

# A short history of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict from its origins to the 2008 war

Marco Siddi

The origins of the Abkhaz conflict date back from the nineteenth century, when Tsarist Russia established a solid presence in the Caucasian region and sparked the demographic changes that have inflamed the debate between Georgians and Abkhazians up to the present. Russian soldiers were stationed in Georgia starting in 1783, when Georgian king Erekle II signed the Treaty of Georgievsk and turned his kingdom into a satellite state of the Tsarist Empire. Direct annexation took place in the first decade of the nineteenth century; the principality of Abkhazia came under Russian protection in 1809. Russia's control of the Caucasus was consolidated during three wars against the Ottoman Empire in 1806-1812, 1828-1829 and 1877-1878.<sup>1</sup>

Abkhaz princes had preferred Russian to Ottoman rule in 1809. However, by the 1860s relations with the Tsarist government had become strained. In 1864 Russia abolished local autonomies and in 1866 Abkhaz peasants rose in revolt against the reforms of Tsar Alexander II, which emancipated them from serfdom but required them to pay redemption duties for land that they already considered as their own property.<sup>2</sup> Military force was used to crush the revolt in Sukhumi, the main city in Abkhazia. However, the Abkhaz peasantry revolted again in 1877, while Russia was at war with neighbouring Turkey. The uprising was harshly suppressed and the central government decided to punish the peasants by overtly declaring that the land was not their private property, but was held only in use tenure. Most importantly, the Russian government forced more than half of the Abkhaz population to flee to the Ottoman Empire. The Abkhaz expellees left behind much free land that, according to Abkhaz historians, was occupied by settlers of other nationalities, in particular Georgians, Armenians, Russians and Greeks. In 1883 Abkhazia was integrated into the Sukhumi district and ruled by the governor of the city of Kutaisi, located in western Georgia.<sup>3</sup>

Following the collapse of the Tsarist Empire in 1917, civil war raged in Abkhazia and Georgia.

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<sup>1</sup> R. G. Suny, *The making of the Georgian nation* (Bloomington, 1994), pp. 58-64; S. Lakoba, 'History: 18th century-1917', in G. Hewitt (ed.), *The Abkhazians* (Richmond, 1999), pp. 68-83.

<sup>2</sup> Most Abkhazian peasants were landowners and had very loose ties to the lords; Suny, *The making of the Georgian nation*, p. 109.

<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Georgian historians argue that Georgians have always constituted the dominant cultural group in Abkhazia; *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, p. 66; Suny, *The making of the Georgian nation*, p. 109; Lakoba, 'History: 18<sup>th</sup> century-1917', pp. 81-83.

The Bolshevik forces organized themselves in Abkhazia and seized Sukhumi, but were defeated by the Georgian Mensheviks in the spring of 1918. Thanks also to the benevolence of the Central Powers, the Democratic Republic of Georgia, including Abkhazia, was proclaimed on 26 May 1918.<sup>4</sup> However, the new state was to last only as long as Bolshevik Russia was embroiled in civil war. After a short war in February-March 1921, Soviet rule was established in Georgia. An Abkhaz Soviet Socialist Republic was created and joined the USSR as an independent Union Republic; a distinct Abkhaz constitution was drafted in 1925. However, the administrative status of Abkhazia remained somewhat ambiguous. In December 1922, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan formed the Transcaucasian Soviet Socialist Federal Republic. Abkhazia joined it not as a constitutionally independent entity, but through Georgia. In 1931 the new Georgian Soviet leader Iosif Stalin demoted the status of Abkhazia to that of Autonomous Socialist Federal Republic within the Georgian Republic.<sup>5</sup>

During the Stalinist period, the demographic balance changed decisively in favour of ethnic Georgians. In the 1930s, head of the Georgian Communist party Lavrenti Beria promoted and partially enforced the settlement of thousands of Georgians in Abkhazia.<sup>6</sup> The Abkhazians, who had constituted 55 percent of Abkhazia's population in 1897, became a minority in their own land, while the Georgian population became the main ethnic group, followed by the Russians.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the Abkhazians were subject to repressive measures against their culture throughout the Stalinist period. Education was offered only in the Georgian language, any broadcasting in Abkhaz was prohibited and local toponyms were replaced by Georgian names. Although many of these discriminatory measures were abolished after the death of Stalin, the subordination of autonomous republics to union republics left the Abkhaz in an inferior position in terms of access to political and economic decision-making at all-Union level.<sup>8</sup>

Due to frictions with the majority of ethnic Georgians, Abkhaz cultural movements requested integration of Abkhazia into the territory of the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic in 1957,

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<sup>4</sup> Suny, *The making of the Georgian nation*, p. 192; the fortunes of the first independent Georgian republic are described at pp. 185-208.

