



# REFLECTIONS ON ABKHAZIA

[14 August] 1992-2012

ABKHAZ WORLD

## Introduction

The bulk of the world's ethnic Abkhazians today live in Turkey as part of the North West Caucasian diaspora, their ancestors having lost their homeland as a consequence of Russia's victory in the 19th-century Caucasian War, which ended in 1864. But it was not Russians who were destined to be seen as presenting the main threat to the well-being (or even survival) of the Abkhazians during the eventful years of the 20th and early 21st centuries.

Today, exactly twenty years have passed since Georgian tanks rolled across the bridge over the River Ingur, thereby sparking the war with Abkhazia, which was to last for 14 months and to cost the Abkhazians 4% of their local population, every family in Abkhazia lost at least one of their members — not for nothing has Abkhazian historian, Stanislav Lakoba, spoken of his motherland as lying between hammer and anvil. Despite the fact that Eduard Shevardnadze, who headed Georgia's State Council at the start of hostilities, has acknowledged that the war was "our biggest mistake", Georgia has done nothing to make amends; on the contrary, it has continued to make grave mistakes.

Since the end of the war in September 1993 Georgia has not only done its best to have Abkhazia isolated internationally but has attempted more than once again to essay the military option there, supporting acts of sabotage and terrorism launched from its western province of Mingrelia, which is separated from Abkhazia by the Ingur.

Georgia's final huge miscalculation came in 2008, when, late on 7 August, President Mikheil Saakashvili issued the order for Georgian troops to attack South Ossetia. After Georgia's defeat in

the 2008-fighting, which saw Abkhazia regain control over all its territory with the expulsion of Georgian troops from the Upper Kodor Valley, Abkhazian statehood was recognised on 26 August by President Dmitry Medvedev on behalf of Russia.

Looking, then, at the recent history, we may, without exaggeration, consider the last two decades to be the re-birth of the state of Abkhazia, even if the bulk of the international community (notably the USA and EU) persists in the erroneous belief that Abkhazia's destiny (like that of South Ossetia) can be decided in international discussions from which the Abkhazians themselves are excluded.

This project aimed to bring together different points of view on Abkhazia. The authors were given complete freedom regarding the content of their texts. Their views in this project do not necessarily reflect the views of the AW website. The texts have been listed alphabetically according to the names of the authors.

I would like wholeheartedly to thank all of the following who have contributed to this project by allowing their valuable thoughts to be included on this site.

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## **REFLECTIONS ON ABKHAZIA**

**[14 August] 1992-2012**

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### **Prospects for the survival of the ethnic Abkhazians**

The modern world is not conducive to the preservation of indigenous peoples; they are in ever greater numbers disappearing from the ethnic map. In the first case, we are speaking of those peoples and tribes who do "not fit" into modern civilization, those who have no actual statehood.

The Abkhazians have their own statehood; this is an indisputable fact, for all the peculiarities of its "partial" recognition. However, their own statehood itself does not guarantee the survival of the Abkhazians. Over recent years, influenced by several factors, an aggravation of the problem has been noticeable.

The Abkhazians have lost the former sobriquet of "a reserve of ethnic strength" in the shape of a rural hinterland: the overwhelming majority of them have moved to the coastal area where assimilation-processes are of much greater intensity. Among the urban youth there is a particularly high level of addiction.

The demographic problem is not solved; the birth-rate among the Abkhazians is low; the number of those not entering marriage continues to be very significant, and above all, the fault is that the stronger half does not want to complicate their lives. With the strong growth in the number of male migrant-workers from Central Asia, Abkhazian women have the opportunity for marriage; if this trend grows, the share of the Abkhazian population will inevitably decline. It would be naïve to rely on the assimilation by the Abkhazians of the guest-workers and on the belief that children of mixed marriages will grow 100 percent into Abkhazians. Equally naïve are hopes to solve the demographic problem with the help of returning descendants of the Muhajirs.

The large amount of funds coming from Russia is leading to a rapid social stratification and to the weakening of the sense of ethnic solidarity, which is especially important for the survival of small-numbered peoples.

In the mid-1990s, in one of the villages in Abkhazia I heard a continuation of the story of God, the Abkhazian and the country of Abkhazia. This story is often told: "When God divided the earth among the peoples, he gave the most beautiful land to the Abkhazian, who arrived late on the day of distribution. God was keeping this land for himself, but he gave it to the Abkhazian as a reward for his hospitality, because the reason for his late arrival was that, on that day, the Abkhazian had been entertaining a guest." My Abkhazian interlocutor said that there was more to the story but people prefer not to talk about it, and now few people know about it. But the end of the story was very revealing: "Giving his own territory to the Abkhazian, God looked at him and said: "But if you mistreat this land, I'll take it back."

In the mid-1990s, when the spirit of victory in the recent war was so strong among the Abkhazians, I did not pay much attention to the story. It seemed rather distant from the reality and certainty of the Abkhazians that they are able to solve their problems by spiting all enemies and, if need be, the whole world. It has been a long time since Abkhazia has been facing blockades; Russia's recognition has neutralised the threat of another war with Georgia; generous financial aid issues from Russia. In the mid-1990s, one could only dream of such a thing. But why, in the recent years of plenty and prosperity for the Abkhazians, is not the end of the story of God and the Abkhaz remembered more often?

Like the rest of the world, Abkhazia is changing rapidly. But there is still no answer to the question as to whether the Abkhazians will succeed or not to manage to find their own solution to the problem of their ethnic survival.

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### **ALEXANDER SMOLTczyk**

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#### **First visit to the free Republic: A travelogue from the year 1993**

The entry visa is numbered 000073. No one visits Abkhazia any more, since the civil war the holidaymakers stay on the other side of the border, in the Russian town of Sochi. The border guard hands me a worn piece of paper. It is a letter written personally by Foreign Minister Sokrat Jinjolia in ballpoint, in which he apologises for the 10 dollar border fee: "...introduced the fee to guarantee your safety."

The cryptozoologists had only just left the Caucasus when the civil war erupted in the country of the snowmen. In March 1993 the 'Republic of Abkhazia', until then an Autonomous Republic of Georgia, declared its independence. It was only from the ruins of an Empire itself somewhat surreal that this phantom state could arise.

The free Republic of Abkhazia is not recognised by any other state in the world. It is being ruled by professor Vladislav Ardzinba, an expert on cuneiform scripts and the dead languages of the Orient. The cabinet consisted mostly of co-historians. They are highly educated men and women who have spent their lives studying the origin of the Abkhaz language in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC and the outline of the first Abkhazian-Kartvelian Kingdom. The war has destroyed their 'Institute for Abkhaz language, literature and history', their libraries, ceramic finds and Habilitation records. Everything was taken from them. Thus they became politicians. The institute has taken over the direction of the state, the historians govern their research subject. At least whatever is still left of it.

The coquito palm trees along the coastal road have been perforated by bullets, the tea plantations and mandarin kokhozy are mined. The country appears empty as we enter the capital Sukhumi. Empty like the pillaged shops and factories, empty like the resorts in Gagra and the munition crates along the roadside. 200,000 people, half the population, are either out of the country or dead. Georgians have fled to the south, Abkhaz to the north, Jews, Greeks, Armenians to all four directions.

Cows have supplanted people. They are everywhere. Akin to an army of ghosts the animals occupy the main street, stand chewing next to petrol pumps or in the overgrown gardens of the sanatoria. A dumb chewing army of ghosts.



“The Georgians are gone. Thank the heavens. Now we are among ourselves. Only their cows have stayed.”, says Father Abwa. He admits that there must be more Georgian cows standing on the road than Abkhaz. For compared to the Georgians, Abkhaz formed a minority of 17 percent in the country that was named after them. To blame are Stalin's population transfers. And also the 220 annual days of sunshine. Here life was good. The offices of the entire Soviet Union were furnished with subtropical pot plants and house palms from Abkhazia.

Bograt Abwa owns one of the four remaining taxis of the Free State. The old man cranks his car forward past the impact craters, abandoned checkpoints and cows, all the while talking at his steering wheel. For three months he had searched for his requisitioned yellow Volga, until he found it with an Abkhaz unit: “I needed my taxi. So I offered the soldiers to drive them onto the battlefield. When they accepted, I wasn't sure whether I ought to rejoice.” Bograt and his taxi were present during the battle for Sukhumi and the artillery fighting along the Inguri River. His taxi survived. His friendship with Georgians did not.

Sukhum, formerly Sukhumi, is in a state of resuscitation.

Those who are young and alive sit squeezed into fast cars, screeching through the ruined city. The only license plate attached to some cars is the plaque from the ADAC [German automobile club]. Those who are old and not yet dead wait with their veteran insignia in front of the bread distribution sites or sweep the streets with eucalyptus branches. Many women wear black clothing. At first one thinks it the national costume.

