

The foreign policy options of a small unrecognised state: the case of Abkhazia

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The study of international relations has historically focused on the activities of large, powerful states, dismissing the smaller entities of the international system as unimportant or merely objects of policy for the larger entities. This truism extends especially to those entities that exist in an unrecognised or partially recognised limbo, neither a full part of the international system nor an ungoverned space. Yet in the post-Cold War world, following the dissolution of large multi-national states such as the USSR, these entities have begun to proliferate. This proliferation provides a significant challenge to an international system in which the primary participants are states, and to the institutions created to oversee their interaction. Unrecognised entities, existing outside of this framework, represent a threat to the universal principle of sovereignty, that one true institutionalised aspect of international relations. As such the study of these entities and their interaction with the world outside their borders is a study important for a systemic understanding of contemporary international relations. This article aims to address the foreign policy of one such entity, Abkhazia.

Key words: Abkhazia, *de facto* states, small states, Russia, Georgia.

Introduction

The study of international relations has historically focused on the activities of large, powerful states, dismissing the smaller entities of the international system as unimportant or merely objects of policy. This truism extends especially to those entities that exist in an unrecognised or partially recognised limbo, neither a full part of the international system, nor an ungoverned space. Yet in the post-Cold War world, following the dissolution of large multi-national states such as the USSR, these entities have begun to proliferate; either as a consequence of the drive for independent statehood by a small nation (Abkhazia, Northern Cyprus, Chechnya), an attempt at unification of an ethnic enclave with an external parent state (Nagorny Karabakh, South Ossetia) or as a political expedient in response to adverse circumstance (Taiwan, Somaliland). This proliferation is a significant challenge to an international system in which the primary participants are states, and to the institutions created to oversee their interaction. Unrecognised entities, existing outside of this framework, represent a threat to the universal principle of sovereignty, that one true institutionalised aspect of international relations (Murinson 2004, 7). As such, the study of these entities and their interaction with the outside world is important for a systemic understanding of the post-Cold War world. This article addresses the foreign policy of one such entity, Abkhazia.

Previous studies have focused on the relationship between Georgia and Abkhazia or Abkhazia and Russia, or indeed merely dismiss Abkhazia as an international non-entity, simply a object of foreign affairs rather than an subject. This article attempts to present a comprehensive overview of Abkhazian foreign interaction, with the aim of investigating if such a small, largely unrecognised state is capable of conducting policy at the international level. In order to achieve this aim the study will encompass not only traditional, bilateral, state interaction – a mechanism for which Abkhazia has limited use – but also the disproportionate influence of intergovernmental organisations (such as the UN and EU) and transnational factors (such as the Abkhaz diaspora and religious institutions). The chronological scope of the study is from the termination of the 1992-93 Georgian-Abkhaz war (and the emergence of a *de facto* Abkhazian state) until December 2013.¹

Space allows Abkhazian-Georgian interaction to be addressed only briefly in this article. As noted previously this particular dynamic makes up the bulk of modern literature on Abkhazia and is so ridden with controversy that its excessive inclusion would add little to the purpose of this article.

Indeed, there has been very little formal political interaction between Sukhum(i) and Tbilisi outside of the Geneva talks during the post-Soviet period. The two principle issues at stake in the Abkhazian-Georgian relationship are the political status of Abkhazia and the right to return of the Georgian population displaced from Abkhazia², in this regard the political leadership of both sides maintain redlines unacceptable to the other. Georgian policy toward Abkhazia has done much to entrench the latter's international isolation, first through economic, political and informational sanctions imposed through the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and, following the August 2008 war, through legislation aimed at restricting the activities of international organisations in Abkhazia.

This article identifies the strategies and individual vectors of Abkhazian foreign policy. In this regard I draw an important distinction between those formal vectors, such as bilateral, inter-state interactions with those states that recognise Abkhazian sovereignty, and informal vectors including Abkhazian-Turkish interaction and dialogue mechanisms such as religious institutions. The utilisation of informal mechanisms is a crucial strategy for unrecognised states, and as this study will demonstrate remains the method through which dialogue is maintained with most international actors. The importance of these transnational, non-state factors is highlighted in a publication of the Abkhazian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA)³, which states explicitly that:

“...a network theory of foreign policy process requires not only the state but also other non-state ... participants of the process; businesses, the media, NGOs, scientific and expert institutions, sports and cultural groups, [and] individuals. We believe that this approach allows for a more efficient use of resources and the institutional capacity of Abkhazian society to achieve our foreign policy goals, as well as to circumvent the formal barriers to international communication” (Khintba 2012; emphasis added - TF).

The nature of Abkhazian statehood is heavily contested; however, it is not the place of this article to trace the evolution of the Abkhazian polity prior to independence. For the purposes of this article Abkhazia is deemed to fulfil the requirements of a state as defined by the Montevideo Convention (MCRDS, 1933), and as such an actor in international relations.⁴

Small state theory

As outlined above the study of the foreign policy of small states is one that has been largely overlooked in the field of International Relations (IR). The discipline focuses almost exclusively on the norms and actions of ‘great power politics’, finding its epitome in the power-oriented and theoretically dominant realist school. Nevertheless, there remains valid reasoning behind the study of small state behaviour, not least because the majority of states present in the international system, as well as all of the world's unrecognised states, may be defined as ‘small’. Secondly, due to the necessary reliance of small states upon international institutions, a greater understanding of the latter as foci of foreign policy may be gained through the study of constitutive relations among the smaller units of the state system (Neumann and Gstohl 2004, 2-3). The study of small state diplomacy represents an important sub-topic within this wider field, but has largely been confined to the small states of the Pacific, Caribbean, and Europe (Stringer, 2006, 2011, 6; Marleku 2013; Baker 2007; Dommen and Hein 1985). The foreign policy of those small, unrecognised entities emerging on the southern periphery of the USSR following its dissolution have been mostly overlooked.

There is no clear-cut and widely accepted definition of a small state, with definitions divided between more definable qualitative and quantitative aspects, and those less definable attributes such as political and cultural influence. Qualitative attributes include intrinsic physical factors such as geographical characteristics. While quantitative attributes include land area, population size, Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Gross National Product (GNP) and per-capita income (Demir 2008, 6). Abkhazia encompasses a land area of 8,660 square kilometres (*Encyclopaedia Britannica* 2013) and has a population of just over 240,000 (*Abkhaz World* 2011), although the latter figure should be treated with caution due to the highly politicised nature of ethnic population ratios within Abkhazia. Estimations of Abkhazia's GDP and *per capita* income vary according to source, with the former standing somewhere between \$500 million (*Georgia Times* 2010) and \$682 million (Ardzinba 2013) as of 2009-2010⁵ and the latter at just under \$3,000 (Ardzinba, 2013). This places Abkhazia on a roughly equal level with the small states of the Pacific and the Caribbean (World Bank 2013), although as will be elaborated below up to half of Abkhazia's 2010 state budget was provided by Russia (International Crisis Group 2010).

Another criteria for small statehood is that of perception, both in terms of how the state views itself and how it is viewed by others. This notion is summarised by Hey: “if states, people and institutions generally perceive themselves to be small, or if any other state, peoples or institutions perceive that state as small, it shall be so considered” (Hey 2003, 3). This may result in small states voluntarily adopting a deferential position in their interactions with larger states, in effect reducing the legal parity between sovereign entities to a more pragmatic, power based relationship. Such behaviour can be readily observed in the Abkhazian-Russian relationship.

The general lack of resources possessed by a small state usually translates to a smaller absolute allocation of resources to foreign affairs and the general international sector. This in turn will be reflected in the size and capacity of the foreign policy-making machinery (East 1973, 492). Such fiscal and diplomatic restrictions are not universal for all small states however; the emirates of the Persian Gulf are by most accounts considered “small” but command a disproportionate diplomatic presence due to their wealth and strategic positioning.

