

CAN TURKEY DE-ISOLATE ABKHAZIA?

Ever since Russia recognized Abkhazia as an independent state after the Five-Day War of 2008, Abkhazia has gained nation-building momentum. Although Turkey does not recognize Abkhazia's independence, there are high levels of communication and exchange of goods between the two. Turkey is Abkhazia's second biggest trade partner and home to the largest Abkhaz diaspora. This article analyzes Abkhazia's relationship with Turkey, examining whether Turkey can play a positive role in Abkhazia-Georgia relations.

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fter the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, newly independent Georgia suffered civil unrest, ethnic tensions, and territorial disputes. Georgia had three breakaway regions within its territory: South Ossetia, Ajaria, and Abkhazia. The latter two have historical and cultural ties with Turkey; both breakaway regions are partly Muslim and were part of the Ottoman Empire between 1578 and 1804. These ties have become an important issue in contemporary Turkish-Georgian bilateral relations due to religious commonalities and historical connections between these regions and Turkey, Ankara has an interest in maintaining and strengthening its relations with Ajaria and Abkhazia.

Turkey's demographics have played an important role in these relations, as there are many ethnic Abkhaz (approximately 500,000)¹ living within Turkey's borders. These Abkhaz fled Abkhazia to Turkey (then the Ottoman Empire) during the Russian Empire's annexation of the Caucasus in the 19th century. As a result, most of the Abkhaz who live in Turkey are not first-generation immigrants, but second- or third-generation Abkhaz have been progressively Turkified.²

The remaining Abkhaz in Abkhazia thus became a minority, even in the Abkhazia region. Abkhazia's population in 1989 was approximately 525,061, of which 93,267 were ethnic Abkhaz.³ However, due to demographic change following the collapse of the Soviet Union and a civil war that displaced many Georgians, Abkhaz are now the majority in Abkhazia. The region's population in 2011 was 190,000 of which approximately 122,200 were ethnic Abkhaz. Abkhazia formally declared independence in October 1999.⁴ Russia opted to support the Abkhaz independence movement, aiding it militarily and financially.

This article attempts to provide insight into the relations between Abkhazia and Turkey, taking into account Abkhaz perspectives. The main question posed is: Can Turkey help de-isolate Abkhazia and break its dependence on Russia?

Historical Overview: Multi-Ethnic Georgia and Independence

Abkhazia has historically been an independent region in various forms: the Kingdom of Abkhazia (780-1008 AD), the Principality of Abkhazia (existing under

1 Elizabeth Owen, "Abkhazia's Diaspora: Dreaming of Home," *Eurasianet.org*, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav030909b.shtml>

2 Wojciech Kononczuk, "A Caucasian Ally? Turkish-Georgian Relations," *Center for Eastern Studies (OSW)*, 2007, p. 5, http://mercury.ethz.ch/serviceengine/Files/ISN/90017/ichaptersection_singledocument/ce799de1-33da-4f8a-8188-ec80eb6dac9b/en/3+from+Turkey+after+negotiations-3.pdf

3 "Population by Municipalities for the Beginning of the Year 2012 (Abkhazia and Ajaria)," *National Statistics Office of Georgia*, http://www.geostat.ge/index.php?action=page&p_id=473&lang=eng

Note: The reason for the major decrease in population in after 1989 was the 1992-3 war, where many Georgians were killed or displaced.

4 "Население Абхазии," [Population of Abkhazia], *Ethno Kavkaz*, 2011, <http://www.ethnokavkaz.narod.ru/rnabkhazia.html>

both the Ottoman and Russian Empires between 1700 and 1864), and later under the Soviet Union as two sequential republics. In 1921, Abkhazia became a Socialist Soviet Republic (SSR Abkhazia) under the vague status of a “Treaty Republic” within the Georgian SSR. This was done through the “Union Treaty between the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia and the Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia,” signed on 16 December 1921.⁵ This treaty paved the way for Abkhazia to receive recognition in the Soviet Union as a separate entity.

