the respondents spoke about the natural beauty and benign climate of Abkhazia and their perception of Abkhazia as the place where they feel most comfortable and at home.

Finally, many respondents stressed Abkhazia's special way of life and the common mindset shared by local residents irrespective of their ethnic identity. These had evolved as a result of many years of different cultures' coexistence and interaction, their cross-fertilization and mutual influence.

Minority representatives emphasised that in their 'historic homelands' outside Abkhazia (be it Russia, Armenia, Greece or Georgia) they were not perceived as "svoi" (belonging/their own). In their native countries, Abkhazian Armenians, Russians and others are more often viewed as a separate group with its own civic identity, culturally different, to an extent, from the "parent" group. Outside Abkhazia representatives of ethnic minorities from Abkhazia are often called the "Abkhaz" and they tend to feel as such when away from Abkhazia.

In the eyes of the Abkhaz repatriates who occupy their own special place in the architecture of Abkhazian society and observe social processes at arm's length (due to a language barrier, first and foremost, as well as cultural differences) different ethnic minorities in Abkhazia have more similarities than differences. This is especially true of the urban population. "It is curious but when you look at each other you must notice the aspects that distinguish you from one another. Yet when we as a group of repatriates look at you, we see to the contrary how much you have in common, linguistically and culturally. You have a considerable shared life experience and do many things in the same way," – said one repatriate from Turkey in an interview.

Although in relation to the outside world and in the eyes of the outside world a certain commonality has emerged in Abkhazia, with shared citizenship and a more or less identical way of life, ethnic identity remains an important factor in internal relations.

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When asked how they categorise other people some respondents preferred to talk in terms of social status (rich/poor), geography (rural/urban population), level of education and so on. For a significant part of those surveyed, however, ethnic identity remained the most important identifier. Respondents commented that if someone is being talked about in society, their nationality will be mentioned in the conversation. Indeed, referencing someone's ethnic identity provides additional social and cultural information about that person or their situation.

Survey responses contain references to ethnic identity, with both positive and negative connotations. Negative aspects are closely linked to social divisions in society, lack of equality before the law or the selective treatment by law enforcement agencies. Some respondents spoke of the fact that they were wary of starting a conflict with the Abkhaz in certain situations even if their rights were infringed as a result: "If, God forbid, I have a car crash, I find it easier to deal with an Armenian than an Abkhaz. I try to have nothing to do with the Abkhaz who always get preferential treatment."

None of the respondents cited religion as an identifier. As seen from the survey, religious affiliation does not impede one's ability to enjoy one's rights in Abkhazia. At the same time, there were certain common features in the perception of the Muslim community as a whole rather than individual Muslims. This does not concern all Abkhazian citizens calling themselves Muslims, as many of them are Muslim in name only. It is rather the case with the new wave of Muslims who have come to settle in Abkhazia as a result of Islam consolidating its foothold in the North Caucasus. The opening of the prayer house in Sukhum and the issue of building a mosque raised by the new Muslims in Abkhazia have sparked off fears in some parts of Abkhazian society about the potential use of the local Muslim community as a channel for furthering Islamic fundamentalist ideology. Practising Muslims, as pointed out by one Muslim respondent, are closely monitored by the security services and law enforcement agencies, which creates a certain discomfort for that group. Yet their religious persuasion does not impede the followers of Islam from accessing education or career opportunities.

On the whole the topic of religion was only mentioned by the Georgian focus group in connection with the discussion of the residents' need to open Orthodox churches in the Lower and Upper Gal regions (residents in remote villages find it very difficult to get to the Ilori Church).

As regards the formal aspects of the matter, all those surveyed think that the Abkhazian Constitution and the current legislation guarantee all citizens' equality before the law, irrespective of their ethnicity, religious belief, gender and so forth. They also agree that the Abkhazian legislation protects their cultural and linguistic identity. For example, the so-called 'national schools' with minority languages as languages of instruction get public funding.<sup>1</sup> In 2012 Abkhazia adopted the Law on the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, guaranteeing its citizens freedom of conscience and religious belief. Only Jehovah's Witnesses are currently banned in Abkhazia because their activities violate the country's legislation. In practice, however, their activities are not interfered with.