In line with the existing literature on the theoretical aspect of small state foreign policy the predominant theoretical framework will be that of neo-realism (Demir 2008; Duursma 1996; Elman 1995; Forde 1995; Hey 2003; Hinnebusch 2006; Keohane 1988). Neo-realism assumes that it is international constraints that influence state behaviour, in general overriding domestic interests and internal political struggles (Elman 1995, 172). This assumption, intertwined as it is with the discipline of geopolitics and rational choice theory, essentially reduces the foreign policy of small states to predetermined actions outside of their control. The founding father of neo-realism, Kenneth Waltz, took the overarching realist principle of anarchy to be the structure within which the international system operates. This structure “affects behaviour within the system, but does so indirectly. The effects are produced in two ways: through socialisation of the actors and through competition among them” (Waltz 1979, 74). This systemic interaction is devoid of every other attribute (whether the state is recognised or not, system of government, etc.), aside from qualification as a state and state capabilities within the international system (99). This neo-realist view is clearly apparent in the literature surrounding Abkhazian foreign policy, epitomised by Sufian Zhemukhov’s statement that: “Abkhazia’s status has not developed as the result of a consistent foreign policy but rather via a series of accidental international events unconnected to each other” (Zhemukhov 2012, 1). Consequently, examining whether Abkhazia is capable of orchestrating foreign policy outside of these restraints forms the basis of this article.

Nevertheless, my approach does differ slightly from the definition of the neorealist-inspired international system, adding that additional systemic constraints on unrecognised states stem from a lack of external sovereignty, whereby lack of recognition does not give the subject state the capacity to comport itself as a legal entity in the modern international system (Caspersen 2013, 23). This addition takes into account the evolution of international norms following the end of the Cold War. Identifying the type of international system in which a small, unrecognised state exists is a vital step in understanding the reasoning and subsequent behaviour of its leadership.⁶

An example of neo-realist-observed international constraints on state policy can be found in Steven Walt’s *The Origins of Alliances* (1987). Walt identified two options for those states confronted with an external threat (this threat may be existential or otherwise, e.g. economic): balancing or bandwagoning. Balancing is defined as allying with others against the prevailing threat (balancing can also be achieved by mobilisation of domestic resources rather than relying on allied support) (114), whilst bandwagoning refers to alignment with the source of danger (110). Walt goes on to elaborate:

“Because balancing and bandwagoning are more accurately viewed as a response to threats it is important to consider other factors that will affect the level of threat that states may pose: aggregate power, geographical proximity, offensive power, and aggressive intentions... The greater the threat, the greater the probability that the vulnerable state will seek an alliance” (112).

With regard to small states Walt asserts that the weaker the state, the greater the probability of it bandwagoning (114). This is due to their inability to effectively influence a defensive coalition, or the existence of a situation whereby allies are simply unavailable. At various moments in its independent history Abkhazia can be observed to utilise both of these strategies in its engagement with Russia and Georgia.

Formal aspects of Abkhazian foreign policy

Since the August 2008 war Abkhazia has been recognised by six UN member states, the Russian Federation (26 August 2008), Nicaragua (5 September 2008), Venezuela (10 September 2009), Nauru (15 December 2009), Vanuatu (23 May 2011)⁷, and Tuvalu (18 September 2011). In addition Abkhazia maintains diplomatic relations with three other separatist entities, namely South Ossetia, Transnistria and Nagorny Karabakh. The nature of these states (with the exception of Russia and possibly Venezuela), with their small economies and limited diplomatic presence, will affect their capacity to engage with Abkhazia. Nevertheless the establishment of these relationships added a dynamic to Abkhazian foreign interaction that simply did not exist beforehand, that of an equal party in a bilateral interaction.

The structure and operations of the Abkhazian MFA are, by necessity, small in scale. Aside from a series of small departments dedicated to administration (such as translation and legal matters) there are four key departments concerned with external engagement. These are (1) the Department of the Russian Federation, the CIS, Nagorny Karabakh, Transnistria, Georgia, and South Ossetia; (2) the Department of Latin America, Asia, Africa, and the Asia-Pacific; (3) the Department for Europe, the USA, and Canada; and (4) the Department for Turkey and the Middle East. The heads of these departments act on the strategic direction determined by the Foreign Minister and the two Deputy Ministers. Day-to-day departmental duties involve providing written briefs for Abkhazia's foreign representatives and coordinating their activities with governmental policy (Gaguliya 2014).

It is through the relevant departments that Abkhazia's three fully-fledged embassies in Russia, Venezuela and South Ossetia, are operated. The maintenance of such a small number of embassies is not an uncommon practice among small states, being used primarily to maintain constant communication with the state's most important partners. Beyond these embassies Abkhazia maintains a network of Honorary Consuls, Plenipotentiary Representatives, and "ambassadors at large". Such an arrangement provides Abkhazia with a presence in key regions without the expense of maintaining fully staffed premises. However, these representatives appear to be under-utilised, as they are currently limited to the provision of basic consular activities such as visa facilitation, but do extend to the contribution of political intelligence for central policy-making (Hewitt, 2014; Gaguliya, 2014).

Abkhazia has signed treaties on friendship and cooperation with Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua and South Ossetia. These documents are similar in content, and all outline that cooperation in a variety of economic and diplomatic areas will form the basis of the bilateral relationship. However, with the exception of that with Russia, these treaties, and indeed the act of recognition itself, remain largely symbolic. The undeveloped nature of the Abkhazian economy and the sheer distance between Abkhazia and its partners serve to dramatically limit the opportunity for political cooperation and trade.⁸

It is a declared Abkhazian priority to expand the number of states that officially recognise Abkhazia (Hewitt, 2013 Interview; Khintba, 2013 Interview; Kvarchelia, 2013 Interview). In the interim period the expansion of trade between Abkhazia and third parties is accepted as a more realistic objective (Gvinjia, 2013 Interview). These priorities have remained relatively consistent since the publication of *Key to the Future* (2001), a document delineating the objectives and policies of the newly declared independent Abkhazian Republic. This document outlined that regional economic integration, assisted by the EU and UN, would "facilitate the strengthening and growth of mutually advantageous, partner-like and mutually interdependent ties, which will eventually form a solid base for lasting and stable peace."

With regard to international trade Abkhazia has shown a remarkable aptitude to engage with an emerging global trend, that of para-diplomatic (sub-state) initiated trade and cultural agreements. The capital city of Sukhum(i) has signed Cooperation Agreements with a variety of Russian and Turkish cities, and has established twinned-city relations with many more (Apsny Press 2013g). In addition to providing opportunities for Abkhazian businesses to network these agreements also provide the opportunity for cultural, educational, and sport exchanges. These are all areas that the Abkhazian government has specifically highlighted as important mechanisms through which Abkhazia can promote itself (Khintba 2012).

Increasing Abkhazia's digital visibility is also government policy. This process centres on the creation of multiple foreign language versions of government ministry websites (the current focus is on Arabic language services, a clear attempt to reach displaced Syrian-Abkhaz expatriates). In addition the Abkhazian government is targeting popular social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube (an Abkhazian-language edition of Wikipedia is under way) in an effort to raise international awareness of Abkhazia and to combat "outright lies and disinformation" (Apsny Press 2013c). The Department of Information within the MFA reports that the web traffic to these sites, particularly those in Turkish, are increasing exponentially (GOA, 2014). Such efforts represent an increasingly modern and sophisticated soft-power policy that previously relied entirely on the activities of the diaspora.

The Abkhazian relationship with Russia

The Abkhaz-Russian relationship has dominated Abkhazian foreign interaction since the termination of hostilities between Abkhazia and Georgia in 1993. In-depth analysis of this relationship is important in order to ascertain whether the Abkhazian position vis-à-vis Russia constitutes dependence, or whether the other Abkhazian foreign vectors serve as an adequate counterbalance to Russia. This also helps to determine if the core principles of neo-realist theory, whereby a small state merely maintains a reactionary capability, is indeed applicable in pure form to the Abkhazian case. Abkhazian-Russian interaction has always been heavily influenced by structural factors, with the Russian position fluctuating in accordance with international developments outside of Abkhazian control. I therefore analyse the Abkhaz-Russian relationship firstly within the context of the structural/systemic dynamics between the international system and the Caucasus through the period 1993-2013. I then articulate these linkages to developments in Abkhaz-Russian relations in three key areas: security, economy and international representation.