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In 1931, Joseph Stalin declared Abkhazia an autonomous republic (Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic or in short Abkhaz ASSR), which was integrated into the Georgian SSR. Under Stalin, the Abkhaz SSR suffered from purges and the suppression of Abkhaz culture as Georgian became the official language, no longer permitting the Abkhaz language in schools. Additionally, Stalin resettled many Russians, Armenians, and Georgians into the Abkhaz SSR. After Stalin’s death, the oppressive policies he pursued were revoked and the Abkhaz were able to restore their societal construct. The local government eventually pushed to make the Abkhaz SSR more autonomous in the 1970s. In 1978, the Abkhaz asked Moscow to make the Abkhaz SSR a part of the Russian SSR in order to detach themselves from the Georgian SSR, but this request was denied. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, in 1992-3 an Abkhaz-Georgian war took place in which the Abkhaz were backed by Russians and North Caucasian fighters. The war ended with Georgia’s loss and a subsequent *coup d’état* in Tbilisi. Besides a high death toll on the Georgian side, there were 250,000 ethnic Georgians displaced from Abkhazia. After the ceasefire in September 1993, the conflict was deemed to be “frozen”. It remained so until the advent of the Five-Day War between Georgia and Russia in 2008 that erupted over South Ossetia, another breakaway region in Georgia. Though the war was not directly related to Abkhazia, in its aftermath Russia recognized Abkhazia as an independent state as well as South Ossetia.

In order to proceed with resolving the issue after the war, the UN, EU, OSCE, U.S., and Russia initiated the Geneva Process in 2008. In April and June 2013, the process

⁵ “Union Treaty Between the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia and the Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia,” 16 December 1921, <http://abkhazworld.com/articles/reports/189-union-treaty-between-december-1921.html>

“Lacking few political or economical connections to countries other than Russia or Georgia creates severe challenges for Abkhazia’s self-determination.”

fences and barbed wire built by the Russian army has been a major thorn in the side of both the Georgian government and the international community. Despite the lack of success in achieving an agreement, the process is important as it is the only formal platform available for talks.⁷

While Abkhazia seems to be moving toward democracy, the current status of the Geneva Process hinders the democratic development of the Georgian state, strengthening nationalist policies and parties.⁸ Aleksandr Ankvab won the most recent presidential election on 26 August 2011 with 55 percent of the vote. Freedom House declared the election free and fair, as well as deeming Abkhazia “partially free” in its 2012 report.⁹

Tbilisi’s policies towards Abkhazia are twofold, as described by Beslan Kmuzov: Georgia, “demands that the international community recognizes Abkhazia and South Ossetia as territories occupied by Russia, and [pursues] propaganda of Georgian achievements (eradication of corruption, tourist development, etc.) among the Abkhazians.”¹⁰

Compounded by both the West’s support of Georgia’s territorial integrity and Russia’s antagonism towards any foreign interference in its sphere of influence in

held its 23rd and 24th rounds of talks, which have not yet produced tangible results. This is due to terminological disputes, Moscow’s “non-party” position (though a major influence on the talks, Moscow is not formally participating as a party), and frequent walk-outs during the process.⁶ The inability to reach a non-use-of-force agreement continues to be one of the most challenging issues. In addition, the recent demarcation of *de facto* borders using

6 “Geneva International Discussions Press Conference (Georgia), following the 24th round of the Geneva International Discussions,” *United Nations Geneva Office*, 26 June 2013, [http://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B9C2E/\(httpPressAudio_en\)/E16266708A86BA02C1257B9600573C7C?OpenDocument](http://www.unog.ch/80256EDD006B9C2E/(httpPressAudio_en)/E16266708A86BA02C1257B9600573C7C?OpenDocument)

7 “Abkhazia: The Long Road to Recognition,” Crisis Group Europe Report 224, *Crisis Group*, 10 April 2013, p. 13, <http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/caucasus/georgia/224-abkhazia-the-long-road-to-reconciliation.pdf>

8 Archil Gegeshidze, “Georgian-Abkhazian Relations: An Inside Perspective,” *Meeting Summary: Russia and Eurasia Programme*, Chatham House, 16 December 2011,