<sup>5</sup> S. Lakoba, 'History: 1917-1989', in G. Hewitt (ed.), *The Abkhazians* (Richmond, 1999), pp. 89-94; *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, p. 67; Suny, *The making of the Georgian nation*, p. 215; M. Matsaberidze, 'Russia and Georgia: post-Soviet metamorphoses of mutual relations', *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, No. 5 (53), p. 146.

<sup>6</sup> In 1938 Beria became head of the infamous Stalinist secret police, the NKVD. From his post in the NKVD, Beria was able to maintain his influence over Transcaucasia by appointing people close to him to command the three Caucasian republics; Suny, *The making of the Georgian nation*, pp. 262-263; *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, p. 67.

<sup>7</sup> B. Coppeters, 'The roots of the conflict', in J. Cohen (ed.), *Accord: an International Review of Peace Initiatives*, No. 7 (1999), p. 19; D. Müller, 'Demography', in G. Hewitt (ed.), *The Abkhazians* (Richmond, 1999), pp. 235-236.

<sup>8</sup> *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, pp. 67-68; Lakoba, 'History: 1917-1989', pp. 94-96.

1967 and 1977, but Moscow always turned down these demands. However, the Kremlin also made some concessions to the Abkhazians, including over-representation in the local government and administration. In 1978 an Abkhaz State University was opened in Sukhumi, the capital of the Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR), and an Abkhaz television channel was introduced. Ethnic Georgians increasingly resented the privileged status of the Abkhazians in the autonomous republic. The proportion of Georgians living in Abkhazia had risen from 28 percent in 1914 to 45.5 percent in 1989. Nevertheless, they were strongly underrepresented in the political system. In 1990, 67 percent of ministers in the Abkhaz government were ethnic Abkhazians. Moreover, the Abkhazians controlled most of the local economy.<sup>9</sup>

During the crisis leading to the collapse of the USSR, tensions between Abkhazians and Georgians increased. In June 1988, 58 Abkhaz Communists sent a letter to the Nineteenth Communist Party Conference in Moscow asking for the separation of Abkhazia from the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. Popular support for such demands increased. On 18 March 1989 a mass demonstration of 30,000 Abkhazians and 5,000 Greeks, Armenians and Russians in Sukhumi demanded the restoration of the 1925 Abkhaz constitution and the promotion of Abkhazia to the status of a union republic. This sparked furious anti-Abkhaz demonstrations in Tbilisi, which continued for weeks and turned into rallies for Georgia's secession from the USSR. Fearing to lose control of the situation in the capital, the Georgian Communist Party asked Soviet troops to intervene. The latter brutally crushed a demonstration in the Georgian capital on 9 April 1989, killing sixteen people and injuring hundreds more.<sup>10</sup>

The events of 9 April 1989 strengthened the nationalist camp in Georgia and contributed to the escalation of the crisis in Abkhazia. In July 1989, armed clashes took place in Sukhumi over the establishment of a branch of Tbilisi State University in the city. A month later the Georgian Supreme Soviet passed a language law making the use of Georgian compulsory in the public sector throughout the republic; this was badly received in Abkhazia, where the majority of the non-Georgian population

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<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Abkhazia, as “Soviet riviera”, enjoyed a far higher standard of living than the rest of Georgia and was one of the wealthiest regions of the USSR; C. Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars* (New York, 2007), pp. 120-121; *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, p. 68; Suny, *The making of the Georgian nation*, p. 322; Lakoba, 'History: 1917-1989', pp. 97-101.

<sup>10</sup> A. Petersen, 'The 1992-1993 Georgia-Abkhazia war: a forgotten conflict', *Caucasian Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 2, No. 4 (2008), pp. 192-193; Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, pp. 121-122; Suny, *The making of the Georgian nation*, p. 322. Together with the Tsarist annexation of 1801 and the Soviet invasion of 1921, the events of 9 April 1989 became part of Georgian collective memory as a national trauma; U. Halbach, 'The longer “countdown to war”: growing confrontation between Georgia and Russia, 2004-2008', *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No. 10 (2 November 2009), p. 2.

does not speak Georgian. The Georgian Supreme Soviet continued its nationalistic policies by declaring Georgia a sovereign nation in March 1990. In response, the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet proclaimed Abkhazia to be a sovereign union republic and asked Moscow to be included in the Soviet Union as a separate union republic. This act was proclaimed invalid by the Georgian Supreme Soviet, but the pro-USSR stance of the Abkhazians persisted, as was demonstrated by their participation in the all-Union referendum of March 1991, in which 98.6 percent of the votes cast in Abkhazia were in favour of the preservation of the Soviet Union.<sup>11</sup>