Structural and systemic dynamics

The two key factors dictating Russian-Abkhazian relations during the period 1993-2013 were the varying strength of the Russian economy and the Russian-Georgian relationship. There is a direct correlation between Russian economic weakness, and thus the need for Russia to avoid expensive diplomatic ventures, and a negative and indeed often hostile attitude toward Abkhazia. The weakness of the Russian economy and state apparatus was mirrored by the chronic weakness of the Georgian state. The post-Soviet Russian state faced a failing economy and large-scale secessionist movements, most clearly apparent in the North Caucasus. In response to its precarious security situation the expansion of the CIS and its accompanying security framework was a priority for the Russian government, facilitating a tactical alignment of Russian and Georgian policy. Combined with the initially pro-Western aspirations and policies of the Yeltsin administration, this alignment ensured a conservative Russian position towards Abkhazia. This conservative position was epitomised by the economic, political and informational blockade implemented in January 1996, following the “Decision by the Council of CIS Heads of State on Measures to Settle the Conflict in Abkhazia. Georgia”.

The deterioration in Russian-Georgian relations, the revitalised Russian economy (following the early 2000s rise in energy prices) and subsequent assertiveness of Russia on the world stage served to define further Abkhaz-Russian interaction rather than any great desire to improve strategic ties. The deterioration of Russian-Georgian relations was due to a number of factors; Georgia’s withdrawal from the CIS Common Security Treaty in 1999 resulted in a phased withdrawal of Russian military personnel from Georgian territory, weakening Russian power-projection capabilities in the region (Gordadze 2009). This development combined with a series of Western initiatives deemed overtly hostile to Moscow’s interests, including the development of the South Caucasian energy transportation corridor (Rabinowitz *et al* 2004; West and Nanay 2000), the NATO intervention in the Kosovo conflict, and the deployment of a US military training mission to Georgia following 9/11. In response to these developments Russia initiated a series of commercial sanctions against Georgia in 2006. Kosovo’s February 2008 declaration of independence and the granting of an (albeit watered down) NATO Membership Action Plan to Georgia served to entrench Russia’s perceived isolation in international affairs.

The August 2008 conflict and subsequent Russian recognition marks a paradigm shift in Abkhaz-Russian relations. The recognition of Kosovan statehood by many Western states proved a crucial turning point, as previously Russia had threatened recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in an effort to preserve the status quo. Formalised Kosovan recognition removed the validity of Abkhazia as a legal bargaining tool for the Russian authorities and led to the establishment of official relations (Ryngaert and Sobrie 2011).

Security

Following the end of large-scale hostilities in Abkhazia in 1993 the conflict parties signed a ceasefire agreement in Moscow on 14 May 1994 (hereafter the Moscow Agreement). This document stipulated that a CIS peacekeeping force (CIS PKF) was to be deployed to the conflict area in order to monitor the ceasefire. In practice this force was entirely composed of Russian personnel and would soon come to be considered an arm of Russian policy rather than a neutral international mission. Nicu Popescu (2007, 1) observes that by cementing the post-conflict status quo Russian forces acted as a *de facto*

border guard for the Abkhazian authorities, allowing the pursuit of the state building enterprise with a reduced threat of an intervention by Georgia.

In light of its deteriorating relationship with Georgia, Russia began to reinforce its peacekeeping force in Abkhazia, whilst improving the latter's military infrastructure. This coincided with a dramatic downturn in Abkhaz-Georgian relations. The CIS mission continued until 2008-9, when formal Russian recognition and accompanying defence agreements transformed the role of the CIS PKF into a *de jure* Russian deployment.

The founding document of the post-August 2008 Russian-Abkhaz bilateral relationship, the Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance, provided a clause whereby "each Contracting Party shall provide the other Contracting Party the right to construct, use and develop military infrastructure and military bases (facilities) in its territory" (GOA, 2008a). This agreement paved the way for the large-scale deployment of the Russian military to Abkhazian territory. In addition Russia was later to take on the duties of an Abkhazian coast guard and border control service. Whilst increasing economic dependence has received criticism in Abkhazia the presence of the Russian military is largely viewed as necessary to preserve Abkhazian independence, ushering in the first truly secure post-Soviet Abkhazian polity.

Economy

Following the implementation of the CIS blockade Russian authorities acted to eliminate cross border trade. In their extremity these measures included a ban on cross-border travel for all Abkhaz males aged 10-55 (de Waal 2010, 165). The sanctions regime initially served to isolate Abkhazia from the outside world, however the implementation degraded over time. In 1996-1999 Abkhazia's foreign interaction was limited to its Turkish vector; without this trade outlet it is likely that Abkhazia would have ceased to function.

Russia largely ceased to observe the CIS sanctions in 1999 and withdrew from the sanctions regime entirely in March 2008 (Socor 2008), initially improving Abkhazian economic prospects through an increase in low-level cross-border trade and later through large-scale investment. The range of Russian investors in Abkhazia before the official lifting of sanctions (the Moscow city administration and Krasnodar region invested heavily) indicate the depth to which the sanctions had lost validity (Wenger *et al* 2006, 220-228).

Following Russian recognition the Abkhazian government has been overwhelmingly dependent on Russia for budget and development funds. The International Crisis Group (ICG) ascertained that since 2009 Russia has provided roughly 1.9 billion rubles (\$57.3m) per year in direct budgetary support, in 2012 this amounted to 22 percent of the official state budget. However, taking into account a further 4.9 billion rubles (\$147.9m) designated as part of a "comprehensive aid plan" for infrastructure development the ICG determined the actual subsidy to the Abkhaz government to be at least 70 percent in 2012. This does not include an estimated 2 billion rubles (\$60.4m) in Russian pension payments for residents of Abkhazia (International Crisis Group 2013, 6). The Abkhazian press reports the 2013 figure at 3.3 billion rubles (\$100.9m), although this refers only to direct financial aid and does not include pension payments and commercial contracts (Apsny Press 2013e).

This direct support is coupled with the granting to Russia of exclusive rights regarding key areas for the development of the Abkhazian economy, most notably offshore exploration and development, and the operation of the rail network. The granting to the Russian state company Rosneft of offshore exploration rights received heavy criticism from the Georgian government, decrying the move as further proof of "Russian occupation". In a concurrent statement Rosneft openly acknowledged its role as an arm of Russian policy and as such confirmed it intended to work with Abkhazia as a sovereign state (Watkins 2009). Abkhazia handed over control of its railway and major airport to Russian management for a 10-year period in May 2009; under this agreement Abkhazia was set to receive a 2 million-ruble (\$60,000) credit from Moscow for reconstruction of the railway. Then-president Bagapsh felt compelled to announce: "This is not a sale. It's a transfer for a temporary period." (*Eurasianet* 2009)

International Representation

Due to the structural constraints of the 1990s Russian representation of Abkhazia was initially limited to a mediatory role in the Abkhaz-Georgian peace process. However there is evidence of Abkhazian authorities petitioning Russian authorities to accept Abkhazia as an "associated state" of Russia (*Radio Free Europe* 2001).⁹

The most crucial development from an Abkhazian perspective in the period proceeding recognition is what is known as Russian “passportisation”. An alteration to Russian citizenship law in 2002 permitted mass issuance of citizenship to residents of Abkhazia. Not only did this provide an opportunity for foreign travel to Abkhazians, vital for diplomatic engagement (although some Western governments still refused to issue visas), it also provided a tremendous source of income for the Abkhazian state due to a large proportion of its citizens becoming eligible for a Russian pension. Whilst providing a crucial lifeline for Abkhazians, this strongly selective disconnection of citizenship from nationality and territoriality posed a serious threat to the Georgian state. Florian Mühlfried observes: “Given that in the UN charter the “responsibility to protect” refers to real and potential citizens, citizenship itself becomes a means of manipulation” (Mühlfried 2010, 5). Russian claims that its intervention in the Georgian conflict of August 2008 was in order to protect its citizens confirm the role passportisation plays in Russian foreign policy.