For two years now the pensioners have remained pensionless. Their only comfort: the government cannot afford to pay itself salaries either. No one in this state gets paid. Not the garbage men, not the policemen, not the teachers, not the soldiers, not the war invalids. And still the people work. Or they pretend to. They cut the flower beds of the Lenin street among collapsed walls or they sit behind a forced door fitted with a sign reading 'Minister for the Economy', contemplating a billion dollar oil terminal, for which “only an investor needs to be found”.

A city is being resuscitated. It resembles those brain dead patients whose bodies need mechanical ventilation, periodic turning and stirring, in the hope that, one day, they might open their eyes.

In Sukhum, previously Sukhumi, a city once called Dioskurias. Dioskurias, Greece's daughter, in whose bazaars Armenians, Syrians, Jews, later also Germans, haggled in all the languages of the Levant. For Abkhazia's figs, Georgian wine, pomegranates, tangerines and boxwood from Tqvarcheli, which ships carried as far as Paris, for the construction of the Notre Dame. We wait, and whom we ask why all this had to be laid in ruins, tells us without a trace of astonishment about injustice that dead people perpetrated against dead people.

But why do stories exist? What purpose do the historians from the 'Institute for language' serve, who today govern Abkhazia (because the other elites prefer to do business in Moscow). They have contributed words and reasons to the fight between Abkhaz and Georgians. They sharply watched cultural nuances, worked out divergences in the costumes of the farmers in the mountains, pointed out ancient injustice. In their offices hang maps, covered in spots of Tipp-Ex, because the Georgians – “to destroy the Abkhaz identity” – attached an i to the end of every place name. Gone with the i.

Where did the injustice start for which Dioskurias had to be destroyed? With the Russian Czar, who after the conquest of Georgia tried to exploit its province Abkhazia as a buffer state? After the first Caucasian War, when the Abkhaz were driven away to Turkey? Difficult to say. Only the triggers are

visible. The deeper causes are lost in the mists of history, just like the trail of the Almas, the mysterious snowman of the Caucasus, is lost in the cloud covered mountains of Abkhazia.

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## **AMJAD JAIMOUKHA**

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### **Abkhazia in Our Hearts!**

Abkhazia's independence is sacrosanct, and the freedom and well-being of the Abkhaz people should never be subject to compromise. The long and hard struggle of the Abkhaz nation to achieve independence is an endless source of pride for most Northwest Caucasians, in the Caucasus and elsewhere. Independent Abkhazia is a paragon that is emulated by many Circassians yearning to and working towards the re-establishment of independent Circassia. Despite their factious tendencies and often divisive character, almost all Circassians are united in their unconditional support for Abkhazian independence and the hard-won freedom of the Abkhazians. Persistent and pernicious attempts to undermine the age-old and iron-clad Abkhaz-Circassian relationship are most probably doomed to failure. Circassians who knowingly or unknowingly take part in activities sponsored by those who aim to undo Abkhaz independence, even if they are clothed in the mantle of Circassian nationalism, need to realize that the ultimate verdict of history shall be very harsh and unforgiving.

Abkhazia evokes romantic images of exquisite natural beauty and a refined ancient culture draped in alluring mysticism. Yet the most dominant perception is that of fragility and impending danger; fragility in numbers, in the number of native language speakers, of the political and economic situations, of the cultural and literary heritage, etc. The constant Georgian military threat hangs like a monstrous Damoclean sword ready to mercilessly smite the nascent country in a heartbeat. The perceived fragility of the nation and its culture should be counteracted by solid and effective policies to regenerate and rejuvenate them. The earnest and systematic repatriation of the Abkhaz-Abaza diaspora in Turkey and the Middle East on a voluntary basis must be made a national priority. The Abkhaz language and culture have to be restored to pre-eminence, to enhance their status and reverse the process of linguistic assimilation to Russian. Abkhaz must be made the primary state and literary language. We need a Fazil Iskander who writes his classic works in Abkhaz, not Russian, with all due respect to the national icon. Enlightened modern investment laws must be devised to lure foreign investment into the country with a clean break from the Soviet era shackles and Russian restrictions. In addition, cultural connections must be established with the diaspora and the West to promote the quintessential Abkhaz ethos.

Georgia is waging a fierce media blitz with respect to its conflict with Abkhazia, and it is scoring some notable successes. Some of this effort is directed towards the Circassians in the North Caucasus and the diaspora. This tireless endeavour is carried out in collaboration with a high-profile US think-tank and a Circassian organization in the USA. Unfortunately, some Circassians have been swayed by the perseverant and indulgent attention, "generous" offers, and clever manipulation. The Abkhaz

counter application in this regard is perceived to be weak and ineffectual. The Northwest Caucasian diaspora is practically neglected by the Abkhaz authorities, and the response to Western support for "Georgian territorial integrity" verges on the hostile. The media effort by the Abkhaz state must be upgraded, both qualitatively and quantitatively. The West can be foreseen to keep its unconditional support for Georgia as long as the present balance of power in the Caucasus remains the same. The media strategy in this respect should by necessity be long-term and indulgent. The diaspora must be given due attention and consideration, and should be effectively made an essential partner in the crucial process of reconstruction of Abkhazia. Considerations that have thus far led to the marginalization of the role of the diaspora in this respect must be discarded for the sake of the higher national interests. In return for the unconditional Circassian support for the Abkhaz issue, the Abkhaz state must reciprocate this support with respect to the Circassian issue. Those who seek to drive a wedge between the two twin nations must not be given any opportunity to implement their nefarious schemes.

In its conflict with Georgia, Abkhazia is classically caught between Scylla and Charybdis, which dilemma poses a tremendous challenge to many Circassian intellectuals. Hostile Georgia is doing its best to destabilize the situation in Abkhazia and is uncompromising in its detrimental drive to undo Abkhaz independence. On the other hand, one watches in horror as Abkhazia is being slowly, but firmly, sucked into the Russian sphere – a gigantic terrestrial black hole! Yet, one is hopeful that the Abkhaz nation would be able to overcome the considerable difficulties that confront it. It is a cherished dream that the Northwest Caucasians would one day be able to collectively pave a third way based on common national interest, away from pernicious outside influences. Viva Abkhazia!

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### **Roads to more international recognition for Abkhazia**

Independent of the usual bodies, that legitimately deal with diplomatic relations in this world, every country, every region, can do things to be heard in the international arena. Without a doubt Abkhazia has a right to sovereignty according to the principle of self-determination of peoples. But what good is this observation if in the one case, as with for example Kosovo, it is followed through, while in another case, as with Abkhazia, it doesn't come into effect. Perhaps it is time to consider what can be done on top of and parallel to international negotiations? The political negotiations for better climate protection, sustainability and biodiversity have not led to the necessary outcome either. The United Nations are revealed to be more and more powerless and indecisive, and are no longer able to so solve the problems of this world on their own. Civil society, private initiative, and also the ever more global economy have to make a greater effort, and to show political decision

makers once more that standing still means going backwards and that globally we need jointly supported decisions.

What could this mean for Abkhazia, being a small country in a complicated region? To begin with, it is clear that neither in Europe nor in the largest part of the world, Abkhazia is perceived as a cultural, political and economical unit. That is not to say that Abkhazia is being purposefully ignored. It simply does not lie in the focus of public interest. Almost no one from the west has been there, and the media don't report on a region that is being perceived by many as outlandish, inaccessible and dangerous. As long as Abkhazia is only recognised by and enjoys diplomatic relations with Russia and a few other, less important countries, other roads have to be travelled to lift the unjustified isolation of Abkhazia. For this it is recommended to consider what could interest people thousands of kilometres removed from the Caucasus in Abkhazia, and kindle their attention in a positive way?

Apart from the politics and the issue of international recognition, Abkhazia offers a unique culture, both from a historical and a present-day perspective. Nature has favoured Abkhazia in every respect, and created a biological diversity that is unmatched on a global scale. Abkhazian hospitality is known by far too few people, and is surprising for everyone who takes the trouble of traveling to Abkhazia. And for many outsiders it is remarkable that there is a democratic system in place and that non-governmental organisations play their part in civil society.

A publicity campaign to make Abkhazia known in the rest of the world, would be far too one-sided, and simultaneously expensive and transparent, to draw international attention and especially open-mindedness. Rather, it is upon Abkhazian civil society, people of Abkhazian origin and tradition, living abroad, but also upon academic and cultural representatives, to establish contacts with potential interlocutors, e.g. in Germany. In this, the main concern should not be to lay out Abkhazia's own history, but rather to astonish and excite, with whatever Abkhazia can offer. For example, one cannot expect of the average German or European to choose one side or the other in their disposition towards Abkhazia. Doubts and a lack of information will cause to fail any attempt to win people for Abkhazia's cause, and in the worst case, even provoke a counter-reaction.