Although civil war had broken out in South Ossetia and the country risked to disintegrate, Georgia proclaimed its independence from the USSR on 9 April 1991. On 26 May 1991, the far-right nationalist Zviad Gamsakhurdia was elected president with over 86 percent of the vote.<sup>12</sup> Initially, Gamsakhurdia was able to reach a power-sharing agreement with the Abkhazians. According to the agreement, twenty-eight seats in the Abkhaz Supreme Council were allocated to the Abkhazians, twenty-six to the Georgians and eleven to the remaining nationalities. Since a two-thirds majority was necessary to pass constitutional laws, the agreement would ensure that no unilateral change could be made without the approval of the other main nationality. However, the compromise did not fully satisfy the aspirations of either the Georgians or the Abkhazians and new controversies arose. The Abkhazians were able to secure a constant majority thanks to an alliance with seven deputies of other nationalities and, according to the Georgian side, adopted some constitutional laws without having a two-thirds majority. Consequently, in May 1992 the Georgian representatives left the Supreme Council and the government to establish parallel structures. Nevertheless, the Council continued its work. In July 1992 it restored the 1925 draft Constitution and proposed to negotiate a new union treaty with Georgia.<sup>13</sup>

The ensuing Georgian-Abkhaz talks produced no results. Meanwhile, Georgia had precipitated into a chaotic situation due to internal political strife and the war in South Ossetia. In December 1991 a *coup d'état* organized by the political opposition ousted Gamsakhurdia from power. Former Soviet Foreign Minister Mikhail Shevardnadze was called back from retirement and appointed chairman of the State Council. However, Gamsakhurdia was able to flee Tbilisi and organized armed resistance in the western Georgian province of Mingrelia. Due to rising internal challenges and increasing Russian pressure, Shevardnadze was forced into a ceasefire with South Ossetia. He then turned his attention to

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<sup>11</sup> Conversely, the referendum was boycotted by ethnic Georgians; Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, pp. 123-124; Suny, *The making of the Georgian nation*, p. 323.

<sup>12</sup> Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, p. 126; Petersen, 'The 1992-1993 Georgia-Abkhazia war', p. 194.

<sup>13</sup> *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, pp. 74-76.

the fight with Gamsakhurdia and the crisis in Abkhazia. These two issues became intertwined in mid-August 1992, when a high-ranking Georgian delegation that had been negotiating with Gamsakhurdia's forces was kidnapped and allegedly brought to Abkhazia. Using this as an excuse, 6,000 Georgian soldiers invaded Abkhazia on 14 August 1992.<sup>14</sup>

The war that followed the Georgian military onslaught of August 1992 constituted a period of national tragedy both in Abkhazia, where most of the infrastructure was destroyed and thousands of civilians died, and in Georgia, due to the constant inflow of refugees from the breakaway region. The initial Georgian attack failed to annihilate Abkhaz resistance. In October 1992 the Abkhazians, strengthened by volunteers from the nearby north Caucasian republics of Russia, counterattacked and consolidated their positions north of Sukhumi. Russia's initial attempts to mediate a ceasefire failed. The Kremlin's involvement in the conflict was inconsistent due to the political and economic crisis in Russia, the existence of political factions supporting different sides and the independent initiatives of Russian commanders on the field. In July 1993 the Russian mediation achieved a ceasefire agreement and the following month United Nations Security Council Resolution 858 established a mission (UNOMIG) comprising of 88 military observers to monitor compliance.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the ceasefire was broken by pro-Abkhaz forces in September 1993. Simultaneously, Gamsakhurdia's forces renewed the insurrections in western Georgia. Trapped between two enemies, the Georgians were beaten within two weeks and pro-Abkhaz forces occupied all of Abkhazia, with the exception of the upper Kodori valley. Approximately 200,000 Georgians, constituting almost the entire Georgian population of Abkhazia, were forced to flee the region.<sup>16</sup>

Shevardnadze had to ask for Russian help to stabilize the situation. The Kremlin's intervention allowed him to quell Gamsakhurdia's revolt and avoid the complete disintegration of Georgia. However, in exchange Georgia had to re-enter the Russian orbit. Tbilisi had to join the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), where Russia played a leading role, and sign a military cooperation treaty

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<sup>14</sup> Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, pp. 127-131; Petersen, 'The 1992-1993 Georgia-Abkhazia war', pp. 194-195; Suny, *The making of the Georgian nation*, pp. 327-329.

<sup>15</sup> *United Nations Security Council Resolution 858* (24 August 1993), available at <http://www.un.org/Docs/scres/1993/scres93.htm> (accessed on 10 May 2010); for the details on the provisions of the Sochi Agreement, see *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, p. 77.