<http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/161211summary.pdf>

9 “Abkhazia,” *Freedom in the world 2012*, Freedom House, 2012, <http://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/2012/abkhazia>

10 Beslan Kmuzov, “Georgia – Abkhazia: Hopes for Integration Dashed,” in Islam Tekushev et al. (eds.), *Abkhazia: between the Past and the Future* (Prague: Medium Orient, 2013), p. 114.

the Caucasus, the viewpoint of the international community is rather fuzzy towards the Abkhaz national struggle. This uncertainty is generally due to lack of knowledge and awareness of the region. Lacking few political or economical connections to countries other than Russia or Georgia creates severe challenges for Abkhazia's self-determination.

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As of today, for example, only five countries in addition to Russia recognize Abkhazia. Being a partially recognized country has many drawbacks. There are no international banks and bank cards are not accepted anywhere in Abkhazia. Supply chains run almost entirely through Russia, making the procurement of goods difficult and expensive. Healthcare is poor – people must go to Russia or Georgia to receive proper medical attention.

Georgians living in Abkhazia –concentrated in the southern town of Gali– are subject to discrimination. For example, they have difficulty obtaining an Abkhaz passport, which is vital for daily life. One may not be a dual national of Abkhazia and Georgia, but can obtain an Abkhaz passport if they are a citizen of another country.¹¹

Abkhazia's Trade with Turkey: Defying Georgia's Sovereignty?

Abkhazia's main industries include tourism, electricity production, water resources, agriculture, and forestry. Most of Abkhazia's economy is based on natural resources and is not industrialized. Ahmet Ceylan, Chairman of the Board of Supervisors at the Abkhaz Federation in Istanbul and a representative of the Abkhaz diaspora, explains that the Abkhaz want to keep Abkhazia pure and pristine by not industrializing. The Abkhaz instead prefer to further develop their tourism sector, which currently receives about one million tourists annually, mostly from Russia.¹² Abkhazia's energy industry is driven by the region's abundant water resources, drawing from 1.7 million cubic meters of flowing rivers. These resources power Ingur dam; with a capacity of 1370 megawatts, Ingur is Abkhazia's largest hydroelectric dam. Almost 70 percent of the energy it generates is exported to Georgia and Russia. Forestry, agriculture, and fishing constitute other large export industries for Abkhazia. To Turkey,

11 John O' Loughlin, Vladimir Kolossov, and Gerard Toal, “Inside Abkhazia: Survey of Attitudes in a De Facto State,” *Post-Soviet Affairs*, No.29 (2011), p. 20.

12 Author's interview with Ahmet Ceylan, Chairman of the Board of Supervisors at the Abkhaz Federation in Istanbul, Abkhazia Culture Association, Üsküdar-Istanbul, Turkey, 18 May 2013.

“While the number of Turkish companies investing in Abkhazia could arguably increase even further if the recognition-related problems are circumvented, inter-party commerce seems to be growing despite current conditions.”

specifically, timber is a notable export.¹³ In sum, despite its isolation, Abkhazia is still able to trade with other countries, but most of that trade is realized through Russia. According to Ceylan, the main goal for Abkhazia is not recognition – though that would be the icing on the cake– but rather freedom of movement, trade, and the re-establishment of sea and air links.¹⁴

According to figures provided by Sener Gogua, a former *de facto* MP of Abkhazia who currently resides in Turkey, Abkhazia has a 600 million dollar total trade volume. Approximately 55 percent of this is with Russia and 20-

25 percent with Turkey (120-130 million dollars).¹⁵ Goods imported to Abkhazia from Turkey are imported fuels and lubricants (41 percent), construction supplies (32 percent) including: cement (15 percent), food (25 percent), machinery equipment (9 percent), and textiles (3 percent).¹⁶

The actual trade volume between Turkey and Abkhazia is probably higher than the estimated figures because much of it passes through Russia.¹⁷ In 2006, Russia authorized non-CIS citizens’ access to Abkhazia *via* a double visa, which allows entry into Russia as transit country to go to Abkhazia. For Turkish citizens this process has been streamlined further with the 2011 visa liberalization resolution between Russia and Turkey, granting Turkish citizens visa-free travel to Russia, therefore enabling easier entry for them into Abkhazia.¹⁸ Further facilitating trade and ease of businesses in Abkhazia is the fact that many Abkhazians can speak Turkish.