*«I try to have nothing to do with the Abkhaz who always get preferential treatment.»*

In answer to the question regarding whether all Abkhazian citizens enjoy equal rights and opportunities, almost all the respondents affirmed that this was true of the Abkhazian legislation. Many felt that in practice, however, a person benefits first and foremost from their social status and connections, which tend to be stronger among the ethnic Abkhaz. The respondents did not mention the provision in the Law on Presidential Elections in Abkhazia, under which only an ethnic Abkhaz can become President of Abkhazia, save for when they were asked about guarantees of equal rights for every citizen. Despite the fact that the respondents considered the situation discriminatory they did not question it per se, recognising that ethnic Abkhaz play a leading role in building and governing the [Abkhazian] state. In the words of one respondent (Armenian), "without the Abkhaz there would be no [Abkhazian] state."

The Abkhaz respondents also confirmed that all groups in Abkhazia enjoyed equal rights. At the same time some of them preferred to discuss the situation of the ethnic Abkhaz and threats to their

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1 Alongside Russian and Armenian schools there are also state-funded Georgian schools in Abkhazia. Despite the fact that Georgian schools (12) in the town of Gal and the Upper Gal region formally became Russian language schools after the Georgian-Abkhaz war, Georgian language and literature are still taught there. All the 12 schools in the Lower Gal region still use Georgian as the language of instruction.

The problem lies in the deficit of textbooks in Abkhaz in a number of subjects. Moreover, there are no Abkhaz textbooks translated into minority languages, resulting in the teaching in those schools being mainly based on the textbooks, published in Armenia, Russia and Georgia respectively.



identity (demographic situation, the state of the Abkhaz language, granting Abkhazian citizenship to ethnic Georgians). The Abkhaz group was divided as to the origin of these problems. Some were more inclined to talk about deficiencies in the application of the state language or the process of repatriating ethnic Abkhaz who currently reside outside Abkhazia. Others preferred to put the responsibility for many problems squarely at the feet of the minorities who, according to them, were failing to learn the state language and created a demographic challenge for the Abkhaz.

The respondents were also divided as to whether additional laws guaranteeing minority rights were necessary. A small proportion of the respondents spoke in favour of adopting special laws to protect minorities' rights. They found it difficult, however, to specify what they should be. The majority of those surveyed thought that there was no need to adopt new laws, but there was a need to properly enforce the existing legislation.

### Opportunities for self-realisation

The answers to the questions of whether Abkhazia had created conditions for a) the self-fulfillment of minorities in the area of education, b) professional and career opportunities - showed that in many respects there was little difference between different ethnic groups' access to various opportunities.

For example, representatives of all ethnic groups spoke about the existence of equal access to the education system in Abkhazia. The problem was not the limited access to education but the fact that the quality of that education, at secondary school level in particular, left much to be desired, which was true for all ethnic groups without exception.

At the same time two respondents spoke of the difficulty of qualifying for state quotas to study outside Abkhazia. In instances when the opportunities to study the Abkhaz language are inadequate, the mandatory requirement, introduced in 2014, to pass an Abkhaz language exam for admission to Russian universities (based on the quotas provided by Russia), limits the possibility for minority representatives (as well as the Abkhaz who do not speak the state language) to participate in the competition for a university place.

The problem of access to quality education raises the issue of social divisions. Preparing for university entry requires additional private tuition, though many in Abkhazia cannot afford this.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> In areas such as health care, social differences also play an important role: rich people can afford treatment that is beyond the means of the poor.

As for professional growth, most respondents (comprised mostly of well established professionals) spoke of the fact that a lot depended on the individual, his or her education level, drive and professional skills. When candidates are considered for employment in the business sector, preference is given to those who have the necessary professional skills and are suitable for the job, irrespective of their ethnic origin.

Cited barriers to employment included mainly objective factors, such as job shortages, lack of manufacturing facilities, limited opportunities resulting from Abkhazia's small size and so on. There are, however, subjective factors at play that create inequality, such as the clan system<sup>3</sup> and corruption. Most respondents named government office as the area where your family ties do matter, which makes it much harder for minority representatives to have a career. This is particularly true at the level of senior government posts.

This means that businesses base their recruitment policies on professional skills, with the aim of achieving greater efficiency, whereas government agencies sacrifice efficiency to the future civil servants' kinship and ethnic solidarity.

There is another very important aspect to consider. According to one ethnic Abkhaz respondent, the unrelenting pursuit of jobs in the civil service, with the low wages they entail, is testimony to the fact that the administrative resource is considered by some as a means of bettering their social status and as a means for personal enrichment.