<sup>16</sup> Petersen, 'The 1992-1993 Georgia-Abkhazia war', pp. 195-197; Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, pp. 131 and 143, *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, pp. 76-79; Suny, *The making of the Georgian nation*, pp. 329-331.

that allowed Moscow to keep three military bases on Georgian territory. To put an end to the conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia had to sign the Agreement on a Ceasefire and Separation of Forces, concluded on 14 May 1994 in Moscow under Russian and UN mediation, and accept the deployment of 3,000 Russian peacekeepers under a CIS mandate.<sup>17</sup>

The Agreement on a Ceasefire and Separation of Forces established a security zone on both sides of the Abkhaz administrative border, including *inter alia* the cities of Gali in Abkhazia and Zugdidi in Georgia. The deployment of armed forces or heavy military equipment in this zone was forbidden. In addition, the agreement created two restricted-weapon zones, north and south of the security zone, where no heavy military equipment was allowed. The parties had to respect the ceasefire on land, at sea and in the air. The Georgians would withdraw their troops beyond the frontiers of Abkhazia, while all volunteer formations made up of non-Abkhazians would be disbanded and withdrawn. The CIS peacekeeping force and the UN military observers were deployed in the security zone to monitor compliance and were also given the task of regularly patrolling the Kodori valley. A protocol to the agreement listed the functions assigned to the CIS peacekeeping force, including monitoring the implementation of the ceasefire and promoting the safe return of refugees. Point 5 of the protocol specified that the process of achieving a comprehensive political settlement should be pursued.<sup>18</sup> The first step taken in this direction was the creation of a Coordinating Commission to discuss practical matters of mutual interest, such as energy, transport and communications.<sup>19</sup> The UN Security Council endorsed the Moscow agreement and extended the mandate of UNOMIG in Resolution 937 of 21 July 1994. The military observers, whose number was increased to 136, would monitor implementation of the Moscow agreement, storage areas for heavy military equipment and the withdrawal of Georgian troops. Furthermore, UNOMIG was to observe the operation of the CIS peacekeeping force within the framework of the implementation of the agreement.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Suny, *The making of the Georgian nation*, p. 331; Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, p. 131; Petersen, 'The 1992-1993 Georgia-Abkhazia war', p. 197. In his memoirs, Shevardnadze wrote: 'The situation was hopeless. Russia accomplished its dirty plans – the country was on the verge of disaster. There was no alternative. I was forced to accept the compromise: Georgia had to become a member of the Russia-controlled "Commonwealth of Independent States"', E. Shevardnadze, *Pondering over the Past and Future. Memoirs*, pp. 432-433, cited in Matsaberidze, 'Russia and Georgia', p. 147.

<sup>18</sup> *Security Council Document S/1994/583. Annex I: Cease-Fire and Separation of Forces Agreement*, Moscow, 14.5.1994; *Website of the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia*, <http://www.un.org/en/peacekeeping/missions/past/unomig/mandate.html> (accessed on 2 April 2010). (accessed on 11 May 2010).

<sup>19</sup> *Proposal for the establishment of a Coordinating Commission*, in Cohen (ed.), *Accord: an International Review of Peace Initiatives*, p. 70.

<sup>20</sup> *United Nations Security Council Resolution 937* (21 July 1994), point 6, available at

International efforts to mediate between the two parties to the conflict started during the 1992-1993 war and continued thereafter. In December 1993 the Group of Friends of Georgia was created, including France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom and the United States. In July 1997 it was renamed as the Group of Friends of the UN Secretary-General and officially included in the UN-sponsored peace process. The Russian Federation played a crucial role as a member of the Group, as a facilitator of the UN-sponsored peace efforts and as an independent actor. Peace efforts were aimed at reaching a comprehensive settlement, including the political status of Abkhazia, the return of refugees, security issues and economic reconstruction.<sup>21</sup>

Until 1997 peace efforts focused on the status question and the return of refugees. These were very controversial and interlinked issues. A return *en masse* of the Georgian population would change radically the ethnic composition of Abkhazia and inevitably affect the power structure, thereby challenging Abkhaz aspirations. Thus, due to Abkhaz opposition, Georgian hopes to use the refugees issue to influence status negotiations and the prevailing insecurity in the area, very few refugees returned in the years immediately following the conflict.<sup>22</sup> The status issue proved even more complex. Georgia offered a greater degree of autonomy for Abkhazia, but rejected the latter's request to create a confederation that would put both entities on an equal footing in terms of international law and give both of them a right to secede.<sup>23</sup>