While these levels of commerce are high, it is important to note that trading with Abkhazia is in violation of Georgia’s sovereignty. Turkish Ambassador to Georgia Levent Murat Burhan underlined this point in an interview as follows: “Turkey

13 “Investment and Business in Abkhazia,” *Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Abkhazia*, 2013.

14 Ahmet Ceylan (2013).

15 Author’s Interview with Sener Gogua, former *de facto* Abkhaz MP, Abkhazia Culture Association, Üsküdar-Istanbul, Turkey, 18 May 2013.

16 “Основными Торговыми Партнерами Абхазии Продолжают Оставаться Россия и Турция,”

[The Main Trade Partners of Abkhazia Remain Russia and Turkey], *Apsny Press*, 27 July 2012,

<http://apsnypress.info/news/6859.html>

17 Sener Gogua (2013).

18 “Russia-Turkey Visa Free,” *Voice of Russia*, 16 April 2011, <http://english.ruvr.ru/2011/04/16/49018132.html>

always stated and reiterated at all levels that it supports the territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognized borders which includes Abkhazia.”¹⁹ The Turkish Ambassador also stated that “this illegal trading has nothing to do with the Turkish government.”²⁰ Despite such proclamations, this trading still upsets the Georgian government, as there are no sanctions against these illegal activities imposed by Ankara.

Deputy Head of the Mission of Georgia to NATO, Temur Kekelidze (then Deputy Foreign Minister) stated the following in an interview about Turkish trade with Abkhazia:

“The diplomatic visits of the Turkish delegation play a role in de-isolating Abkhazia, where de facto officials are unable to participate in political and cultural events on the international stage because of visa denials when traveling on Abkhaz passports.”

There might be some companies that just want to do business with Abkhazia for the sake of doing business and disregard the blockade. If this is the case, and the company has no permission from the Georgian government, then that company faces a fine from the [Georgian] government. There are no state-sponsored companies working in Abkhazia. It would be a great legal problem.²¹

While the number of Turkish companies investing in Abkhazia could arguably increase even further if the recognition-related problems are circumvented, inter-party commerce seems to be growing despite current conditions. While there is not enough reliable data to back up the claim that trade has increased between Turkey and Abkhazia since 2008, Argun Başkan, a researcher with the Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey, argues that Russia recognized Abkhazia’s independence, economic and cultural ties between Turkey and Abkhazia have greatly increased.²²

In 2012, the Georgian coast guard detention of two Turkish cargo vessels in the Abkhaz section of Georgian territorial waters made headlines, but this constitutes

19 Personal Interview with Levent Murat Burhan, Turkish Ambassador to Georgia, Turkish Embassy in Tbilisi, 6 July 2011.

20 Levent Murat Burhan (2011).

21 Author’s Interview with Temur Kekelidze, Deputy Minister at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Georgia, 10 July 2011.

22 “Turkish Investment and Trade Booms in Abkhazia,” *Tabula*, 1 April 2011, <http://en.tabula.ge/article-3573.html>

“While Georgia and the international community consider the Russian troops stationed in Abkhazia as occupying ‘Georgian territory,’ many Abkhaz and their *de facto* government views the Russian military presence as ‘providing security’.”

just a small fraction of such detentions. In the period between 1999 and 2009, the Georgian coastguard captured more than 60 Turkish cargo vessels.²³ Gogua stated that Georgians now detain fewer Turkish vessels than previously. According to the *de facto* Abkhazia Foreign Ministry, after Turkey’s Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu visited Georgia on 27-28 March 2013, the number of detained ships decreased. In the first half of 2013, there were only three ship detentions by the Georgian coast guard. What makes these detentions different, according to the Ministry, is that they occurred in international waters instead of Georgia’s territorial waters, which violates the 1982 UN resolution on piracy.²⁴