The same applies to serving as an MP. According to one respondent, during parliamentary elections in the past there was a gentlemen's agreement that the Abkhaz would not field their candidates in certain constituencies, in order to give a chance to representatives of other ethnic communities, whereas during the last parliamentary election that agreement was broken. One of the likely explanations was that to a certain category of citizens the value of administrative resources, including the corruption element of it, had increased.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> The Abkhaz, Armenians and Mingrelians have particularly close family ties; they live compactly both in rural and urban areas. There is much less cohesion among the Russians who mostly live in urban areas. While recognising on the whole negative consequences of the clan system, the respondents, particularly ethnic Russians, spoke of the positive aspects of strong family ties, namely, mutual assistance, looking after the elderly and orphans and others.

<sup>4</sup> This does not imply that corruption in Abkhazia has particular ethnic roots. Representatives of all ethnic groups tend to participate in corrupt practices. Corruption as a phenomenon presents a challenge to the entire society.



Poor representation of ethnic minorities in government institutions is typical at all levels of government. A representative of one rural community, for example, pointed to the fact that the Abkhaz, often from other districts of Abkhazia, were appointed to serve as heads of administration in a number of local villages, while the local cadre were ignored.

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As regards business opportunities, many businessmen, according to the respondents, face some pressure from criminal groups (protection rackets), irrespective of their ethnicity. In cases like these the Abkhaz and, to some extent, Armenians resort to family ties/kinship in order to avoid or at least mitigate that pressure. The rest of the Abkhazian citizens who might not enjoy the same protection by the law enforcement agencies are left to fend for themselves.

### **General and specific problems**

In addition to these general problems such as the poor quality of education or social divisions, the respondents mentioned the overall cultural decline and decline of political culture in society. Personal conflicts often arise from ignorance while domestic conflicts give rise to ethnic stereotypes.

The respondents also mentioned a number of specific problems that are particular to minorities. For example, the surveyed repatriates (ethnic Abkhaz) talked about isolation caused by the language barrier (many of them do not speak either Abkhaz or Russian). They do not always or immediately understand social/other mechanisms that operate in the post-Soviet environment and there are no proper programmes for the integration of repatriates. As a result this group perceives a degree of social isolation in Abkhazian society and often depends on information sources from another state (e.g. Turkey, Syria).

In fact, the issue of information policies is relevant not just to the repatriates who speak neither Abkhaz nor Russian but also to the entire Russian-speaking population. The majority of the Abkhazian state TV channels broadcast in Abkhaz, without subtitles. Some respondents pointed out that subtitles could really help residents to understand and master the Abkhaz language and feel better connected to the interests and issues facing their society. This would also mean that the authorities use TV to communicate with the entire population

of the republic and not just the limited number of Abkhaz speakers.

At the same time, subtitles are no substitute for having a good command of the state language. Almost all the respondents acknowledged the importance of the broad adoption of the Abkhaz language, yet very few of them make an effort to master it. Many minority representatives spoke of the difficulty of acquiring Abkhaz at their age because of its complexity but wanted their children to speak fluent Abkhaz. At the same time they pointed out a number of serious problems in the current conditions:

1. Deficit of Abkhaz language teachers;
2. Shortage of text books which use modern language teaching methodology;
3. Overall absence of language teaching programmes that accommodate different starting levels of the students;
4. Absence of an official policy that creates the conditions for and promotes the study of the state language throughout Abkhazia;
5. A purely formal attitude of some members of the teaching profession to the teaching of the Abkhaz language, in particular, to children from non-Abkhaz families;
6. Some respondents complained about individual teachers' intentional attempts to discourage non-Abkhaz children from studying Abkhaz. Such teachers are likely to belong to the part of Abkhaz society who think that a good command of the language would obliterate the difference between the titular nation and the rest, which they do not consider desirable.

Many respondents expressed concern that the entry into force of the Law on the State Language in the Republic of Abkhazia in 2015 (in the absence of the necessary conditions, mentioned above) could in practice restrict the rights of ethnic minorities. Some spoke of their feeling of confusion. They did not know whether to prepare their children for a life in Abkhazia or for emigration.

*Many minority representatives spoke of the difficulty of acquiring Abkhaz at their age because of its complexity but wanted their children to speak fluent Abkhaz.*

The Abkhaz were divided on the subject of the implementation of the Law on the State Language in the Republic of Abkhazia. Some of them were mostly

sympathetic to the fears of other minorities and thought that those concerns should be considered when taking the necessary steps to implement the Law. Some of them spoke of the need to reform the Abkhaz language to make it simpler and more accessible and contribute to its greater uptake. They also pointed to the need for a gradual introduction of the language and a possible establishment of a transitional period.