The year 1997 saw the appointment of the first Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Georgia, Liviu Bota, and a change in the peace strategy. Since status negotiations had been unsuccessful, the UN-sponsored peace process would now focus on practical issues, namely the return of refugees, the improvement of security conditions and economic rehabilitation. The UN role was enhanced by the creation of a negotiating mechanism that included high-level plenary meetings in Geneva and periodic sessions of the Coordinating Commission in Tbilisi and Sukhumi. Three UN-organized conferences on confidence-building between Georgia and Abkhazia took place between 1998 and 2001, with the support of the Group of Friends of the UN Secretary-General, the OSCE and the Russian Federation as facilitator.<sup>24</sup>

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<http://www.un.org/Docs/scres/1994/scres94.htm> (accessed on 11 May 2010).

<sup>21</sup> *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, pp. 80-81.

<sup>22</sup> The Gali district, close to Abkhazia's administrative border, constituted an exception in this respect: by the year 2000, an estimated 40,000 refugees spontaneously returned, approximately half of the pre-war population; *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, pp. 82-83.

<sup>23</sup> *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, pp. 83-84.

<sup>24</sup> *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, pp. 84-85. On peace efforts in this period, see also Neil MacFarlane, 'The role of the UN', in Cohen (ed.), *Accord: an International Review of*

However, this negotiating mechanism, which became known as “first Geneva Process”, produced only modest results. Living standards in Abkhazia deteriorated further following the decision of the CIS Council of Heads of State (based on a Georgian proposal) to restrict contacts and cooperation between CIS member states and Abkhazia.<sup>25</sup> This situation reinforced anti-Georgian feelings in Abkhazia, which resulted in open hostilities, widespread destruction of the property of ethnic Georgians and another exodus of 30-40,000 people from the Gali region in May 1998. Following these events and the clear failure of the new negotiation strategy, the UN Security Council encouraged the resumption of status negotiations in Resolution 1255 of 30 July 1999.<sup>26</sup>

The new negotiations produced a document entitled 'Basic Principles for the Distribution of Competences between Tbilisi and Sukhumi', known also as “Boden paper”, from the name of the UN Special Representative who supervised its drafting.<sup>27</sup> The Boden paper declared Abkhazia to be a sovereign entity and paved the way for the distribution of competences between Georgia and Abkhazia within a federal agreement. However, since the paper supported Georgia's territorial integrity and did not give a right to secede to Abkhazia, Sukhumi decided to ignore it and declared its independence in October 1999. In January 2001 the Abkhaz side also suspended its participation in the Coordinating Commission.<sup>28</sup>

A period of impasse followed until February 2003, when the official peace dialogue resumed within the framework of the second Geneva Process. The Geneva Process was complemented by the Sochi Process, agreed between Shevardnadze and Russian President Vladimir Putin in March 2003. These two initiatives produced some concrete results concerning the return of refugees and agreements on the non-use of force. Within the Sochi framework, Russia committed itself to repairing the important railway going from Sochi to Erevan and Baku via Abkhazia and to cooperation in the energy sector. However, from 2004 onwards the reconciliation process was increasingly undermined by domestic political developments in Georgia and the changed attitude of the new Georgian government towards its breakaway regions.<sup>29</sup>

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*Peace Initiatives*, pp. 37-41.

<sup>25</sup> Radio Free Europe Newline, 22 January 1996, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1141092.html> (accessed on 11 May 2010).

<sup>26</sup> *United Nations Security Council Resolution 1255* (30 July 1999), available at <http://www.un.org/Docs/scres/1999/sc99.htm> (accessed on 11 May 2010).

<sup>27</sup> *Basic Principles for the Distribution of Competences between Tbilisi and Sukhumi* (2001), available at [smr.gov.ge/uploads/file/annex/annex13.pdf](http://smr.gov.ge/uploads/file/annex/annex13.pdf) (accessed on 11 May 2010).

<sup>28</sup> *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, pp. 85-88.

<sup>29</sup> *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, pp. 88-89.