On the Turkish side, the increase in trade stems from two factors: (1) the number of Turkish nationals of Abkhazian descent who view post-2008 Abkhazia as a potential location to start a business and strengthen ties to their homeland, and (2) the pressure on Ankara from Abkhaz diaspora organizations such as the Caucasus-Abkhazia Solidarity Committee (*Kafkas-Abhazya Dayanışma Komitesi* in Turkish, or KADK).²⁵

Breaking the Isolation

The Abkhazian diaspora and business community of the Black Sea in Turkey are active in their quest to reopen the ferry link between Trabzon (Turkey) and Sukhumi (Abkhazia). The need for this link is justified by the strong human contact between these cities. In solidarity with Georgia, Turkey cancelled the ferry in 1996. At this point, however, it might be a beneficial for Ankara to step in and work with Tbilisi on the opening of the ferry.

²³ *Tabula* (2012).

²⁴ “Statement by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Abkhazia in connection with the seizure of a Turkish vessel Pasha,” *Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Abkhazia*, 16 July 2013, <http://mfaapsny.org/en/information/index.php?ID=1343#sthash.4oluHdQo.dpuf>

²⁵ Burcu Gültekin-Punsmann, et al., “Abkhazia for the Integration of the Black Sea,” *Center for Middle Eastern Studies and Economic Policy Research Foundation of Turkey*, December 2009, http://www.orsam.org.tr/tr/trUploads/Yazilar/Dosyalar/20091216_sayi9_eng_ic_web.pdf

President Mikheil Saakashvili proposed there could be special Georgian customs officials working in Trabzon and inspecting ferry's passengers and goods going to or coming from Sukhumi. Saakashvili stated that "this is doable and the Turks agree with it in principle."²⁶ In fact, Tbilisi has increased the freedom of movement of the Abkhaz by issuing neutral travel documents and identity cards in July 2011. However, the *de facto* Abkhazia Foreign Ministry expressed its displeasure with the alleged "neutral" documents because the country code of the documents still specifies Georgia.²⁷

Diplomatic contacts between Turkey and Abkhazia have also been on the rise since 2008, when the Turkish Ambassador to Georgia visited in 2011, up to the visit from Turkey's Foreign Minister in March of 2013. The following passage from *Tabula* illustrates some of these first visits:

Since Russia's recognition [of Abkhazia], Turkey has increased its high-level diplomatic contact with Abkhazia, twice sending senior diplomats to Abkhazia for meetings with [the former] *de facto* Abkhaz Prime Minister Sergei Shamba in the last two years. After the most recent visit in April 2010, Turkish Ambassador to Georgia, [Levent] Murat Burhan, who was among those who made the trip, said that working groups had been set up to expand bilateral ties between the two sides and that Turkey hoped "to discuss establishing direct trade relations with Abkhazia."²⁸

The diplomatic visits of the Turkish delegation play a role in de-isolating Abkhazia, where *de facto* officials are unable to participate in political and cultural events on the international stage because of visa denials when traveling on Abkhaz passports.²⁹

The *de facto* former Foreign Minister of Abkhazia, Sergei Shamba, stated in an interview with *Asbarez Armenian News* that: "We would like to develop economic and humanitarian contact with Turkey. We request opening of communications and passenger transport. It is a big interest because we are neighbors and we have a big Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey."³⁰

26 "Interview with Mikheil Saakashvili: Georgia's Westward March," *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, Vol.12, No.1 (Spring 2013), p. 22.

27 "Sokhumi Slams Tbilisi's Neutral Travel Documents," *Civil.ge*, 31 January 2012, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=24401>

28 *Tabula* (2011).