In December 2008 a Memorandum of Understanding on Cooperation in International Affairs was signed between Russia and Abkhazia. This document outlined that Russia would actively seek the recognition of Abkhazia by third parties and the inclusion of Abkhazia in international organisations of which Russia is a member. In this regard Russian lobbying was invaluable in securing the recognition of Abkhazia by the five previously mentioned UN states. However, Russia has since been unable to secure further international support for Abkhazia’s independence. Russian attempts to coerce its closest regional partners to recognise Abkhazia (most notably Belarus (CBC News, 2008) and Ukraine (Ria Novosti, 2010)) have all met with failure. Abkhazian representatives claim evidence is available of significant counter-lobbying by the US and EU regarding Abkhazian recognition, in effect removing the issue from Abkhazian control (Gvinjia, 2013 Interview; Khintba, 2013 Interview).

Level of Dependence

James Crawford identifies four key factors in determining whether a political entity qualifies as a puppet state; these are the entity’s origins (by threat or use of force?), the reaction of the local population (rejection of the new entity?), the degree of direct foreign control in important matters and the presence of staff from the dominant state in the entity’s institutions (Crawford 2006, 80-81). Whilst it is impossible to deny Abkhazia’s economic reliance on Russia and the leverage this grants to the Russian state, the other requisites are not fulfilled. The increasingly asymmetric concessions granted to Russia by the Abkhazian state are beginning to receive heavy criticism from the political opposition. Even on a mass level, whilst there is support for the Russian military presence when polled on potential existential futures for Abkhazia a large majority across the ethnic spectrum continue to favour full independence (O’Loughlin *et al* 2011, 32). The electoral rejection of the Russian-backed presidential candidate in 2004 provides further evidence of popular support for a more independent policy. However the appointment of a Russian officer to the position of Chief of the General Staff of the Abkhazian Armed Forces in 2012 suggests that Abkhazia’s continual isolation leaves the authorities vulnerable to Russian pressure (German 2012, 1655). Furthermore, Caspersen (2012, 109) suggests that external dependence, as highlighted above, does not necessarily mean that internal sovereignty is absent. Inter-reliance has increasingly become a norm in the post-Cold War world, with many recognised states dependent on international linkages for, among other things, defence and economic wellbeing, without their sovereign independence being called into question.

Finally, it should be noted that there are issues of contention between the Abkhazian and Russian governments, although the Abkhazian authorities are quick to confirm that these concerns are addressed through appropriate mechanisms (Khintba, 2013 Interview). The issues of most concern are a border dispute regarding the village of Aigba, the status of the Abkhazian church, the construction of a highway linking Abkhazia to the North Caucasian infrastructure system and the issue of property rights for Russian investors. (Kvarchelia, 2013 Interview)

Engagement with intergovernmental organisations

Since the dissolution of the USSR Abkhazia’s official contacts with the international community have primarily taken place in connection with conflict resolution efforts vis-à-vis Georgia, however the changing nature of this conflict has seen a corresponding evolution of international involvement. Due to discrepancies in the depth of this involvement the focus of this section will be upon the UN and EU.¹⁰

The relationship of Abkhazia to intergovernmental organisations is one of complete asymmetry. These organisations are primarily united by one factor; they are comprised in their entirety

by states, as such Abkhazia's semi-recognised status serves as a severe obstacle to engagement and often results in the exclusion of Abkhazia from decision-making and dialogue processes.

*The United Nations*¹¹

The United Nations (UN) is committed by its charter to the territorial integrity of its members (United Nations Charter), immediately creating a bias in favour of Georgia in any negotiations initiated regarding the status of or policy towards Abkhazia. This unavoidable position compromises the UN's role as a potential mediator in discussions on the status of Abkhazia, and, as Susan Stewart observes, "strengthens the perceived dichotomy between the UN and the Russian Federation as [actors]" (Stewart 2003, 14). This restriction is apparent in the consistent failure of Abkhazian officials to gain a platform at the UN from which to express their opinion, a position that has caused deep resentment among the Abkhazian authorities who identify this as biggest obstacle as obtaining a US visa (Gvinjia, 2013 Interview).¹²

The United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) was deployed to monitor the ceasefire line between Abkhazia and Georgia following the August 1993 Security Council resolution 858 (United Nations, 1993), with its mandated scope being expanded following the May 1994 Moscow Agreement.¹³ UNOMIG was officially brought to an end on the 16 June 2009 following a Russian veto in the UN on a motion to prolong its mandate, claiming the mission no longer corresponded to "new political and legal conditions" (Socor 2009). The discontinuation of the UNOMIG served to highlight its inherent weakness, as every aspect of its mandate, from its funding to staff numbers, was subject to direct Russian influence. Due to its unarmed nature the UNOMIG was dependent on the CIS PKF for its safety, in effect depriving it of the independence necessary to fulfil its mission and to have any meaningful influence on events.

UNOMIG operated in parallel with an international mediation process initiated in 1997 by Liviu Bota, the UN Special Representative, known as the 'Geneva process'. The key negotiation framework of the Geneva process is the Coordination Council (United Nations 1997), itself divided into three thematic working groups (Wolleh 2006, 17):

1. The lasting non-resumption of hostilities;
2. Refugees and internally displaced persons;
3. Social and economic problems.

Despite having met on a consistent basis (both before and after the 2008 conflict¹⁴) the Geneva participants are yet to secure a viable agreement addressing any of their professed aims. This is due to inflexibility on a number of issues; primarily the status of the respective participants and which states should be signatories to any final settlement. The former refers to the reluctance on the part of Georgia to acquiesce to a full participatory status for Abkhazia or South Ossetia (*Caucasian Knot* 2008), instead insisting the negotiation is between Georgia and the Russian Federation. The latter refers to, once again, Georgian reluctance to sign an agreement on the non-use of force with either of the separatist parties, an act that from the Georgian perspective would imply recognition. Georgian representatives have constantly argued that such an agreement has in fact been signed with the other conflict party, Russia, a reference to the 2008 ceasefire. This claim is in turn denied by Russia, whose delegation maintains that Russia is not a primary party to the conflict (Gurgulia 2010, 40).

The rigidity of the UN mediatory position, based around its reluctance to adapt the conditions put forward in the paper 'Basic Principles of the Distribution of Competences between Tbilisi and Sukhumi' to conform to new realities, resulted in negotiations becoming stalled as Abkhaz authorities refused to consider any legislation that suggested Abkhazia remain a region of Georgia (United Nations 2009). Russia also came to reject this paper in early 2006 (Socor 2006). Stewart attributes these stagnant negotiations to the UN's poor suitability for mediating in conflicts involving an existing state and a separatist region, due to the afore-mentioned commitment to the territorial integrity of its members. She also identifies the role of Russia as both a participant and a mediator in the conflict as undermining the position of the UN (Stewart 2003, 25-26). However the Geneva talks retain their utility as the only high-level official dialogue mechanism between Abkhazia and Georgia, and indeed with the UN, OSCE, EU and the USA (Apsny Press, 2013c).

Nevertheless, despite its institutionally compromised position toward Abkhazia, a UN presence of some category is still viewed as a desirable objective. Irakliy Khintba, Deputy Foreign Minister of Abkhazia as of this writing, declared in 2010 that a UN presence, "the most politically acceptable type of international presence for Sukhum", is a vital factor for advancing Abkhaz interests

(Khintba 2010, 28). Khintba goes on to warn against the danger overreliance on Russia, to the detriment of a more internationalist approach, may pose to Abkhazia's international relations (32).

The European Union

The role of the European Union (EU) in Abkhazian policy can be understood as operating on multiple levels: firstly the systemic influence of the EU in its bordering regions, secondly the direct policies of EU instruments such as the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) and the European Commission, and thirdly, the unilateral or multilateral engagement of its constituent member states.

Systemically the EU can be, Hiski Haukkala maintains, envisaged as a regional normative hegemon: "Using its economic and normative clout to build a set of highly asymmetrical bilateral relationships that help to facilitate an active transference of its norms and values" (Haukkala 2008, 1602-1603). This power rests on the perceived legitimacy of the union's actions and is reinforced by the open-ended nature of membership. Whilst this normative projection does have an influence on domestic Abkhazian development (Gvinjia, 2013 Interview), its main target has been Georgia. However this Georgia-centric policy is calculated to have an indirect influence on Abkhazia, whereby the raising of the Georgian standard of life theoretically makes an Abkhazian re-integration into Georgia more desirable for Abkhazians.