What, concretely, can be done? Perhaps one should simply uncover and talk about a few facts: Abkhazia's mountains, together with neighbouring regions in Russia and Georgia, is one of the world's few biodiversity 'hotspots'. Here – as everywhere in the world – nature respects no political borders. Therefore, one possibility is to introduce into the international academic exchange the topic of Abkhazia's landscapes that have been left to nature, and its unique fauna and flora. Globally active conservation organisations will without question adopt initiatives by relevant partners in Abkhazia and can also contribute financial support to concrete activities, like conferences and expeditions.

It should also be worthwhile to let an Abkhazian cultural centre do something for the fame of this country in one or more Western European capitals. Especially multiculturally open-minded Berlin, traditionally Europe's gate to the east, suggests itself. Here audiences are found for regular presentations, talks and debates. At the same time, the contacts thus established can be used to converse with political, economical and journalistic decision makers. For this it is important to kindle the interest of the population, and to not merely operate within the inner circle of the Abkhazian diaspora. From Abkhazia's history and culture, excellent and sometimes surprising connections with Germany and Europe can be established, that can be used as springboards towards greater interest in Abkhazia. For this it would certainly be helpful to develop an English or German travel guide for Abkhazia. It would also be worthwhile if the Abkhazian cultural centre in Western Europe was present on the internet, and in the medium term, this could be financed through the attraction of tourists. The first tourists will certainly not cause an economic boom, but once returned to home,

they will share their impressions with friends and relatives, show pictures and videos, and as multipliers probably spread a realistic-positive image of Abkhazia. Articles in travel and nature magazines will be able to reach a wider audience. And then a good film about Abkhazia, in cooperation with a Western broadcaster, would already be a realistic objective, achieving at once more than years of individual activities. Ideally, these complement each other and promote a positive overall image of Abkhazia, as has been achieved for Tibet since a few decades. Abkhazia also possesses a figure who embodies the desperate struggle for independence in the form of the charismatic first President Vladislav Ardzinba, who died in 2010.

In the end, with a more visible representation of Abkhazia abroad, it should be possible to reintroduce this almost forgotten region into the public consciousness. Deputies and other politicians will gratefully pick up the topic of Abkhazia, when it has freed itself of its obscure image, when reliable and informative information is available and when behind all this stand competent and recognised interlocutors who possess sufficient farsightedness to not get tangled up in traditional friend-enemy thought patterns. On the way to more international recognition, Abkhazia should seek allies and friends, and even talk with its supposed enemies. As a rule, old enmities are surmountable, especially if one recognises the deeper political ambiguities and if one appreciates the fact that we people can converse, even if the politicians aren't ready. For this reason, the friends of Abkhazia should extend their hand to anyone with good will and interested in building peaceful relations in the neighbourhood. Germany in particular managed this very well after WWII, in this regard this example can contribute to lead Abkhazia out of its undeserved isolation, as a first measure of true international recognition.

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**BENEDIKT HARZL**

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### **The need for real conflict transformation in the Abkhazian-Georgian dimension**

The Republic of Abkhazia – sometimes often referred to as „de facto“ or „partially recognized“ - has existed for almost twenty years. Even though it remains, and will most likely continue to remain unrecognized by most of the so-called „International Community“ for the foreseeable future, it has silently but steadily begun to fulfill traditional state functions, it has started to appear – albeit on a very modest level – on the international arena and enjoys fully-fledged legitimacy among its citizens.

Nevertheless, it would be a huge misjudgement to claim that, through its recognition by the Russian Federation in 2008, the conflict story has finally come to an end and that all hurdles for sovereign statehood were thereby surmounted. Much to the contrary, Abkhazia has still very limited access to international bodies (even its participation in the Geneva talks does not happen on institutional eye level with Georgia, but only in the format of so-called informal discussion groups) as well as donor or aid agencies, investments originating from other countries than Russia leave a lot to be desired,

Abkhazians suffer to some degree even from physical isolation since their Schengen visa applications are regularly refused, and not unimportantly, Abkhazia is confronted with the hardly flattering image of being a region occupied by the Russian Federation. Indeed, Georgia has been very successful in portraying Abkhazia and its multi-ethnic population as nothing else but an abulic and manipulated object in the geopolitical adventures of the Kremlin. Tbilisi has equally succeeded in politicizing both the roots of the conflict and its outcomes. Yet, even if it is clear to any neutral observer that the Georgian claim of Russian „occupation“ of Abkhazia is objectively and legally incorrect, even if it is also clear that official Georgian state strategies for engagement with Abkhazia are designed primarily for international audiences since they fail to deliver any serious results on the ground, one has to conclude that since 2008 the conflict transpired from a Georgian-Abkhazian conflict into an international confrontation, with Russia and Georgia at loggerheads. And this development is potentially depriving Abkhazia of its own room for manoeuvre and indeed, the concern of growing Russian influence in Abkhazia is even shared by many Abkhaz as well.

Therefore, and apart from the fact that it is only Abkhazia and Georgia which will have to find a solution alone, the International Community – and most importantly – the European Union would be well advised to help to re-transform the logic and the discourse of this confrontation back into a Abkhazian-Georgian dimension. Much has already been said, written and published in this context about possible policies of „engagement without recognition“ towards Abkhazia which require innovative approaches, some level imaginary power and most importantly realistic assessments based on pragmatic attitudes. However, to carry out these ideas, Europe has to understand that it can not provide assistance in conflict resolution if its actions always need to be either approved or directly requested by Tbilisi. A policy of engagement without recognition has to be an independent approach without any interventions by third parties – the case of EU-Northern Cyprus engagement could provide some valuable lessons. This approach will of course not bring the conflict to an end – but it can serve as an invaluable complementary instrument for transforming a conflict, of which both Abkhazians and Georgians are suffering until today, and can hence provide incentives for future negotiation mechanisms. And indeed, this is not only for the sake of inter-regional stability in the South Caucasus, it is important in terms of the credibility of the EU as strong international actor.

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**CAROL WEAVER**

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### **Abkhazia and the Black Sea Region**

For around twenty years the international community has attempted to ‘resolve’ the ‘frozen conflicts’ of the Black Sea region so that all of the people might live in peace, be able to communicate with each other, trade with each other, join international organizations and be subject to international law. However, ‘resolution’ often focuses on issues such as ‘territorial integrity’, ‘self-determination’ and ‘international recognition’ in order to agree on status.

But perhaps the reverse needs to be done. If ordinary people could begin to trust each other again, participate in civil society and travel freely, then eventually the issue of status could be determined more easily by younger generations. Currently there only seems to be deadlock, especially where the South Caucasus conflict regions are concerned, and continuing to isolate communities cannot help the situation.

In many respects, Abkhazia is the 'breakaway' region of the Black Sea most able to maintain autonomy regardless of status. It has a long history, a beautiful coastline and reasonably appropriate political structures. However, its isolation from Georgia as well as from other Black Sea and EU countries or organizations can only make Abkhazia more dependent on Russia, leading to a kind of paradox if its desire is independence. Issues of crime and corruption will not be resolved easily either as long as there is isolation.

Rather than focusing on whether Abkhazia is an independent country, or an autonomous region of Georgia, or an almost *de facto* member of the Russian Federation, could it not just be considered, temporarily, as an active member of the wider Black Sea region and, as such, join in regional activities? In a recent, jointly-written, policy brief I proposed that a democratically elected Black Sea parliamentary assembly, which had, as members, not state deputies but multiple constituency representatives, could be one way of creating a forum for all people of the wider region without necessarily resolving status first. This parliamentary assembly could be a development of the existing BSEC parliamentary assembly, an extended Euronest, or a newly created assembly, provided that all people from all Black Sea regions were represented and had a forum for being heard.

See: <http://www.khas.edu.tr/cms/abaum/dosyalar/files/CIESPpolicyBrief01.pdf>

**Dr Carol Weaver**, University of Leicester, UK -

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### **CEM ÖZDEMİR**

GERMANY

As all people in the world the inhabitants of the Caucasus deserve a peaceful and democratic world as well. The Caucasus is not only ethnically diverse, but also rich of nature.

A nature that is underthreat through the Olympic Games and unsustainable growth. I hope that the people of Abkhazia find a way to live in good neighborhood with Georgia and Russia that allows them to find a solution for their final status that is accepted by everybody in the region.