The other part of the Abkhaz respondents insisted on every citizen's duty to learn the state language and suggested that ethnic minority representatives should make greater efforts to master the Abkhaz language.

In addition to the issues already covered above, discussions covered the 'passportisation' process (issuing passports) and citizenship. The Gal focus group spoke about the legal vacuum many of the Gal residents found themselves in after it was announced that their passports would get annulled. The focus group participants did not go into details but mentioned the restricted rights of those who did not have any legal documents, especially amongst people whose passports had been withdrawn.

Representatives of other ethnic groups were also concerned by the issue of citizenship. Some of the respondents, for instance, spoke of the fact that young people (non-Abkhaz) who left Abkhazia to study abroad between 1994 and 1999 lost their Abkhazian citizenship because they did not have an uninterrupted period of residence in Abkhazia during that time, as required by the Law on Citizenship.

Alienation of property rights is one of the most critical issues for ethnic Russians in Abkhazia. As a result of many Russians and Greeks being absent from Abkhazia over a long period of time after the war, their flats and houses were occupied and reallocated, mostly to ethnic Abkhaz. Examples were given of elderly Russians of retirement age who had lost their property to fraudsters and corrupt housing department officials who had sold their properties off to third parties, even if the former had stayed in Abkhazia without interruption. Many courts have ruled in favour of the original owners yet the enforcement of the rulings has proved difficult, if not impossible. There have also been instances of selective justice.

At the heart of the so-called 'housing issue' are corruption and poor law enforcement, which predominantly affect the most vulnerable sections of society; there is also the inability of the authorities, when there is such an acute need for housing, to keep flats empty when the original residents of these flats (in this case, not the flats belonging to

Georgians), stayed away during the war and the difficult post-war period.

Those whose rights have been violated look elsewhere for help when the authorities fail to uphold their claims. In the words of one ethnic Abkhaz respondent "since 2008 many local Russians have increasingly felt that they do not belong in Abkhazia as Abkhazian citizens. When they fail to get support from the Abkhazian authorities, with housing issues in particular, they feel the need to seek assistance from the Embassy of the Russian Federation."

The respondents gave examples of ethnic Abkhaz successfully avoiding penalties for breaking the law. This is particularly prevalent in traffic accidents. Corruption, family ties, ethnic solidarity and an awareness of themselves as representatives of the titular nation – often lead to impunity and manifest inequality before the law, which the minorities see as an expression of discrimination against other ethnic groups.

The respondents emphasized the negative role played by the isolation of the ethnically homogenous villages and districts of Abkhazia. Rural communities rarely engage with one another and are excluded from the Abkhazian information space. Communication in these communities takes place mostly in the respective native languages (Armenian or Mingrelian); their poor command of Russian creates serious communication problems when dealing with other groups. These isolated communities are poorly informed about each other's lives and problems. They do not have the feeling of belonging to a common entity that includes other groups; they live autonomously, without any sense of engagement in more global processes taking place in Abkhazia.

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Communities in border areas often gravitate towards the neighbouring countries, which at times play a more significant role in securing their livelihoods. The unresolved social and infrastructural problems in the isolated communities (roads in poor condition, absence of

running water etc) are seen as unique to their own district or village and interpreted as an expression of ethnic discrimination when in reality these cases may not have any ethnic connotations.

The survey, on the whole, showed that minority representatives belonging to the less active part of society (ordinary citizens, largely from rural areas) acutely feel a communication deficit. They support the idea of a dialogue and cooperation between different ethnic groups. People are interested in contacts with other communities from other districts. The more active, professionally established and prominent representatives of ethnic minorities (urban dwellers) do not feel the same deficit of contacts and communication.

## What can be done?

Talking about the prospects of nation building in Abkhazia the majority of the respondents supported the idea of creating the Abkhazian nation on the basis of a common civic identity, while preserving the minorities' cultural rights. Some respondents suggested that the ethnic identity designation should be removed from Abkhazian passports.

Some participants in the ethnic Abkhaz focus group identified civic identity with the ethnic Abkhaz identity, which also reflects their perception of a certain demographic and linguistic vulnerability.

A practical way of removing some of the fears among the Abkhaz would be to introduce the Abkhaz language into all areas of life, however difficult this task may seem today. In order to deal with the concerns of other ethnic groups it is important





to get the whole of society on board in tackling this issue. Citizens need to assume their place as subjects and not mere recipients of government directives. Abkhaz language acquisition must become a national objective that unites society rather than divides it. We need a whole package of measures and a carefully considered action plan. It is wrong when the importance and prestige of the state language are undermined because of a lack of serious government schemes or hasty and unrealistic solutions.