These norms are institutionalised in the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), developed in 2004, "with the objective of avoiding the emergence of new dividing lines between the enlarged EU and our neighbours and instead strengthening the prosperity, stability and security of all. It is based on the values of democracy, rule of law and respect of human rights" (European Commission 2013). The ENP is given a regional dimension through the Eastern Partnership and Black Sea Synergy projects (Tsantoulis, 2009).

EU-Georgia bilateral relations are regulated by the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement signed in 1996, which came into force on the 1 July 1999 (EUR-LEX 2013). This relationship was further reinforced by the creation of an ENP Action Plan in November 2006 (European Commission 2006). Article 4.2 of the Action Plan is dedicated to the resolution of the Georgian conflicts; however, the Article is underdeveloped and contains no original proposals. In addition the inviolability of Georgia's territorial integrity is further emphasised. Since 2003 the EU has also maintained a Special Representative (EUSR) for the South Caucasus. The role of the EUSR is to provide the EU with a permanent political presence in the region, representing a potential dialogue mechanism through which the Abkhazian authorities may engage the EU (European Union 2013).

During the period 1993-2008 the EU as a bloc was a minor player in the Abkhazian conflict resolution process compared to the UN, OSCE and CIS, limiting itself to the provision of aid. This politically neutered approach has earned the EU criticism regarding its lack of a strategy toward Abkhazia (Hewitt, 2013 Interview). During this period Abkhazia was able to benefit from EU financial aid, primarily to the NGO and civil society sector but also in the form of infrastructure projects, most significantly the restoration of the Ingur(i) hydroelectric plant (EBRD 2006). In the pre-ENP period (1992-2005) the European Commission allocated €505 million to Georgia, for utilisation as technical assistance dedicated primarily to democratisation projects and the reform of the judicial system (European Commission 2007). By 2008 the EU claimed to be the largest international donor to reconstruction in Abkhazia (European Union 2011). Economic rehabilitation and confidence building measures were selected for their apolitical nature, and implementation was not linked to the negotiating formats (Fean 2009, 9).

However, in the aftermath of the dissolution of the UN and OSCE missions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia respectively, the EU has become the primary international peacekeeper between Georgia and the separatist entities through the deployment of the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) on 15 September 2008. The EUMM's mandate consists of: "Stabilisation, normalisation and confidence building, as well as reporting to the EU in order to inform European policy-making and thus contribute to the future EU engagement in the region" (EUMM 2009). However, the EUMM is not permitted to operate within Abkhazian territory. This more visible deployment has come at the expense of aid projects, as the latter are now significantly hampered following Georgia's introduction of the Law on Occupied Territories.

During the period 2009-2010 the EU developed a policy of "Engagement without Recognition" (EWR) towards Abkhazia, whereby Abkhazia is theoretically allowed to engage with the West on a number of political, economic, social and cultural issues, without any Western commitment to recognition. Recognition is deemed non-negotiable until a final settlement on the issue of IDPs/refugees. This separation of international legal dimensions from aspects of governance is intended to lessen the reliance of Abkhazia on Russia and increase western strategic influence (Cooley

and Mitchell 2010, 60). Former Abkhaz Foreign Minister Maxim Gvinjia criticises the EU for its failure to include Abkhazia in the ENP and its regional sub-projects, a policy that need not entail diplomatic recognition, as a part of EWR (Gvinjia, 2013 Interview). Such a failure has led the current leadership to conclude that EWR is already obsolete and in need of an upgrade (Khintba, 2013 Interview).

As has been discussed the EU does possess the institutions to engage with Abkhazia on a regional level, and if the policy of EWR is effectively implemented it is highly likely that it will be accepted by the Abkhaz leadership. EU engagement with Abkhazia has been qualitatively poor, initially ceding the role of primary mediator in the conflict resolution process to other organisations, and subsequently pursuing an unclear strategy that has severely damaged the union's reputation and capacity to act in the region. The EU has consistently failed to utilise its systemic leverage over Abkhazia, a task made impossible by the lack of a regular dialogue with the Abkhaz authorities.

Informal Vectors

The Abkhazian relationship with Turkey

The relationship between Abkhazia and Turkey, despite being defined by Turkish non-recognition of Abkhazian statehood, has been vital for Sukhum(i). Turkey is inhibited from formally recognising Abkhazia by its NATO membership and close relationship with the USA and the EU. Nevertheless, Turkey has maintained consistent and increasingly strong economic ties with Abkhazia. The Abkhaz issue has remained a (albeit minor) political concern due to the activities of the Circassian/Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey. This informal but functional relationship stands in contrast to those formal but impractical treaties with Abkhazia's partners in the Pacific and Latin America.

During the years 1994-1996 the Turkish government, whilst not actively encouraging, did nothing to prevent maritime trade between its northern ports and Abkhazia.¹⁵ This link, supplemented by the possibility of land travel from Turkey to Abkhazia via Georgia, did a great deal to keep the war-damaged Abkhaz economy functioning.

However, in an act of solidarity with the Georgian government and in spite of protests from the Circassian/Abkhaz diaspora the Turkish authorities acted to enforce the 1996 CIS blockade. Turkish participation in the CIS sanctions included a severe travel restriction on residents of Abkhazia, insisting that international travel required a Georgian passport (Monitor 1996). This restriction on travel was to last until April 2006, when Russia authorised non-CIS citizens with a double-entry Russian visa to enter Abkhazia via the Psou crossing (Punsmann 2008, 84). The most plausible reasoning behind the initial Turkish position was Georgia's increasing importance as a key transit state for Caspian oil and gas. Turkey has since pursued a consistent policy of support for Georgian territorial integrity.

The official Turkish policy on Abkhazia has, after Russia, seen the most evolution following the dramatic change of circumstances in the aftermath of the August 2008 war. Whilst there are cases of visits by senior Abkhazian officials to Turkey before August 2008, Abkhaz Foreign Minister Sergey Shamba visited Ankara in June 2008 (Kanbolat 2008), these trips have since increased in frequency. This diplomatic process has not been entirely one sided: Deputy Under-Secretary to the Turkish Foreign Minister Ünal Çeviköz held a meeting with Abkhazian officials in Sukhum(i) between 8-9 September 2009, marking the first visit to Abkhazia of a foreign national diplomat since the August 2008 war (Kanbolat 2009). This was followed by an April 2010 visit to Sukhum(i) by Nurdan Bayraktar Golder, head of the South Caucasus department of the Turkish Foreign Ministry. Golder met with then Prime Minister Sergey Shamba and Foreign Minister Maxim Gvinjia with the aim of demonstrating the importance of Abkhazia to Turkey (*Radio Free Europe*, 2010).

The importance of the Turkish vector in Abkhazian policy was demonstrated by the first visit by President Baghapsh (previous planned visits in 2007 had been cancelled due to Georgian protests) to Ankara in April 2011. Baghapsh was careful not to criticise Turkish policy toward Georgia, claiming to "appreciate Turkey's position", he instead focused on improving and increasing business and cultural contacts with the diaspora. Taking advantage of the visit to respond to international allegations that Abkhazia is essentially a part of the Russian Federation, Baghapsh said: "Such a thing is unacceptable. Abkhazia has to maintain its bilateral relations as an independent state" (Kanbolat 2011). Abkhazia hopes to further develop formal bilateral relations with the Turkish state, as was confirmed by Foreign Minister Vyacheslav Chirikba in November 2013, when it was announced that a major objective of Abkhazian foreign policy was the opening of consular and other diplomatic missions in Ankara and Sukhum(i).

These official visits have been accompanied by an increase of commercial ties following August 2008. The destruction of the two largest Georgian naval vessels in the August war and the deployment of the Russian coastguard to Abkhaz waters (*Civil Georgia*, 2009) have served to reduce the regular impounding of Turkish operated vessels in the process of conducting trade with Abkhazia. In large part because of the diaspora, Turkey is currently Abkhazia's second largest trading partner behind Russia, accounting for 18 percent of Abkhazia's trade in 2012 (Apsny Press, 2012) and 20 percent of trade in the first quarter of 2013 (Apsny Press, 2013b).