**Cem Özdemir**, Co-chairman of the German political party Alliance '90/The Greens. GERMANY -

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## **CHARLES KING**

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Borjomi, as any visitor to Eurasia knows, is the highly flavored mineral water produced in Georgia's Borjomi-Kharagauli National Park, located in the mountains stretching south toward Turkey and Armenia. The park's natural springs yield a metallic liquid that was probably the most celebrated non-alcoholic drink in the entire Soviet Union, usually taken with a slice of lemon. Although it is credited with curing any ailment from indigestion to halitosis, some people—myself included—find it undrinkable.

A glass of Borjomi was sitting on the table when I interviewed Eduard Shevardnadze in Tbilisi in the summer of 2004, and that glass proved to be the subject of considerable interest a few weeks later when I found myself in Abkhazia.

In Sukhum my hosts were a kind Abkhaz couple, who opened their home and introduced me to the marvel of strong morning coffee served with a dollop of evaporated milk. During the Georgian-Abkhaz war, they had fled when the Georgian army invaded. After the fighting stopped, they returned home to find their house ransacked. They were convinced that the perpetrators were their ethnic Georgian neighbors, who had also fled when the Abkhaz recaptured the area.

On my first evening with the family, I casually mentioned that I had talked with Shevardnadze only a few days earlier. Their faces dropped. The husband of the household rose and went outside. I heard him calling to a young boy and sending him on some errand.

In a few minutes, the boy returned with several friends and neighbors. I was asked to recount my meeting with Shevardnadze, beginning at the top and not skipping a thing. I told them what he looked like, his views on the Rose Revolution, and his sense of remorse about the Abkhaz war.

"What did he offer you?" one of the neighbors suddenly asked.

"You mean to eat and drink?" I said. "Well, a glass of Borjomi."

The small group erupted with loud laughter and hand claps.

"You see, that's why we can never live with the Georgians again," one of my hosts said.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Obviously," he said, "no Abkhaz would talk to you for two hours and offer you no more than a glass of Borjomi!"

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### **Abkhazia 1992-2012, Transition Towards a Stable Republic**

After the cease fire agreement between the Abkhaz government, signed by president Ardzinba, Russian President Yeltsin and Georgian president Shevardnadze, in September 1992 and again in October 1992, the state building process of Abkhazia started off. Abkhazia already had its own president (chairman of the Supreme Soviet), parliament (Supreme Soviet), and constitution, which referred to its status as an ASSR in the Soviet Union. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union Georgia temporarily used the Constitution of 1921 which did not regulate the status of Abkhazia, while Abkhazia temporarily used the constitution of 1925.

Now Abkhazia also had to transform itself into a republic based on Western European values such as human rights and the rule of law. A new constitution was drafted, which went into force on 24 November 1994. In article 1 the constitution provided for sovereignty. The constitution was based on the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Abkhazia kept its geographical organization in six provinces and seven districts (article 4), and the republic installed a presidential system, giving the president considerable power. Elections would be organized according to the European system of multiparty democracy. Voting went through proportional representation and coalition governments were possible. A Central Election Committee was established, which is responsible for the organization of elections in Abkhazia. In addition, the Supreme Court can judge in cases concerning conflict over the outcome of elections, conform article 73 (3) Constitution of Abkhazia.

#### *Elections*

Over the last twenty years political parties, advocacy groups and NGOs in Abkhazia have gone through considerable development. The government is faced with opposition groups in parliament. It is not predetermined that the candidate who has the support of the sitting president or the Russian Federation, will win the elections. This is illustrated by the 2004 presidential elections, where there was a very narrow victory for the candidate that was not supported by the sitting president and Russia. The presidential elections in fall 2011 showed that it remained unclear until after the elections how the population would vote. Eventually president Ankvab was elected in the first round with 54,9% of the votes, Shamba, who has been Minister of Foreign Affairs for 13 years, and seemed to do well during the run up to the elections, received 21% of the votes, and Raul Khajimba got 19% of the votes. The independent "League for Fair Elections" has been organised, which comprises of Abkhazian election monitors and their observations have been published in reports. In addition, foreign election monitors have been invited to the presidential and parliamentary elections. An estimated 80 international election monitors from 30 different nations and from several NGOs and INGOs were present.

In the run-up to the elections all candidates received television airtime to campaign. This time was for instance used to broadcast discussions with the audience or political commercials.

NGOs are capable to lobby parliamentarians, as is the case with the gender NGOs, who have supported a specific parliamentarian to be elected. He now advocates gender issues in parliament. Women are well represented in civil society, and in the latest parliamentary elections, several women have been elected in parliament, such as Irina Agrba, Amra Agrba and Rita Lolua.

According to election monitors which monitored the presidential elections in September 2011 and the parliamentary elections in Spring 2012, the preparation of the elections, giving all candidates the possibility to run their campaigns, for example by offering them airtime on radio and television, went according to international standards. The elections themselves were also regarded as transparent and fair. This is good news, especially since not all Abkhazia's neighbors can show a similar record concerning their elections.

### *Parliamentary System*

A question which may come to mind is whether in Abkhazia, as part of a further development of its institutions, there would be room to change from a presidential to a parliamentary system. This will bring democracy closer to the citizens. Most Western European states have a parliamentary system and it is a guarantee that power is shared among all those elected by the citizens. A parliamentary system is also considered as a stronger guarantee that there will be checks and balances, and a division of powers (*trias politica*).

It is understandable that Abkhazia opted for a presidential system in 1994. All its neighbours adopted a presidential system in their constitutions as well (Georgia's constitution was adopted in 1995, as well as Armenia's constitution and the constitution of Azerbaijan). When a territory is unstable, a strong executive will guarantee that the ruling of the republic will not be paralyzed by fighting political parties in parliament. A strong president will be able to keep the country together. Furthermore, when fighting would break out, in many states the president will be the commander of the army. This will create extra responsibilities and power in the executive, in which case a presidential system will assure enough room for action, if needed. The president does not have to reckon with prior approval by a parliament (article 47 (14) Constitution gives parliament the power to decide on matters of war and peace). In a state which still has to acquaint itself with a multi-party system, the president may fill a void which political parties may leave, for example because the system is more based on consensus than on a ruling coalition and an opposition.

Georgia has changed its constitution in 2010 by changing from a presidential to a parliamentary system. This would bring more democracy; give more political room to the prime minister and parliament; and create more checks and balances. There are however voices which worry that president Saakashvili of Georgia will use the parliamentary system to have him elected prime minister after January 2013, when his second term as president expires. It is said that, while serving as a prime minister he would possibly wait until he can run for president again in 2018, using the same system as neighbouring president Putin. In Armenia the plan to change the political system from presidential to parliamentary has been issued as well. According to the Dashnak party, who has raised the plan, it is a way to diversify Armenia's very centralized state apparatus.

Apart from Abkhazia's internal political development, there has also been a development in its foreign policy.

### *Abkhazia's Foreign Policy*

The present foreign policy of Abkhazia can be characterized as 'interested in closer relations with Western Europe, while at the same time having close relations with the Russian Federation'. Under the authority of Minister of Foreign Affairs Chirikba, who took office in October 2011, delegations from the EU, the OSCE and specialized agencies of the UN have been welcomed in Abkhazia to discuss relations. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs was recently reformed to include regional desks and desks covering topics such as consular affairs, a legal department and an information department. Another initiative by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is to create a website in four languages which

will inform the reader about the background of the conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia, as well as give information on the official publications concerning the negotiations between Georgia and Abkhazia. In June 2012 the Czech ambassador to Georgia visited the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Abkhazia in a familiarization visit. The visit reflects an increased interest in the republic by Eastern European states and is a step forward to development of relations. Furthermore, in the past years Abkhazia's relations with Turkey have increased, both politically, with the visit of high officials to Abkhazia, and economically. Turkish vessels, primarily fishing vessels, are frequently anchored in the harbor of Sukhum.

### *Human Rights*

Human rights have been enshrined in chapter 2 of the Abkhaz constitution. The formulation follows the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as formulated by the UN and adopted in 1948. This Declaration has been an inspiration to many constitutions worldwide. The main issues Abkhazia has concerning respect for human rights are corruption and a partially state-controlled media. The Abkhaz parliament has installed a committee on human rights, headed by Batal Kobakhia. Furthermore, Abkhazia has deployed a Human Rights Commissioner, working under the aegis of the president, and the UN has instituted a Human Rights Office in Abkhazia.

Many developments have taken place in the past twenty years, and Abkhazia is showing that it complies with the criteria of a state and a democracy. Given the difficulties of boycott and conflict in the last two decades, this is an accomplishment worth celebrating.