The new Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili made the recovery of full sovereignty over the breakaway regions of Adjara, Abkhazia and South Ossetia a priority of his administration. In May 2004 Saakashvili succeeded in returning Adjara, a region in south-eastern Georgia, to Georgian jurisdiction. The Kremlin took a cautious stance and helped to resolve the conflict peacefully. The successful reintegration of Adjara emboldened Saakashvili to take further steps in the conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, the conflict with Adjara was very different from those with the other breakaway provinces. In particular, it lacked deep historical and ethnic roots and had never been as violent and brutal as the Abkhaz and South Ossetian conflicts. International forces were present in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These regions border with Russia, which thus had greater interests and leverage there than in Adjara. Furthermore, the methods used to resolve the Adjaran conflict had a negative impact on the credibility of Tbilisi's federal offers to the other breakaway regions: after May 2004, Georgia established full control in the province and made the powers of the local government irrelevant.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, Saakashvili confidently turned to the South Ossetian conflict and used the launching of an anti-smuggling operation as a pretext to send Georgian special forces into the region. Tensions escalated and culminated in the night-time shelling of Tskhinvali and nearby villages in August 2004. Simultaneously, relations with Sukhumi were undermined by Saakashvili's warning that vessels attempting to dock in Abkhazia without Georgian authorization would be stopped by the Georgian navy. His statement was followed by an incident in which the Georgian coastal guard fired at a Turkish freighter. Despite these tensions, an open war could be prevented in the summer of 2004 because Georgian troops stopped their offensive in South Ossetia. Tbilisi feared that a conflict at this stage would undermine the country's economic recovery. However, the crisis left deep scars. Sukhumi withdrew from all talks with Tbilisi as a result of the freighter crisis. In addition, the actions of the Georgian military reactivated the memory of the wars in the 1990s and raised the psychological barrier to confidence-building. Most importantly, Russia was appalled by Georgia's military initiatives, and bilateral relations deteriorated.<sup>31</sup>

The confrontation between Tbilisi and Moscow continued due to Georgia's demands for a revision of the existing negotiation formats and the internationalization of the peacekeeping forces,

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<sup>30</sup> B. Harzl, A. Engl and G. von Toggenburg, *Guidelines and recommendations for EU conflict prevention and management: the case of the South Caucasus* (Bolzano, 2008), p. 33; *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, pp. 11-12.

<sup>31</sup> *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, pp. 13-14.

which were dominated by Russian forces. Such steps would have reduced considerably Moscow's role; however, they were not supported by the international community, which considered Russian peacekeeping operations in the area effective in terms of stabilizing the conflicts and facilitating negotiations. Nevertheless, Saakashvili continued his verbal attacks against Russia. Speaking at the UN General Assembly in September 2006, he accused the Kremlin of “annexation” and “bandit-style occupation” in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>32</sup> According to the Saakashvili government, Russia's contribution to conflict management in the region was “not peacekeeping, but keeping in pieces”. The clearest demonstration of this, they argued, was the awarding of Russian passports and pensions to South Ossetian and Abkhaz citizens.<sup>33</sup>

The peak of the crisis in bilateral relations was reached in September 2006, when Georgian authorities arrested four Russian military officers accused of espionage. Georgia overplayed the incident and expelled the officers from the country in theatrical circumstances. In response, Russia recalled its diplomats from Tbilisi, slapped an import ban on most Georgian products and cut air, land, sea, postal and banking communications with Georgia. Although the Russian ambassador returned to Tbilisi in January 2007 and some of the sanctions were lifted, the incident irreversibly spoiled bilateral relations.<sup>34</sup>

Meanwhile, the conflict in Abkhazia had reached a new peak. The year 2006 saw the last serious Abkhaz-Georgian bilateral attempts to solve the conflict. In May the Abkhazians presented a plan named “Key to the future”; this was followed by a Georgian road map in June. Although the proposals differed considerably in the topics of political status and the return of refugees, some common ground could have been found. For instance, the Abkhaz side manifested an interest in European integration and reducing Russia's influence, while Georgia declared itself ready to find a peaceful resolution of the conflict. However, in the following weeks Saakashvili scuttled the whole process with two controversial moves. First, he demoted the main Georgian officials who had been conducting successful negotiations with the Abkhazians, namely Irakli Alasania and George Khaindrava. Alasania was appointed Georgian ambassador to the UN, while Khaindrava was forced to resign.<sup>35</sup> Most

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<sup>32</sup> 'Saakashvili unveils “fresh” roadmap in UN speech', *Civil Georgia* (22 September 2006), available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=13621> (accessed on 11 May 2010)

<sup>33</sup> *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, pp. 14-19.

<sup>34</sup> The crisis had domestic repercussions in both countries. Saakashvili used it in the domestic political crisis to accuse the opposition of connivance with the Russian secret service. In Russia, several discriminatory measures affected ethnic Georgians, including outright expulsion from the country. *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, pp. 19-23; Halbach, 'The longer “countdown to war”', p. 4.