These developments are in line with the Turkish Caucasus Cooperation and Stability Platform (CCSP), announced on 13 August 2008, and its predecessors, notably the Stability Pact for the Caucasus proposed in January 2000 under the aegis of the OSCE (Fotiou 2009, 3). Despite the exclusion of Abkhazia from the CCSP, economic engagement is in keeping with its principles. In this regard there is a similarity between Turkish projects and those of the EU, in particular the latter's Eastern Partnership. However there is a possible contradiction between the CCSP and the parallel, albeit idealistic, policy of "zero problems" with neighbours vis-à-vis the Turkish-Georgian relationship, although there appears to have been discussions regarding the status of Turkish economic interaction with Abkhazia. The key Turkish objective is the maintenance of open Black Sea transportation channels (*Today's Zaman* 2010).

Despite official Abkhazian rhetoric it is unlikely the Abkhazian-Turkish relationship will develop further until direct (and un-harassed) transportation links by land, sea and air can be established. In the meantime the Turkish vector will remain heavily dependent on transnational factors, primarily the activities of the diaspora and religious institutions.

Transnational factors

Due to the limited nature of Abkhazia's formal foreign interaction, non-state transnational factors play a greater role in determining policy and foreign relations. Transnational factors, such as interaction with the Abkhaz/Circassian diaspora and religious institutions, are analysed here separately from the institutionalised actions of supra-national organisations such as the EU. NGOs represent a relatively small aspect of Abkhazian foreign interaction, and are largely synonymous with the activities of the UN and Abkhazian-Georgian conflict resolution.¹⁶ Nevertheless NGO representatives are included in the Public Expert Council, an advisory board at the Abkhazian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, thus orchestrating a direct, if minor, influence upon Abkhazian foreign policy (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Abkhazia 2012).¹⁷

Kimitaka Matsuzato has argued that in some regions, the Black Sea in particular, transnational actors are determining epistemological factors. He suggests that the "small countries of the Black Sea rim (population less than five million) are not self sustainable economically and politically and become catalysts of transnationalism" (Matsuzato 2011, 814). This observation highlights the importance of transnational factors as policy options for small and unrecognised states. These transnational factors largely fit the role of civil society as an organisational form, as "the realm of autonomous voluntary organisations, acting in the public sphere as an intermediary between the state and private life." This is best made up of organisations that are private, non-profit distributing, self-governing and voluntary (Diamond & Plattner 1996; Salamon and Anheier 1996; Babajanian *et al* 2005, 212). These organisations can be based on ethical, cultural, political, scientific, religious or philanthropic considerations (World Bank 2006).

Transnational factors represent Abkhazia's primary form of exercising what Joseph Nye terms 'soft power', namely the ability to influence the preferences and behaviour of others without resorting to 'hard power' methods such as military force or economic inducement (Nye 2004, 5-7). In the case of Abkhazia the soft power resource most prevalent is that of culture, "the set of values and practices that create meaning for a society" (11), in particular cultural links with the diaspora and through religious links to the Orthodox and Islamic worlds.

Diaspora

Abkhazians are considered a part of the Circassian world, with the Abkhaz language belonging to the North-Western Caucasian branch of Abaza-Circassian languages (Zhemukhov 2012, 107). This links Abkhaz with the Circassian languages of Adyghe and Kabardian spoken in the Russian Caucasus to Abkhazia's north (Lewis *et al*, 2013). When combined with the many other cultural similarities shared within the broader Circassian group these primal links provide a valuable sense of shared identity.

The size of the Abkhazian diaspora varies according to source; the diaspora resident in Turkey alone is claimed by diaspora representatives to be a million strong (Ozgur 2004), while Abkhaz

authorities claim a more modest figure of 150,000- 500,000 (Owen 2009). Turkish law makes it impossible to accurately verify the correct number, since the status of ethnic minority is reserved for non-Muslim peoples; hence Caucasians do not appear as a separate category in the census (WRITENET 1996). Jordan and Syria also contain relatively large Caucasian minorities. This large extra-territorial population is the result of extensive deportations from the Caucasus region in the aftermath of the Russian-Caucasian war ending in May 1864, with an Abkhaz rebellion in 1866 resulting in the expulsion of tens of thousands of Abkhaz to the Ottoman Empire (de Waal 2010, 149-150).

This diaspora, in concert with its wider Caucasian counterpart, has been a vocal supporter of Abkhazian independence. Indeed, Abkhazia served as an observer to the International Circassian Association throughout the 1990s, representatives of which fought with the Abkhazians in the 1992-93 war (Bram 2004, 63-97). Engagement with the Circassian world has continued to play a not inconsiderable role in Abkhazian policy, both in terms of international lobbying on its behalf and as a source of potential citizens and investment. The latter is deemed especially important in order to offset the unstable numerical position of ethnic Abkhaz; deceased Abkhazian President Sergei Baghapsh was quoted comparing Abkhaz immigration policy to that of Israel (Barry 2009).

Within Turkey the adoption of the European integration process and its accompanying conditions regarding democratisation has made possible a consolidation of Abkhaz, Circassian and other associations into federations as of 2001. In 2002 these same organisations gained the right to contact associations in foreign countries, thus creating official links between diaspora and domestic civil society (Vamling 2008, 82). As a result of this increased freedom the diaspora is credited with facilitating unofficial meetings between Turkish and Abkhazian leaders (Judah 2009).

The most prominent of Abkhazian diaspora organisations is the Caucasian-Abkhazian Solidarity Committee (CASC), an umbrella humanitarian aid organisation founded on 23 August 1992. The CASC rapidly grew in significance, evolving into a pro-Abkhazian lobbying organisation recognised by both Abkhazian and Turkish authorities. In February 1994 Abkhazian President Vladislav Ardzinba dispatched a permanent representative to the diaspora, who requested that the CASC not only resume its wartime activities, but also take up the role of official representation of Abkhazia in Turkey. This expansion of duties led to involvement in inter-authority communication, a small role in Abkhaz-Georgian peace negotiations and meetings with foreign delegations (Punsmann *et al* 2009, 13).

Indeed, as Sufian Zhemukhov observes, “the Circassian world remained Abkhazia’s only real supporter for half a decade after the [1992-1993] war” (Zhemukhov 2012, 3). Abkhazia established relations with the Circassian republics within the Russian Federation, and, in 1997, officially recognised nineteenth century Russian imperial policy towards the Circassian people as genocide (Ibid). In order to encourage repatriation a Law on Repatriation was passed by the Abkhaz parliament in 1993 and a State Committee on Repatriation was established in 2002. The latter was tasked with providing incentives for the Abkhaz, Abazin, Ubykh and Shapsug (Ibid, 4) diasporas to return and was provided with a \$1 million fund for this purpose. Furthermore taxpayers in Abkhazia currently pay 2 percent of their salary into this fund (Trier *et al* 2010, 40-41). Paradoxically this immigration policy has served to alienate the majority of the Circassian diaspora, who deem the Abkhaz government to be offering favourable terms for the Abaza sub-group of Circassians at the expense of the wider ethno-cultural group. Indeed Inal-Ipa warns that the current Abkhaz neglect of its North Caucasian vector may lead to Abkhazian policy being undermined by a warming of the Georgian-Circassian relationship (Inal-Ipa, 2012). The Georgian recognition of the Circassian genocide on 20 May 2011 makes it the first fully recognised state to do so, and whilst this is viewed as an attempt to undermine the Russian position in the Caucasus the action has a clear negative impact on the Abkhaz-Circassian relationship. The Abkhaz failure to support the Circassian position on the 2014 Sochi Olympics, held not only on the 150th anniversary of the genocide, but also in what the Circassians believe to be their natural capital, serves as a further barrier to relations (Haindrava 2013; Khashig 2013). This unstructured approach leads Liana Kvarchelia, Deputy Director of the Center for Humanitarian Programs NGO in Abkhazia, to maintain that successive Abkhaz governments have consistently underestimated the issue of the wider Circassian diaspora (Kvarchelia 2013 Interview).