### **Charlotte Hille**

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### **CHEN BRAM**

ISRAEL

#### **From Abkhazia to the North Caucasus: thoughts from the road**

The following lines are some thoughts following my last journey to the Caucasus, in autumn 2011. These thoughts are not necessarily coherent, and they are not "academic" in its narrow meaning. Rather, they bring some intuitions of a traveller, an ethnologist, and mostly – of a person who comes from one conflict zone (the Middle East) to another (the Caucasus). They also reflect both my personal (professional) experience of my visit in the Caucasus and my meetings with old and new friends in Abkhazia and the North Caucasus, as well as the gap between this experience and my impressions from the social and political reality of the area (as I understood it).

Travelling on Abkhazia's roads, one cannot ignore the number of commemorative sites. Most of them refer to the battles for independence, while many also commemorate other bloody events, such as the victims of Stalin's persecutions. In some cases new tablets of remembrance that relate to

both old and new struggles are added to the Soviet commemorative sites for the fallen in World War II. Such an intensive culture of Remembrance is a sign not only of the enormous price paid for Abkhazia's independence but also of the symbolic participation of the people. Similar patterns of remembrance can be seen in Kosovo, as well as in Israel and in the Palestinian territories. In all these cases, remembrance is a not only a state-project but also a "grass-root" dynamic from below. This reflect societies with patterns of "nations in arms", where the conflict serves also as a primary mechanism of solidarity and nation-building. However, the strong cohesiveness that this model mirrors also raises at the same time dilemmas for the building of an inclusive civil society.

A unique pattern in Abkhazia is its multicultural nature, as witnessed by the participation of local Armenians, Russians and people from many other ethnic groups along with the Abkhazians in the 1992-1993 battles in Abkhazia, as well as in the project of building a new state and society. Moreover, while talking with people from different ethnic backgrounds during visits to Abkhazia in 2008 and 2011, I got the impression that, although there are, as everywhere, potential conflicts and mutual stereotypes, the relations between different groups contain also mutual recognition. In this respect, Abkhazian society is not only diverse, it is also an interesting example for multiculturalism. Still, the project of nation-building, which naturally focuses on the revival of Abkhazian culture and identity, has also a "built in" contradiction with such multiculturalism (as in other ethno-national models of nation-building). The question here is not only the possibilities for maintaining equilibrium between these contradictory pools (ethno-nationalism vs. multiculturalism) but also the linkage between this dynamic and Abkhazia's political status and its relations with Russia and Georgia.

Thinking about these issues while travelling from Abkhazia to the Russian Caucasus and the Adyghe-Circassian Republics raises some possible ideas about future scenarios. In Sochi and along the roads travelling north in Krasnodar Kraj (actually in former Ubykh and Shapsugh areas), one sees the huge economic gap between these relatively flourishing areas and Abkhazia. The villages in the small Shapsugh sub-region are also benefiting from such economic development. Circassian culture actually became a resource for attracting buses full of tourists coming to view Circassian folk-displays. Tourism can contribute to a modus vivendi between cultural development and cultural sustainability, and this might be a possible future development in Abkhazia's resorts once Russian tourists will re-discover Abkhazia. But at the same time, the current interactions between Russian tourists and Circassian hosts raise questions about the commemoration of culture, as well as about the orientalist and even colonialist messages that accompany tourists gazing upon "native" folklore-displays.

When one arrives in Adyghea, and more so in Karachay-Cherkessia and Kabardino-Balkaria, many pessimistic thoughts are raised. During the 1990s, the Circassian republics in the North Caucasus struggled with a difficult economic situation, but at the same time there was a burdgeoning of new beginnings in the national and cultural dynamic, new contacts with the Circassian diaspora, and new civil organisations. Only a pale shadow of all these remains. A systematic description of the dynamic in the Circassian republics in the North Caucasus is beyond my scope here, and there are also important differences between the three republics. In all of them, however, it seems that Moscow's policy towards these areas goes hand in hand with corruption, poverty, and in some cases even growing religious extremism (which legitimises moves to establish more intensive control). The dynamics of the Adyghean Republic's "Republic Day" symbolise this: on the surface, this was a multicultural celebration with fine representation from all the groups in the tiny republic. Closer observation, however, reveals how Adyghean culture is pushed a side by Russian and Cossack culture, and, at the same time, the culture of most groups is largely characterisable as a folkloristic reduction. Given this experience, it is no surprise that some Adyghe repatriates prefer to settle in Abkhazia rather than in the North Caucasus. One of them explained it to me thus: "In Abkhazia there is something vivid, whilst in the Adyghe-Circassian republics the horizon is limited." But with the

current geo-political situation, the question arises: can the future of Abkhazia under strong Russian patronage differ from the processes already evident in the North Caucasus?

Many people I met in Abkhazia are dreaming of “special relations” with the European Union; this, it seems to them, is a way to solve the paradox described above, a way to loosen the bear’s hug. This seems to me, however, to be no more than a fantasy: the EU is busy with its own troubles. It is also doubtful that the recognition from Venezuela or Nicaragua or some Pacific islands offers any real horizons for the future. In short, following the 2008 events, Abkhazia’s situation became better as far as its geo-political stand and its position vis-à-vis Georgia are concerned, but at the same time, in the deeper dimensions of culture, nation-building and identity-formation, the situation became also more risky. The realities of the North Caucasus call for a reconsideration of Abkhazia’s possible future place and role, given its position between Russia and Georgia. In other words, sometimes finding a way to re-build relations with your enemy can contribute to the processes of nation-building and strengthening one’s own identity, whilst having too strong an ally (Russia in this case) can also put such processes at risk. Moreover, the sensitive equilibrium between the Abkhazians’ ethno-national project and the multicultural character of Abkhazia will benefit if Abkhazian (and their neighbours) can find a creative way to navigate between Russia and Georgia and to locate Abkhazia in between them and with connections to both of them. Although this seems to be far removed at this moment from any “real politics”, this option should be at list theoretically live, since in other scenarios Abkhazia could easily turn into just another semi-autonomous “native” enclave.

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**CHRISTOPHER LANGTON**  
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### **The Conflict Element of History - Lessons for the Future or a Burden from the Past?**

The constant of history is present in all conflicts. It fuels and maintains emotions which in turn hinder conflict management and resolution. Conflict management itself is hindered by adherence to traditional methods and mechanisms that may have been established in a different era to the present. This begs the question; are they relevant to today's context?

In all management and resolution methodologies there is the acceptance that conflict is part of the human condition and is therefore inevitable. This leads to the thought that in moving towards a better state in conflict and ultimately resolution those involved might focus on what is possible rather than adhering to notions such as 'independence at all costs'. In fact it might be worth reflecting on questions such as; "what is 'independence' in a globalized environment?". "Is it the same 'independence' we thought of when we went to war all those years ago?" " And does our form of 'independence' mean 'freedom' ?"

These are all questions that conflict managers and resolvers can address more actively.

One problem in doing this is the impediment caused by the inability of leaders to break away from the original context in which the conflict started. Emotion and fear of losing material assets and territory are part of this. But while those who 'fight' for this material territory in a basis of no compromise, the context changes.

Alongside a constantly changing context is the far too often fact of unchanging approaches to conflict management. The paths to resolution that are often pursued are suited to the original context in which the conflict is set and not in the context of the present. 1992 to 1994 was a very different age to 2008 to the present day. Yet the attempts to solve conflicts of this type take very little account of change. History and the emotion it carries help to maintain these unreformed attitudes to the detriment of all sides in the conflict and the future of generations to come. So the conflicts become generational and more embedded.

An example of unreformed thinking is the idea that a ceasefire and separation of forces is in some way a solution. Or for some it buys time for them to regroup and establish territorial position. It is not a solution. It can only be a temporary mechanism while other paths to resolution are sought. A ceasefire is by definition, temporary. Yet time and again in conflicts around the world we see no progress beyond this temporary state until inevitably it breaks down and there is a return to conflict.

To break out of this trap there needs to be an understanding that history should be a positive element showing a way to the future and not a mechanism for fuelling subjective emotions that can only be negative. What is important? The improved prosperity of the people of our country in conflict? or the subjective notion of pride that we are somehow 'independent'?

Sadly the ceasefire conundrum is part of the history of Georgia's conflicts. The question, 'how to move beyond ceasefires?' was never answered. So what next? Back to the Future or proactive management?

Is it possible for the parties to take a calculated risk and allow a free return of IDPs? Thus the moral high ground belongs to the receiving party. Or does a stalemate continue to embed a generational trap in the societies involved?

As a philosopher once said:

"If you do not know where you have been, you do not know where you are, and you do not know where you are going..."