<sup>35</sup> P. Zakareisvili, 'Georgia's relationship with Abkhazia', in *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, No. 7 (25 June 2009), pp. 7-8;

importantly, in July 2006 Saakashvili launched a large-scale anti-criminal operation in the Kodori Gorge and moved the headquarters of the pro-Georgian Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia from Tbilisi to the upper Kodori valley. The introduction of Georgian forces in the Kodori valley violated the Moscow agreement of April 1994 and induced the Abkhazians to suspend their participation in the peace mechanism.<sup>36</sup>

A period of relative calm ensued, but in the spring of 2008 the overall situation deteriorated rapidly in both the security and the political spheres. The swift escalation of the crises in Abkhazia and South Ossetia took place against a background characterized by rising tensions between Russia and the West.<sup>37</sup> Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that international recognition of Kosovo would have repercussions on the situation in Abkhazia. On 6 March, Russia lifted the economic sanctions that had been imposed by the CIS on Abkhazia in 1996 at Shevardnadze's request. On 16 April, Putin instructed the government to establish official relations with the Abkhaz governmental structures. By the end of May, the Russians had increased their military personnel in the CIS peacekeeping operation by 545 men and sent 400 members of the Russian railway forces to take control of the railway line crossing Abkhazia.<sup>38</sup>

The last attempts to stop and reverse the crisis failed. These included in particular two peace initiatives by Saakashvili in March and May (both were rejected by the Abkhaz side), high-level bilateral talks in Sukhumi and Stockholm in May and June and German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier's peace plan in July 2008.<sup>39</sup> The ambiguous stance of the United States on the eve of the conflict contributed to increasing tensions. On 9 July 2008, only one day after four Russian jets had illegally flown over the South Ossetian airspace, US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice went to Tbilisi and declared that the United States would take very strongly obligations to defend its allies.<sup>40</sup> Although

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'Alasania's UN appointment triggers controversy', *Civil Georgia* (13 June 2006), available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=12813> (accessed on 11 May 2010); 'Khaindrava loses office in slightly reshuffled cabinet', *Civil Georgia* (21 July 2006), available at <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=13120> (accessed on 11 May 2010).

<sup>36</sup> W. Kaufmann, 'A European path for Abkhazia: yesterday's pipe dreams?', *Caucasus Analytical Digest. Abkhazia*, Vol 7 (July 2009), p. 3; Zakareisvili, 'Georgia's relationship with Abkhazia', p. 8; *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, pp. 89-90.

<sup>37</sup> See chapter 2, pp. 15-16.

<sup>38</sup> Zakareisvili, 'Georgia's relationship with Abkhazia', p. 9.

<sup>39</sup> For details on these initiatives, see *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, pp. 31 and 90-91.

<sup>40</sup> M. Schwirtz and W. J. Broad, 'Rice warns Iran that U.S. will defend allies', *New York Times*, 11 July 2008, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/11/world/middleeast/11iran.html> (accessed on 9 June 2010), and H. Cooper and T. Shanker, 'After mixed U.S. messages a war erupted in Georgia', *New York Times*, 13 August 2008, available at <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/08/13/washington/13diplo.html> (accessed on 9 June 2010) cited in *Report of the*

Rice referred in particular to the Iranian threat, such a statement made in Tbilisi amongst growing tensions could have been taken by Saakashvili as addressed to Georgia too. A few days later, the US intervened again in the crisis with a statement of Deputy Assistant Secretary of State Matthew Bryza, arguing that Russia's and Abkhazia's request for a non-use of force pledge as a precondition for negotiations was not acceptable.<sup>41</sup>

In the second half of July 2008, Russia held a military exercise near the Georgian border under the code name "Caucasus 2008". Simultaneously, a joint training exercise involving approximately 1000 US and 600 Georgian troops was performed at the Vaziani base in Georgia under the code name "Immediate Response 2008". While these exercises were taking place, Saakashvili's army prepared for a real onslaught against South Ossetia, where skirmishes and fire exchanges between the Georgian army and South Ossetian troops had intensified. Unlike in the summer of 2004, Saakashvili did not give up the fight. Prolonged training of the Georgian army with Western assistance and large investments in modernizing his forces probably increased his confidence that Tbilisi's troops would be able to defeat South Ossetian forces before Russia could intervene. It was a bad miscalculation.<sup>42</sup>

American officials later claimed that they had no knowledge about Georgian military preparations, despite their excellent relations with the Georgian government and the presence of US trainers in Georgia. Undoubtedly, Washington soon lost control of the situation on the ground. The Russian army had prepared for the eventuality of a Georgian attack and quickly tilted the balance in its favour. The Russians swiftly responded to the Georgian onslaught on Tskhinvali of the 7-8 August and pushed Saakashvili's brigades well beyond the South Ossetian administrative border. The US were unable to prevent the humiliation of Georgia and the destruction of most of its military infrastructure.<sup>43</sup>

The outbreak of hostilities in South Ossetia profoundly influenced developments in Abkhazia. The Abkhaz side introduced heavy weapons into the restricted-weapon zone, in violation of the 1994 agreement, and prepared for an offensive in the Kodori valley. Simultaneously, the Russian Black Sea Fleet and air force transferred 9,000 troops and 350 armoured vehicles to the Abkhaz port of Ochamchira to launch an offensive against western Georgia. On 10 August the offensive took place and

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*Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, p. 46.