Nevertheless there is little evidence to suggest that the activities of the diaspora have served to improve the Abkhazian international position or demographic situation to any meaningful degree. As regards permanent repatriation early hopes of large numbers of returnees proved false, with the prevailing sense of insecurity that existed until the August 2008 war serving to keep repatriation figures in the low thousands. However, the improved security situation seems to have acted to improved the prospects for return to Abkhazia, particularly among those of the diaspora currently residing in dangerous areas. This latter group is epitomised by those ethnic Circassians resident in

Syria (*Caucasian Knot* 2012; Lomsadze 2012), 522 of whom have resettled in Abkhazia since the beginning of the Syrian civil war (Apsny Press 2013f).

There are other factors that inhibit diaspora-homeland interaction, such as religion. The overwhelming majority of the Abkhaz diaspora is Muslim (WRITENET 1996), whereas the predominant religion in Abkhazia is Orthodox Christianity. Nevertheless in order to provide further incentives for potential returnees Abkhazian officials have announced plans to construct a mosque in Sukhum(i) in order to replace the existing prayer house (Barry 2009). Moreover, the Abkhazian church maintains that religious differences are not a divisive issue between the homeland and the diaspora (Marshan 2013, Interview).

Religion

Matsuzato (2011, 814) argues that “in the Black Sea rim, religious congregations, such as Orthodoxy, Islam, and pre-Chalcedonian Christianity (in this case the Armenian Apostolic Church), operate as formidable transnational actors.” The religious plurality of Abkhazian society lends itself well to international engagement through religious institutions, providing an avenue of dialogue that is openly acknowledged by official authorities. Indeed Senol Korkut argues that in the post-Cold War world “religions can easily be converted into a sphere of international relations” (Korkut 2009, 121).

Traditionally Abkhazians have an instrumental attitude to religion, utilising it as a tool to resist cultural assimilation. However, the years following the dissolution of the USSR have seen something of a revival in religiosity. After the 1992-93 war the Abkhazian Orthodox Church (AOC) broke away from the jurisdiction of the Georgian Church, creating their own diocese, although this diocese remains to be recognised by the Orthodox community (Trier *et al* 2010, 114; Matsuzato 2009b, 256). This status is largely to do with the AOC lacking a bishop, an issue that excludes AOC authorities from direct communication with high-ranking Orthodox figures. As such the Abkhazian president currently undertakes this function (Marshan, 2013 Interview). Before the formal recognition of Abkhazia by the Russian Federation the former’s Orthodox status provided a dialogue mechanism through the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Since the dissolution of the USSR the ROC has come to represent a significant arm of Russian foreign policy, maintaining close ties with the security services and Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Throughout the period 1993-2008 the activities of Russian clergy allowed the Russian state to simultaneously espouse respect for the territorial integrity of Georgia whilst maintaining ties with Abkhazia (Curanovic 2007, 312).

It should be noted however that Abkhazia is not alone in using its church as a form of soft power mechanism, the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) itself maintains an active lobbying function on behalf of the Georgian state. The 20-26 January 2013 visit to Moscow of Georgian Catholicos-Patriarch Ilia II, encompassing as it did not only consultations with Patriarch Kirill of the ROC but also with Vladimir Putin, serves to illustrate the increasingly politicised nature of religion in contemporary Eurasian politics. Among discussion of strictly canonical issues Ilia II used his platform to espouse the territorial integrity of Georgia and claimed the support of the ROC on the issue (Gamakharia 2013). Whilst the acting head of the Abkhaz church conducted a visit to Moscow on 1 February 2013 the promised support of the ROC referred to the “Abkhaz Orthodox community”, rather than the Abkhazian church (Ibid). This further illustrates the asymmetric nature of inter-church relations in favour of the recognised entity, suggesting that Abkhazian soft power instruments are also subject to structural restrictions (Apsny Press, 2013).

Despite a marked decline in the numbers of practicing (Sunni) Muslims within Abkhazia between the years 1993-2006 (Matsuzato 2011, 823) certain significant events took place such as to bring about considerable engagement between the Abkhaz Muslim community and foreign organisations. In 2005 representatives of Abkhazia’s Muslims signed an agreement with the Russian Council of Muftis, which, since the agreement’s implementation in 2007, has resulted in Abkhazian Muslim leaders being invited to various international conferences, allowing them to properly engage with the international Muslim community (824). Similarly in the aftermath of Russia’s recognition of Abkhazia the Turkish Diyanet¹⁸ judged a new legal situation to have come into being, allowing, upon an official request from the Abkhaz parliament, the certified provision of aid to Abkhazia’s Muslims. This action involved the appointment of a Diyanet Waqf Foundation coordinator to Abkhazia, an action deemed so important by the Abkhaz authorities that President Bagapsh himself met the coordinator in order to express his gratitude (824-826).

Finally, the appointment of an independent representative of the Armenian Church in Abkhazia in 2006, thus bypassing Georgia, may develop into a direct line of communication between Abkhazian officialdom and the Armenian government (Matsuzato 2011, 821). However the signing on 4 December 2013 of an agreement on hydrocarbon exploration and development between the

government of Abkhazia and the government of Armenia suggests that regular dialogue mechanisms are already in existence (Apsny Press, 2013d).

Conclusions and prospects

This article has investigated the systemic factors behind Abkhazian policy, and sought to determine if Abkhazia is capable of pursuing an independent policy in spite of plentiful restraints. However, despite attempts to conduct research outside of traditional bilateral diplomacy, it appears that the neo-realist premise on the restricted policy prospects of small states is indeed applicable to the Abkhazian case.

Most of Abkhazian foreign interaction has its origin in events firmly outside of Abkhazian control. The triangular relationship between Abkhazia, Russia and Georgia determines the foreign policy capability of Abkhazia to a far greater extent than dedicated governmental action. Attempts to develop foreign vectors outside of this trilateral relationship, predominantly with Turkey and transnational actors such as the diaspora, in turn encountered structural restraints due to Abkhazia's legal position. Abkhazia's (predominantly) unrecognised status, whilst not necessarily disqualifying it from statehood, acts to significantly restrict its interaction with other international actors. The lack of legally sanctioned, large capacity, transportation links between Abkhazia and Turkey serves to restrict the effectiveness of Abkhazian efforts at trade diversification.

The victory of Bidzina Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream coalition in the October 2012 parliamentary elections, followed by Giorgi Margvelashvili's October 2013 presidential victory appeared to offer the prospect of improved relations with Abkhazia, by offering a clean break from the Mikheil Saakashvili era. However, more than symbolic measures, such as the renaming of the Ministry of Reintegration, will be needed if a constructive dialogue on the Georgian-Abkhazian relationship is to result. The reopening of a rail link between Russia and Armenia, passing through the territory of both Abkhazia and Georgia, has been proposed as a major diplomatic and economic project; however, this project has stalled due to legal ambiguity associated with the Abkhazian stretch of the railway (Jabbarli 2013).

Legal ambiguities surrounding Abkhazia result in a reticence to invest in the territory; combined with the often hostile attitude of the Georgian authorities, it becomes apparent that Abkhazia's isolation is systemically entrenched. The inevitable result of such isolation is a disproportionate reliance on the Russian vector. Abkhazia is reliant on Russia for its security, economic stability and international representation, however the activities of the Abkhaz authorities and civil society show that this need not be the case. An improvement in the Abkhaz-Georgian relationship would reduce the need for a heavy Russian military presence, in turn reducing the image of Abkhazia as an "occupied territory". This improvement in relations would further legitimise third party trade with Abkhazia, facilitating the development of a more diverse economy. A full implementation of the EWR policy, whilst not admitting Abkhazia to international institutions as a full member, would serve to give Abkhazia an outlet for its concerns. It is only through such measures that the issues of Abkhazia's political status and the return of displaced persons can be effectively addressed. Whilst federal solutions to the Abkhazia-Georgia conflict have not been seriously considered for several years it is not inconceivable that, in collusion with EWR, a tacit Georgian acceptance of Abkhazia's *de facto* independence may develop. The stability such an acceptance would provide would serve to facilitate trade between the two entities, itself a trust building mechanism. Such a relationship would be reminiscent of that between China and Taiwan. But it is important to note that the transition from such acceptance to the negotiation of practical considerations such as customs arrangements remains a serious hindrance.