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**DANIEL MÜLLER**

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### **Abkhaz democracy and the wilful ignorance of the ‘international community’**

What I find most intriguing about Abkhazia 1992-2012 is its elections (on all levels). Yes, there is a certain turbulence about Abkhazian politics, including occasional violence (I’m speaking of intra-Abkhaz violence here, not of the attacks by armed Georgians mainly in Gal’); but, remarkably, in this beleaguered and tiny nation, there have been a number of closely fought elections, incumbents being turned out of office more often than not, in what seems to be a remarkably free vote, despite the lack of international help and goodwill. Surely this is a remarkable achievement, especially when comparing it with elections elsewhere in the region, say in Georgia and Russia.

The second remarkable aspect surely must be the ignorance with which the “international community” (i. e., the US-led countries, including the EU) approach this conflict. Yes, it is true that Russia (itself very much a non-democratic country behind a thin veneer, much like Georgia incidentally) is the main obstacle to “reunification”, as the Georgians call it. Without the Russian back-up to the Abkhaz forces, Georgia would undoubtedly have found the means to unleash a second full-scale invasion long ago, with a more or less complete genocide (not necessarily mainly physical) of the Abkhaz in its wake. But why is Russia standing by the Abkhaz and the Ossetians when it did not stand with, say, Abashidze, although the strategic interest (Batum) was even stronger there if anything? The answer is that Abashidze was not representative of the Adzhars, who, whatever their misgivings, were not willing to fight for autonomy, and certainly not independence, because they did not fear outright subjugation and destruction as the Abkhaz and Ossetians have every right to. So, the Adzhars (not so afraid and not willing to fight) were key to the re-incorporation of Adzharistan with the Russians standing by, just as the Abkhaz and Ossetians (justifiably very fearsome of what a new invasion would hold for them and very willing to fight, now as in ’92 or ’91 and ’08) are the reason for the lack of Georgian headway in Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia.

So, trying to solve the riddle by pretending this is a two-way thing – tiny Georgia vs. mighty Russia – will not work just as it has not worked in the past. Regrettably it is very likely that the ‘international community’ will stick to its failed strategies, driving Abkhazia ever further into Russia’s arms.

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**DEMIS POLANDOV**

CZECH REPUBLIC

### **The Circassian Factor in the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict after 2008**

The rapidly unfolding events of recent years demonstrate the historical and current importance of the North Caucasus factor in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Georgia's recognition of the Circassian

genocide perpetrated by Tsarist Russia in the 19th century has become a key component of Georgia's new strategy for the peoples of the North Caucasus, and is certainly one of the most important events of recent years. The introduction of a visa-free regime, the opening of the Circassian cultural center in Tbilisi and the monument in Anaklia to the victims of the Circassian genocide were real and symbolic gestures by Georgia that have certainly paid off, in particular, in the form of a pro-Georgian lobby by Circassian activists.

But perhaps the primary reason why Georgia's strategy has proven so successful is not what Georgia has done, but that the Abkhaz authorities lack a strategy for the North Caucasus. Abkhazia had a huge resource in the form of the image of Adyghe-Abkhaz unity that has taken root over the last 20 years in the consciousness of Russian Circassians and Abkhazians in Abkhazia. Add to this the almost complete fusion of Adyghe and Abaza within the Diaspora into a single Circassian nation, and it may seem that Abkhazia's position with regard to the "Circassian question" is unassailable. Nevertheless, this position is currently under attack.

It is clear that the arsenal of a republic recognized only by Russia and a small number of faraway states is limited. The main constraint is, of course, the Russian Federation, for which Adyghe-Abkhaz unity constitutes a problem. It is clear that Abkhazia cannot at present recognize the genocide of the Circassians, or express open support for the Circassian national movement, which is currently demanding the repatriation of Circassians to their historical homeland and the creation of a single Circassian subject of the Russian Federation, or lobbying against the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi.

Thus, active measures by Abkhazia at this juncture are highly improbable. However, the Abkhaz authorities also have problems defending their position. In July of this year, an event took place that could have fundamental consequences for Adyghe-Abkhaz unity. Abkhaz leader Alexander Ankvab, citing ecological concerns, said that he opposes the construction of the Trans-Caucasian highway - the road from Abkhazia to the North Caucasus. Even allowing for all the problems involved in building that highway - how to finance construction (a loan?) and the ethno-demographic and ecological factors - that statement by Ankvab constitutes an abrupt change in the direction of Abkhazia's North Caucasus policy. It is clear that while the policy of previous Abkhaz leaders was devoid of real content, on the ideological, symbolic level communication (including transportation) with the peoples of the North Caucasus was identified as one of Abkhazia's strategic goals. In 2012, Aleksandr Ankvab has now called that trend into question.

Meanwhile, the factor of Abkhaz-Adyghe unity is one of the most important elements of Abkhazia's policy. Relationships with the fraternal peoples of the North Caucasus create conditions for the preservation of a more independent position on the part of Abkhazia towards Russia, they force Russia to listen to the opinion of Abkhaz society, small as it is, taking into account the possible negative consequences in Russia itself. In addition, the Circassian factor affects Georgia, which is a party in the Abkhaz conflict. The factor of Adyghe-Abkhaz unity is an obstacle to the recourse to violence (a new war), and in that respect is the key to a peaceful settlement of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict.

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## **DIETER BODEN**

GERMANY

**Abkhazia** – this rings a variety of memories in me: my first trip to Sukhumi, Gagra and Pitsunda under OSCE auspices in June 1995 when I was struck by an extraordinary beauty of the scenery, but also by the heritage of a terrible war which had left people traumatized. Then, only a few years later, the beginning of difficult work on peace building and conflict regulation under a UN mandate. This is work which has not yet come to an end although the UN unfortunately had to discontinue their presence in the field after the August 2008 war.

I wish Abkhazia and the multi-ethnic people living there that after many years of conflict they will eventually find lasting peace and prosperity, ideally with the South Caucasus becoming part of the European family. As for outstanding political solutions I continue to think that the UN peace plan of 2001 can still be a useful tool to this end.

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## **DOMINIQUE CAILLAT**

GERMANY

### **Abkhazia: Lessons from Israel?**

Having spent many years researching and writing about Jewish history and the Middle-East conflict[1], I am struck by parallels between Israel and Abkhazia. Could these similarities provide useful insights with respect to the South Caucasus?

Hang on: what parallels?!, you may rightly ask. What does the hyper mediatic Israeli-Palestinian disaster, with its ability to stir the emotions of citizens around the world and influence the policies of major powers, have to do with little Abkhazia, which no one outside the former Soviet territories and possibly West Germany can place on a map, assuming one has heard about it at all? How can one possibly compare Israel, with its mighty army and thriving economy, to weak Apsny, which struggles on all fronts with problems mostly inherited from years of communism, war and isolation?

Well, for one thing, the Abkhazians and the Israelis both strongly identify with a history that goes back to Antiquity and even mythical times; and they are both traumatized by a past marked by persecutions and deportations; both feel threatened in their existence and see life as a constant fight for survival; both have won wars against the odds, which have produced – as a result of outright expulsion, spontaneous flight from feared violence or refusal to let exiles return – a significant refugee problem (some have called it ethnic cleansing) of international concern; both will never let the refugees return en masse to their previous homes, for emotional but also demographic reasons; both have to deal with large ethnic minorities in their midst and are themselves ethnic minorities within a larger regional perspective; both depend on the support and goodwill of a superpower; both have large diasporas; finally, Israel has won international recognition but

permanently fears losing legitimacy in the eyes of the world, while Abkhazia has not yet succeeded in its struggle for recognition[2].

So yes, my question is: what lessons, if any, can be drawn from the Mideast?

First, as in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, any negotiations with Georgia should centre as soon as possible on borders. As long as both entities do not agree on frontiers, there will be no significant progress in their relationship, just an existential fear that the enemy is still planning to strike back. Only an agreed border will provide a stable ground for cooperation and, why not – even though it is anathema today to the Abkhazians – the gradual build-up of a larger confederation of two or more States. In other words, first separate, then build bridges. Today the greatest obstacle to the acceptance of borders is, of course, the Georgian government, which has not yet accepted the loss of its former territory. A first step towards agreed borders would be a treaty of non-aggression.

Second, there is no safety in a hostile environment. If the Abkhazians wish to live in security, they will have to overcome war traumatism and negotiate a peace treaty with Georgia, in which compromises will have to be made so that each party may safeguard its honour rather than stand there as a total, humiliated loser. For Abkhazians, one area of compromise could be the treatment of the Georgian refugees. A number of exiles have already been allowed to return to the Gal province, but perhaps Abkhazia could open its doors slightly more, easing up certain conditions of return, particularly with respect to citizenship (see below). For all those, and they are the majority, who will not be allowed or will not wish to return, compensation will have to be paid, as envisaged in every earnest peace negotiation in the Mideast. On a more psychological level, both parties will have to recognize, one day, that violence was not perpetrated by one camp alone. Without diminishing Georgia's responsibility for starting the war and engaging in well publicized acts of violence and vandalism, Abkhazians will have to look into their own actions. Both sides should apologize for possible crimes or at least express regret for the loss suffered by the opponent. In the Mideast too, apologies are deemed a necessary requisite to eventual peace.