29 "Abkhazia: Reactions to Visa Denial," *Unrepresented Peoples and Nations Organization*, 12 April 2007, <http://www.unpo.org/article/6562>

30 "Abkhazia Seeking Turkish Recognition of Independence," *Asbarez Armenian News*, 11 September 2009, www.asbarez.com

Abkhazia's increased trade with Turkey could lessen Abkhazia's dependence on Russia, which is becoming a chronic problem as the late Vasil Tchkoidze, President of Tbilisi's Center for European Integration Studies, argued:

Everything needs to be fixed; infrastructure, education, tourism etc. These regions do not have much to offer and they are emptying out. People are leaving, because there is no chance to succeed there: life conditions are not normal, the economy is not developing, and they are entirely dependent upon Russia for everything. 80 percent of the investments are Russian State owned, therefore nothing develops. After recognition, these breakaway regions are totally dependent on Russia, they were better off before recognition.³¹

Laurent Vinatier, fellow at the Institute of Political Studies in Paris, elaborates on this point, noting that Russia invests rather heavily in Abkhazia by paying pensions, rebuilding roads and the railway, hospitals, schools, etc. Furthermore, Abkhazia is serving as a "large warehouse" for the 2014 Winter Olympic Games in Sochi.³² From the Abkhaz perspective, Russia is doing them a favor, as it is one of very few countries providing assistance, by recognizing Abkhazia, issuing Russian passports to the citizens for travel purposes, etc.

The presence of Russian military forces in Abkhazia is another problematic issue. While Georgia and the international community consider the Russian troops stationed in Abkhazia as occupying "Georgian territory", many Abkhaz and their *de facto* government views the Russian military presence as "providing security", since Abkhazia does not have its own military force. Whether Russians are really supporting Abkhaz independence or whether they are using it to partition Georgia depends on who is asked.

Arda Inal-Ipa, the Deputy Director at the Center for Humanitarian Programs in Abkhazia, asserts that an inside perspective of Abkhazia contrasts starkly with what the Georgian government wants the EU and the West to believe: that Abkhazia is a puppet state of Russia and that Russia controls all the inner workings of the Abkhaz state. According to Inal-Ipa, Abkhazia has several Abkhaz-Russian commissions that discuss bilateral issues and there is a difference between Russian and Abkhaz views.³³ Gogua also backs this up perspective in asserting that Abkhazia is free from

31 Author's Interview with Vasil Tchkoidze, President of the Center for European Integration Studies at the Georgian Parliament, 20 July 2011.

32 Laurent Vinatier, "Between Russia and the West: Turkey as an Emerging Power and the Case of Abkhazia," *China and Eurasia Forum Quarterly*, Vol.7, No.4 (2009), p. 85.

33 Arda Inal-Ipa, "Georgian-Abkhazian Relations: An Inside Perspective," *Meeting Summary: Russia and Eurasia Programme*, Chatham House, 16 December 2011, <http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Russia%20and%20Eurasia/161211summary.pdf>

Russia in the sense that Abkhazia has its own parliament and cabinet. People with Russian citizenship are not part of these institutions.

The paucity of trade relations with the outside world has created many problems for the people in Abkhazia. Economic isolation facilitates the development of a shadow economy, criminality and the impairment of the rule of law.³⁴ Furthermore, isolation reduces the likelihood of resolving tensions between Georgians and Abkhaz. Increased trade and diplomatic relations can potentially provide a proverbial “window to the West” for Abkhazia.

Conclusion

Given that Georgia cannot sever ties with its biggest trading partner over black market trading that goes on between Turks and Abkhaz, and that Ankara cannot recognize Abkhazia as an independent state at this current juncture, what is the way forward?

A solution to this problem is not easy to come by. However, if the situation remains unchanged, it is likely that the stalemate will be sustained as a frozen conflict, from which all parties will continue to suffer.

It seems that despite the political loggerhead, some Turkish business actors of Abkhaz decent will continue to trade illegally with Abkhazia. Therefore, the best suggestion is for Ankara to work with Tbilisi on reopening the Trabzon-Sukhumi ferry link. The stationing of Georgian customs officers aboard the vessels could ensure that the proper customs procedures are being carried out in a way that satisfies Tbilisi’s concerns. Increasing “legal” trade with Abkhazia could decrease Abkhazia’s dependence on Russia over time.

³⁴ Jonathan Cohen, “Economic Dimensions,” *Accord*, 1999, <http://www.c-r.org/accord-article/economic-dimensions-incentive-or-obstacle>