Abkhazia may also benefit from the Taiwanese model of engagement in international relations, such as adopting a pragmatic attitude to Abkhazia's constitutional title (Taiwan is officially known as Taipei, China) and the Taiwanese practice of privatising its international interaction (Lynch 2004, 104). Enlisting the services of private diplomatic services is a method employed by unrecognised entities such as Somaliland and Western Sahara, both of which are represented by the private company Independent Diplomat. Such outsourcing has the potential to provide Abkhazia with a presence in spheres of international engagement from which its legal status currently excludes it. It is also possible to supplement these measures through a more innovative use of Honorary Consuls. The microstate of Liechtenstein provides a precedent in this regard, delegating more authority and more closely managing the activities of its Honorary Consuls (Stringer 2011, 15, 37). This places them within an overall public diplomacy and branding strategy that allows greater penetration of regions with which beneficial bilateral relationships may be established. In turn this would reduce the need for expensive formal representation, enabling the financially constrained Abkhazian MFA better outreach capability

for limited cost. All of these measures would reduce Russian influence in Abkhazia, a short to medium term prospect beneficial to both Abkhazia and Georgia.

The findings of this article also provide evidence that the political realities of unrecognised or partially recognised states are more complex than generally assumed. In order to justify the neo-realist position most often accepted by commentators and policy-makers it is first necessary to examine every facet of a polity's foreign interaction, both formal and informal. Whilst one should not exaggerate the role of small states, or indeed unrecognised states, in international relations, the subtleties of their study must be acknowledged by conventional theory, taking into account the greater role played by informal relationships in their policy making.

Notes

¹ In a study addressing such a heavily disputed issue as Abkhazia it is necessary to adopt a semantically sensitive approach to the spelling of toponymic names, even when rendered in the English language. Since Abkhazia achieved *de facto* independence the Georgian spelling of place names have been declared invalid. In large part this has taken the form of removing the typically Georgian '-i' from the end of a toponym, for example 'Sukhumi' became 'Sukhum'. In order to preserve the neutral character of this paper where such a difference exists the disputed endings shall be encased in brackets, for example 'Sukhum(i)'. An exception to this rule will be made when a direct quotation is utilised, in which case the original spelling used in the source will be maintained.

² In the case of the latter a semantic clarification is necessary. The status of the Abkhazian Georgians is a highly politicised matter; as such the title by which they are known is a political variable. The Abkhaz refer to the displaced persons as "refugees", thus invoking Article 1 of the UN Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees (United Nations, b), therefore implying that they are persons "outside the country of [their] nationality" and thereby inferring the legality of Abkhazia's existence as a state. On the other hand the Georgians refer to these individuals as "Internally Displaced Persons" (IDP), this is a crucial distinction as IDPs are deemed as not having crossed an international boundary (UNHCR, 2013), thus implying that Abkhazia remains a legal province of the Georgian state.

³ This article will not preface each mention of a state institution in Abkhazia with the term '*de facto*' or 'partially recognised'. I acknowledge the contested nature of these institutions in the title of this article.

⁴ The factually based provisions of statehood outlined in Article 1 of the Montevideo Convention defines an entity as a state if it possesses the following: (1) a permanent population; (2) a defined territory; (3) government; (4) the capacity to enter into relations with other states (MCRDS, 1933). It is clear that Abkhazia fulfils these requirements: it maintains a permanent population (notwithstanding the issue of displaced persons), controls a defined territory that, as of August 2008, is administered in its entirety by a sovereign Abkhazian government that maintains a clearly demonstrated ability to engage in foreign relations. Crucially, Article 3 of the convention also outlines that:

"The political existence of the state is independent of recognition by the other states. Even before recognition the state has the right to defend its integrity and independence, to provide for its conservation and prosperity, and consequently to organize itself as it sees fit, to legislate upon its interests, administer its services, and to define the jurisdiction and competence of its courts. The exercise of these rights has no other limitation than the exercise of the rights of other states according to international law".
(Ibid)

⁵ The official press estimated the 2011 GDP to stand at \$800 million, but this seems inflated (Baratelia 2011).

⁶ However neo-realism is often criticised for its a-historical nature and tendency to ignore international institutions (Keohane 1988, 174), both factors critical to understanding the actions of small states and particularly Abkhazia. This fault may lie in an overreliance on rational choice theory, assuming that people and thus states can be relied upon to act in ways that best secure their goals and that these goals reflect their self-interest, to the extent that their actions can be predicted.

⁷ The status of Vanuatu's recognition of Abkhazia is ambiguous and likely to change (Bedwell 2013; Lomsadze 2013).

⁸ Nevertheless the Friendship Treaty with South Ossetia was cited as a *casus belli* for Abkhazian entrance into the 2008 conflict (the International Fact Finding Mission for the Conflict declared this reasoning, and indeed the treaty itself, illegal; IIFFMG 2009 Vol.1, 25-26). The recovery of control over the Kodori gorge from the Georgians was the primary Abkhazian objective.

⁹ Such a status would have consisted of a Russian-Abkhazian confederation along the lines of that between the Marshall Islands and the United States. This would have protected the internal sovereignty of Abkhazia as well as guaranteeing a right to unilateral secession.

¹⁰ The OSCE played a very minor role in Abkhazia, instead focusing on the South Ossetian conflict. Its involvement in Abkhazia was limited to a mediatory role in the Geneva talks and joint participation with the UN in the Human Rights Office Abkhazia, Georgia (OSCE 2013).

¹¹ Throughout its tenure the UN acted in cooperation with the so-called 'Group of Friends of the Secretary General', comprised of representatives of France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the Russian Federation and the United States. The Group of Friends provided another third-party mediatory role designed in an effort to dilute Russian influence on the mediation process. The Group has been defunct since the August 2008 war and has been superseded by the 'New Friends of Georgia', an organisation primarily comprised of central and eastern European EU states founded in 2005 with the aim of improving EU-Georgian relations (Socor 2005).

¹² The Georgian-sponsored 'Abkhazian Government in Exile' was, however, permitted to organise a press conference at the UN headquarters (Akaba 2010, 8).

¹³ Further duties included monitoring the activities of the Commonwealth of Independent States Peacekeeping Force (CIS PKF). The UNOMIG was expanded to include a human rights oriented contingent jointly staffed by UN and OSCE personnel following Security Council Resolution 1077 in October 1996 (United Nations 1996).

¹⁴ In the aftermath of the August 2008 war an OSCE initiative called for the re-establishment of the Geneva mediation forum, based on the Sarkozy-Medvedev ceasefire (President of Russia 2008a), aimed at addressing the causes of the conflict. This forum brought together the conflict parties of Russia, Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia into a mediated process involving the UN, EU and the OSCE; this process reconstituted the Geneva talks in October 2008. The Geneva process re-identified its mandate as achieving a comprehensive agreement on stability and security in the region, conflict settlement, and the return of refugees (Mikhelidze 2010, 2-3).

¹⁵ Indeed, several months before the outbreak of the initial Georgian-Abkhazian war President Ardvinba proposed to the Turkish President, Suleyman Demirel, that Turkey take over management of the port and customs of Sukhum(i) (Punsman *et al* 2009, 10).

¹⁶ The establishment of the first (notably western) NGOs in Abkhazia took place during the years of *perestroika* within the USSR, with the Youth Creative Union being formed in 1986 (Ozgur 2007, 13). Since the dissolution of the USSR NGOs in Abkhazia have focused almost exclusively on the conflict resolution process between Abkhazia and Georgia, thus providing the only continuous source of interaction between the two entities outside of the Geneva process. However, in recent years the activities of Abkhazian NGOs have diversified, encompassing cooperation with such international organisations such as the European Commission, UNDP and OSCE (Trier *et al* 2010, 111-112). Those NGOs under the patronage of the European Commission played an important role in supporting the free press and in the creation of civil society within Abkhazia. Nevertheless the non-systematic nature of this

support leaves civil society vulnerable to the Abkhazian leadership, who feels itself threatened by a civil society viewed as engaging in partnership with potentially hostile international institutions (Kvarchelia 2012, 3).

¹⁷ In addition the election to the Abkhaz parliament of former NGO representatives provides a further lobbying platform (Kvarchelia, 2013 Interview).

¹⁸ The Turkish Diyanet is a state-sponsored external action service concerned with religious affairs.

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