Third, Israel is a striking example of a nation that has been systematically acting against its own best interests, obeying ideological principles and bending to internal political pressures, to the point of becoming a favoured target of harsh criticism in almost every international forum. Abkhazia too (like Georgia) often seems keen on self-destructive policies. Examples? Here are a few, at random, since this essay only attempts to start a debate, not to solve it:

- International organisations: Sukhum's policy is to deny accreditation to any institution that is principally based in Tbilisi and is directed from there. I understand the problem and the position adopted by the Abkhazian authorities. But Abkhazia wants and needs to end its diplomatic isolation, it needs to secure for its citizens the right to travel anywhere they wish, it needs the assistance and funds that could flow from abroad, it needs to retain some autonomy from Russia and therefore diversify its international contacts, and it would only benefit from cooperation with international workers, promoting mutual understanding and goodwill. This calls for clever diplomacy, which could find a formula allowing the internationals to do their work without Abkhazia formally recognizing their Georgian status. That's what diplomats do: devise formulas that enemies can live with, so that useful work may be accomplished.

- Europe: Recently, Abkhazia has made harsh statements about Europe and European representatives, constantly suspecting them of bowing to Georgian pressures. True, Europe has seemed over-attentive to Georgian propaganda and made few conciliatory gestures towards Sukhum. But Europe is not anti-Abkhazian. It simply finds itself in a quandary. First of all, even though it recognized Kosovo under special circumstances, it still passionately holds on to the

principle of national integrity, as opposed to the right of self-determination. Present-day Europe is post-colonial and its driving mood is towards integration, not fragmentation. Second, Europe is wary and suspicious of Abkhazia's sponsor and protector, the authoritarian and corrupt Russian leader Putin, a president who learned his life philosophy at the KGB. Abkhazia's embrace of Russia, while understandable – Russia's recognition and funding have arguably saved the Abkhazians from long-term insecurity and poverty –, is not such a good reference. Third, Georgia is in control of the important BTC pipeline: it is a partner that Europe will only be willing to antagonize if provided with overwhelming arguments. So what can be done to encourage the EU to change its position towards Abkhazia? Some ideas – and I am sure Abkhazian experts will come up with many more:

- Passports: Abkhazia has strongly criticized the issuance of so-called “neutral” passports and refused to recognize them. *Prima facie*: logical. But could one look at it another way? How does the issuance of neutral passports by Georgia differ from the issuance of Russian passports by Russia (which Abkhazians have gladly accepted)? Why insist on everyone having exclusively a Russian and /or an Abkhazian passport? Isn't a “neutral” (second or third) passport an elegant solution to an unnerving dilemma? And coming back to the Georgian refugees: I agree that they have to show a basic allegiance to Abkhazia. But why can't they have a double nationality? (In my own family, almost everyone has at least two passports). Let me quote the great George Steiner: *Borders are made to be crossed. Passports should be collected like stamps. Trees have roots, homo sapiens – what a proud word! – has legs. He can, he must go on a pilgrimage throughout the human world. There is a single phrase written in his visa: nihil humanum alienum mihi, nothing human is foreign to me*[3].
- Suchum(i): Stop being obsessed with the correct spelling of Abkhazian names. Yes, the “i” letter at the end of words is Georgian. But only the Caucasians and possibly the Russians really know this. Germans still call Gdansk “Danzig”, Wrocław “Breslau” and Kaliningrad “Königsberg”, without creating diplomatic incidents[4]. What does it matter, how the others name you? Is an extra-letter worth returning incoming mail to the sender? Abkhazians may very well express their irritation, but why refuse to even read the messages?[5] Everything in the world is Darwinian: it's about constant exchange and adaptation, not the frantic accumulation and invention of new, unshakable taboos. Abkhazia is lost to Georgia, and no amount of i-letters will change that.
- Invite the Europeans to Abkhazia. Let them see for themselves. It's such a beautiful, seductive country. Think mediation, not aggression or self-protection. Think of neutrality, not of an army. Model yourself, not on traumatized Israel but on peaceful Switzerland, the country that has built its wealth and security upon the respect of all minorities, which are over-represented in all political instances by word of law. Think of the open Black Sea more than the dense Caucasian forests. Open up like an oyster and show your pearl!
- Work closely with Russia, which seems to be your fate, but make sure you will not be choked in this mighty friend's embrace, or used by it as a pawn to further its own selfish geopolitical interests. Diversify.
- Make sure that the existential need to protect your culture does not end up in the mere revival of ancient rites and patriarchal customs. The universe is Darwinian and so is Abkhazia: traditions are essential, but societies need to evolve. Emancipation is not a dirty capitalist word but a fundamental aspect of our humanity. A society is as free and evolved as its women are. Don't regress, like parts of Israel (and Palestine) are doing.

A final word about Israel, a country which started in 1948 as a miracle but then let its traumas dictate its policies. Now it is sadly in danger of becoming a pariah on the international stage. What a shame, what a loss, a dream turning into a nightmare. Still, many Israelis work at turning the wheel. Invite Israeli academics, peace activists, writers, and let them tell you their nation's story. Why not organize a workshop or a conference about the pitfalls of excessive nationalism, militarism, introversion and fear, and in order to find new ideas and incentives for the development of an increasingly modern, democratic and emancipated Abkhazia?

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[1] *La Paix ou la mort – Dans les coulisses du drame israélo-palestinien*, Labor et Fides 2007 ; *État de piège*, théâtre, Christophe Chomant Éditeur, Rouen 2010 ; *Kidnapping*, théâtre, Christophe Chomant éditeur, Rouen 2010 ; *Proche-Orient: Quel espoir?* Journal de Genève, Geneva 2007; *Leb wohl, Schmetterling – Theresienstadt*, theatre, 1998-2000 international tour.

[2] I will not dwell on the Palestinian tragedy, which falls outside the scope of this essay.

[3] George Steiner's acceptance speech on receiving the Ludwig-Börne-Prize in the Paulskirche, Frankfurt, May 25, 2003.

[4] And think of Cisjordan, which has at least four politically loaded names that define the name-giver more than the land: Judea and Samaria, West Bank, Palestine, Occupied Territories.

[5] Vyacheslav Chirikba: "We simply will not read these letters"  
<http://abkhazworld.com/news/politics/812-vyacheslav-chirikba-we-simply-will-not-read-these-letters.html>

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## **DONNACHA Ó BEACHAIN**

IRELAND

### **Snapshots from Abkhazia: 2001-2012**

#### **First Visit: 2001**

I first visited Abkhazia in May 2001. I had a visiting fellowship with the Civic Education Project (CEP) and was attached to the Faculty of International Relations at Tbilisi State University and to the

Department of Conflict Resolution at the Georgian Technical University. At the time the only way for someone like me to travel to Abkhazia was with the United Nations, which at the time ran a large base in Sukhum/i.

If one could persuade the UN that visiting Abkhazia could in some very general sense contribute to conflict resolution and/or normalisation they would offer a ride in their helicopter. In my case I spoke with a field officer, Rajen Parekh, and submitted a formal application to deliver guest lectures at the Abkhazian State University. My first visit (17-21 May) was to be exploratory in nature, to make contacts and evaluate the possibilities for CEP activity in the region. I would like to have gone earlier but my trip had been postponed when two UN personnel were kidnapped two days prior to my departure. It was partly to avoid kidnappers that I left Tbilisi with the UN at 3 a.m. in the morning and drove to Zugdidi. From there we were given an escort to Gali on the other side of the border and shepherded through first a Russian Army and then an Abkhaz army checkpoint. On meeting representatives of the Abkhazian State University I donated the books I had brought with me, which included 30 publications relating to the EU and 20 books of English literature. The trip back to Tbilisi by UN helicopter provided an opportunity to witness the scale of destruction at first hand. Every second house was unroofed, destroyed by fire, or simply abandoned.

### **Second Visit: 2002**

This first visit had been undertaken with a view to making contact with the university in Sukhum/i. My planned return during the autumn of 2001 had to be postponed due to a deterioration in the security situation. Irregular forces in the Kodori Valley continued to pose a threat and on 9 October, the UN helicopter I had travelled in the previous May was shot down about 20kms from Sukhum/i as it approached the Kodori region. All nine people on board were killed and flight missions were temporarily suspended. My second visit, which eventually took place in March 2002, was to be a more substantial affair during which I made a number of presentations at the university, conducted interviews with local political figures and took field notes. This time the journey to Abkhazia was mercifully short. The night before travelling I went to bed in Tbilisi almost immediately after the electricity was cut off. At the time electricity was rationed to about four hours a day, usually those hours in the late evening/early night. My notes tell me that at 4 a.m. I took the helicopter to Senaki, where we took a break, and then onwards to Sukhum/i.