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Another important task is more effective law enforcement. It is necessary to combat selectivity in the work of law enforcement agencies, to tackle clan relations and corruption. In the words of one respondent, “an individual must be protected by law and not by their ethnic background.”

It is essential to raise the level of literacy in the area of law. During the survey the minority representatives who felt confident (mostly journalists or established professionals in other areas) spoke about the fact that citizens should be able to defend their rights. “If someone knows the law and his or her rights they will not fall victim to extortion.” Civic education for adults and children could play an important role. Both adults and children should be familiar with such notions as citizenship, respect for human rights and cultural diversity, respect for the state language etc.

Some respondents suggested that school curricula should include lessons on the history of ethnic minorities in Abkhazia.<sup>5</sup> Programmes containing information about different ethnic cultures, including festivals, exhibitions, and TV broadcasts, would contribute to greater mutual understanding.

The question about the need for so-called ‘national schools’ caused a lot of debate among the representatives of different ethnic minorities. Some of the respondents (mostly Armenians and a few Georgians) think that the teaching of different subjects through the medium of national languages (Armenian or Georgian) results in the pupils’ poor command of Russian and zero command of Abkhaz. This limits their opportunities for continuing their education in Abkhazia and Russia. Some

respondents suggested setting up schools with an ethno-cultural component, instead of national schools, where the teaching would be conducted in Russian and Abkhaz, with additional minority language and literature lessons. If the government embarks on such reforms, it would need to first hold wide public consultations; otherwise any such action will be seen as a violation of minorities’ cultural rights.

Almost all the respondents noted the low level of political culture in society that creates fertile ground for manipulation of public opinion by populist politicians. Ethnic minorities often become hostages in the standoff between the main political forces mostly represented by the Abkhaz. On the one hand, the minorities do not want to fall out with the different political groups within the Abkhazian nation; on the other, they are not likely to be satisfied with a nominal appearance in the political arena. As a consequence, many of them prefer to distance themselves from the political processes. This does not mean that there are no politicians among representatives of ethnic minorities but that they are few and far between.

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Civil society activists speak about the undesirability of political association along ethnic lines and call for uniting on ideological grounds. Strengthening democratic institutions, developing political parties and civil society are the preferred ways of ensuring greater participation of citizens in the social and political life of the country.

Opinions were also divided on the question of introducing quotas for ethnic minority representatives in parliament and government. Some think that it is necessary to introduce quotas as a temporary measure to encourage political participation of minorities; others consider quotas an anathema to the idea of public participation. In either case, it is necessary to think of measures that would encourage the more professional and educated part of society, irrespective of ethnic background, to consider a career in government.

The development of political parties and the introduction of a mixed electoral system would aid that process.

Many spoke of the need to set up community boards for ethnic minorities under the auspices of

<sup>5</sup> One ethnic Armenian respondent suggested that episodes of history that strengthened good relations between different ethnic groups (for example, the welcome shown by the Abkhaz to the Armenians fleeing Turkey at the end of the 19th century) should get special coverage.

different official institutions (such as parliament or the Cabinet). They could serve as communication channels and provide feedback as well as develop recommendations and strategies on managing cultural diversity. The participants mentioned the Public Chamber, which could play a positive role by broadening the representation of ethnic minorities and becoming a platform for dialogue, for which, according to many respondents, there is a real need. It is also important to pay greater attention to a broader participation of ethnic minorities in the work of local government.

Without economic development and job creation, social problems are going to get worse. In situations of economic stagnation and unemployment, social problems are often perceived through the prism of ethnicity. It is important to support economic activity between different districts, because it will bring different ethnic groups together and enable

their more effective integration into a common Abkhazian space.

The media could play a special role in promoting minority policies. Currently they barely reflect the lives and problems of ethnic minorities in Abkhazia. On the other hand, the most widely available resource, state television, is not accessible to the majority of citizens because of the language barrier. At the same time the respondents emphasized that they would like to know what is being discussed on Abkhazian TV channels, to get a better understanding of the social and political issues in Abkhazia, to be familiar with the Abkhazian culture and so on. The introduction of subtitles for programmes in the Abkhaz language could play a positive role. Their introduction would indicate a readiness to create a shared Abkhazian information and cultural space.

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