<sup>41</sup> *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, pp. 47

<sup>42</sup> *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, pp. 47-48. Between 2004 and 2008, Georgia increased its military spending from 1 percent to 8 percent of its GDP; *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, pp. 29-30.

<sup>43</sup> For further details on incidents preceding the war and military operations in South Ossetia, see *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, pp. 200-211, 214-219 and A. Nicoll and S. Johnstone, 'Russia's rapid reaction', *IISS Strategic Comments*, Vol 14, Issue 7 (September 2008).

resulted in the Russian occupation of the Georgian cities of Zugdidi, Senaki and Poti. Finally, on 12-13 August, Abkhaz and Russian troops occupied the upper Kodori valley, which had been vacated by Georgian forces and most of the local population the day before.<sup>44</sup>

A Six-Point Ceasefire Agreement was reached in mid-August thanks to the mediation efforts of French President Nicolas Sarkozy, who also held the rotating presidency of the European Union. Russian President Dmitry Medvedev signed it on 12 August and Saakashvili followed suit on 15 August under strong US pressure.<sup>45</sup> The Ceasefire Agreement sanctioned the non-use of force, a definitive halt to hostilities and the immediate provision of free access for humanitarian assistance. In addition, Georgian military forces had to withdraw to their barracks, whereas Russian armed forces would be pulled back to the line preceding the start of hostilities. Russian peacekeeping forces would implement additional security measures until the creation of an international mechanism. Finally, the agreement provided for the opening of international discussions on security and stability in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which started in Geneva on 15 October 2008.<sup>46</sup>

However, the Ceasefire Agreement did not end the political crisis. Russia's recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia on 26 August 2008 was harshly criticized by the West. NATO temporarily suspended talks with Russia in the NATO-Russia Council and the EU postponed talks on a strategic partnership until Russia fully complied with the Ceasefire Agreement. Delays in the withdrawal of Russian troops from undisputed Georgian territory caused concerns in Western capitals. To solve this issue, an Implementation Agreement was reached in Moscow on 8 September 2008. The Agreement confirmed the international presence of the UNOMIG and OSCE missions in Georgia<sup>47</sup>, the provisions of the Ceasefire Agreement and the planned opening of international discussions in Geneva on 15 October 2008. Most importantly, it provided for the withdrawal of Russian troops from undisputed Georgian territory within ten days after the deployment of a monitoring mission of the

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<sup>44</sup> *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, pp. 211-214 and 216-217.

<sup>45</sup> The delay in Saakashvili's signature was due to failed last-minute Georgian attempts to change some of the provisions of the agreement in Georgia's favour. Tbilisi was especially displeased with point 5, which provided for an additional security role of Russian peacekeepers until the achievement of an international solution. In addition, the Georgian side was worried about the implications of point 6 for status negotiations, as the Russians were insisting that security in the breakaway provinces was impossible without a final decision on their status. However, Sarkozy and Condoleezza Rice managed to convince Saakashvili that signing the document did not entail an automatic recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. M. Volkhonskiy, 'Medvedev-Sarkozy's six points: the diplomatic aspect of the South Ossetian settlement', *Central Asia and the Caucasus*, Vol 58-59, No. 4-5 (2009), p. 206.

<sup>46</sup> Volkhonskiy, 'Medvedev-Sarkozy's six points', pp. 203-206; *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol III, pp. 587-588 and 591; 'OSCE, UN and EU co-chair Georgia discussions in Geneva', [http://www.osce.org/cio/item\\_1\\_34378.html](http://www.osce.org/cio/item_1_34378.html) (accessed on 11 May 2010).

<sup>47</sup> However, both missions were terminated in 2009 due to Russian vetoes on their prolongation.

European Union (EUMM). The deployment of EUMM was to take place by 1 October at the latest. Furthermore, by that date Georgian troops had to complete the return to their bases. On 15 September, the Council of EU foreign ministers set up the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia, including 200 observers and another 150 members of staff; their deployment was completed by 1 October. Finally, on 9 October the Russian Foreign Ministry announced the completion of the withdrawal of Russian forces from undisputed Georgian territory.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> However, the issue of full compliance by the parties with the Implementation Agreement has been subject to different interpretations and remains contentious to date. *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, p. 219, and Vol III, pp. 593-594; Volkhonskiy, 'Medvedev-Sarkozy's six points', pp. 210-211.