When I landed I had to stay in a small building as we awaited security clearance. I switched on my phone, at which point the Abkhaz security official, with some degree of pride, told me that my Georgian sim card would be of no use here as no signal could be received. As I idly looked around I noticed four flags were visible – Abkhaz, Russian, Ukrainian and Turkish. I was offered coffee and the local variant of Ravioli and then, as the time passed, vodka was suggested. Eventually, with clearance secured, I was given a lift into Sukhum/i. We stopped for fuel at what was the functional equivalent of a petrol station where I was given three glasses of wine. I had already identified a pattern whereby unless one kept ones wits it would, in the cause of politely accepting offers of hospitality, be difficult to remain sober.

I was brought to UN compound, signed in, and assigned a room. The compound was a real melting pot. The security guards were from Trinidad, the electrician, Gortmunder, from Iceland, and so on. It was a stroke of luck that the head of logistics was an Irishman who gave me a tour of the base and provided me with a tab at the bar. The life of the UN employee based in Abkhazia was not an exciting one so far as I could see. Though generously paid (not least for working in a “conflict zone”) they had little to do in the evenings and were not allowed to leave base after 7 p.m. Most went to Sochi at weekends for entertainment.

## St. Patrick's Day in Sukhum/i

My visit coincided with St. Patrick's Day, which was celebrated with green ribbons, and much wine and chocolates as a computer banged out Enya, Sinead O'Connor, and Clannad. This informal gathering for Ireland's national day took place in the building of AIS (Association Inva-Sodeistvie/Association of Invalid Support)an NGO established for the welfare of war veterans. Most of our party had lost limbs in the war and to this day it remains the most memorable of ways that I have spent St. Patrick's Day. It would have been surprising had the occasion not been also a forum for political discussion. As it early in my acquaintance with Abkhazia, I asked the basic questions. Why did Abkhazia seek to link itself with Russia? "Protection from Georgia", came the response. Abkhazia was too weak to protect itself alone and too poor. They had heard about US troops training Georgians to patrol the Pankisi Gorge and they worried that these trained Georgians might turn their attention to Abkhazia once the work in Pankisi had concluded.

## Shevardnadze Remembers

The day after the St. Patrick's Day festivities I travelled to the university where I was told there were about 1,800 students studying full and an additional 1,200 part time. I met with the university rector, an affable man with shock-white hair who gave me three books on Abkhazia in English. I was introduced to a politics lecturer whom I was told was the only woman elected to the new Abkhazian national assembly, and only then, after a second ballot. Coffee, wine and nuts followed. In the corner of the room a young woman was engrossed reading an English language edition of the UN Declaration of Human Rights. Another politics lecturer, loquacious and animated, strolled in and spoke of his father, then 106 years old, prompting us to discuss the mystery of Abkhaz longevity before he inevitably turned to politics. What did I think of Ardzinba? 'Be careful', my translator cautioned helpfully. I confined my remarks to the biographical details which were well-known and added that I'd heard that he was ill, and currently in Moscow receiving treatment.

The lecturer responded by saying that Shevardnadze was a terrible man and yet received great support and acceptance in the west. Some years later I had the opportunity to meet with Eduard Shevardnadze in his Tbilisi home (the old presidential residence – the Georgian authorities had not the heart to kick him out) for an interview during which we covered the highs and lows of his political career. When I asked him whether he was aware that in Abkhazia his tenure as Georgian Communist Party General Secretary was not remembered with affection, he was unrepentant and reeled off what he felt were a number of noteworthy "concessions" given to the Abkhaz. In particular he cited the opening of an Abkhazian television station and the university in Sukhum/i. 'When you meet with the Abkhaz and discuss this period, don't they mention this to you?', he inquired in a tone that seemed to combine both hurt and surprise. As our time together neared a close I asked him of his regrets. As he looked back on his life, what would he have done differently? The biggest mistake, he said, 'was when Georgian troops were taken into Abkhazia'. He continued:

*... The initial reasoning for this was to protect trains passing through Abkhazia and I had talked with the leadership of Abkhazia before taking that action and I had even offered them that they could use their own troops in addition to Georgian troops to protect the trains. I was not the President then; I was Head of the State Council, I was not head of the military, the head of the military was the person who was head of the troops. And one of my mistakes was when I had the negotiations with the head of Abkhazia I should have flown to Sukhumi then to sit down and talk with him [Ardzinba]. I should have flown there because on the second or third day after they entered Abkhazia the Georgian troops went on to Sukhumi. And back then Yeltsin was on holiday in Sochi and he called me and said 'it's going to be a mistake; they are trying to trap you. If there are going to be troops in Sukhumi, then it's*

*going to be the start of war between Georgia and Russia' Had I been in Sukhumi then, I would not have allowed Georgian troops to invade Sukhumi. That was my mistake...*

All that is now water under the bridge. During those early trips to Abkhazia both Shevardnadze and Ardzinba held their respective presidencies but both their reigns were also nearing an end. In November 2003, Shevardnadze was overthrown in what his ousters dubbed the "Rose Revolution". Ardzinba's second term was hampered by his poor ill-health and infrequent public appearances. The national assembly elections, postponed from October 2001 to March 2002 due to "invasions" of Chechens and Georgians into the Kodori Valley, had sparked opposition protests resulting in a boycott of 16 leading candidates mainly drawn from Aitaira and the Peoples Party. Though it wasn't obvious to me at the time, tensions were rising within Abkhazia between those surrounding the ailing Ardzinba and an emerging political opposition seeking a new departure. The showdown would come two years later when Ardzinba stepped down and his anointed successor Raul Khadjimba was challenged by a popular coalition supporting the candidacy Sergei Bagapsh.

### **Lectures at the Abkhazian State University**

My lectures at the university in March 2002, which took place over a three day period, focussed on a range of topics that included Ireland, the EU, US foreign policy, and politics in the Caucasus. About a dozen professors attended and the presentations were translated by a young man called Maxim Gvindzhia, who would go on to attain high office himself in the years to come. The students – approximately 150 and drawn mainly from the law and history departments – bombarded me with questions. On Ireland they wanted to know more about the IRA, about the roots of the conflict, and the fate of the Irish language. On matters pertaining to international affairs questions that arose included the ways in which Ireland could help Abkhazia. How could international recognition be achieved? How could US foreign policy in the world be understood? Why was Abkhazia's place in international law as it was?

I was brought to the Department of Abkhaz language and literature. Champagne was offered and I found myself in a sea of Abkhaz speakers. Several toasts followed with stories of Abkhaz history and culture. The staff of the department explained the complexity of the 56 letter Abkhaz alphabet and the language, along with an exposition of Abkhazia's literary giants and how the language absorbed loan words from other tongues. The head of department gave me a signed copy of a book he'd written on pirate stories from ancient history. My field notes of the time described the sound of Abkhaz to my ears as akin to "difficult Welsh". Even this does not quite capture my feelings of incomprehension at being confronted with this unique and melodious language that seemed bereft of vowels and consisted of making unrepeatabe sounds punctuated by whistles.

At the conclusion of my final lecture and after I had finished addressing the follow-up questions by those who loitered after the presentation, I was approached by one student who presented me with a wonderful large Soviet-era book entitled "Abkhazia" that was full of excellent photographs. Signed "from Alice" it is one of my prized possessions in my extensive library in Ireland. The gift of the book, quite possibly the solitary copy in the family, epitomises the kindness afforded to me during my stay. The generosity of people surprises me even more now than it did then. Still scarred by the effects of war and only now emerging from a crippling embargo, people in Abkhazia did not have much. And yet no hour of the day was too early or too busy to pause for a toast, a meal, a glass of wine or something stronger. My time there witnessed a continual clash between the Irish conception of the good guest- politely declining all attempts until at least the third offer - with the Abkhaz notion of the good host who would not take no for an answer.

## Political Encounters

I never had to travel far for political discussion. On one occasion, while travelling on one of those rare buses that traversed Sukhum/i at the time I was exposed to twenty lines of Hamlet's soliloquy by a demonstrative man who was introduced to me as Iakub Lakoba, then leader of the Peoples Party of Abkhazia who two years later would mount an unsuccessful bid for the presidency. The highlight though was a meeting with Sergei Shamba who even at this stage had held the foreign affairs portfolio for several years and was a chief negotiator in the conflict resolution processes. As with Ardzinba, Shamba was a historian by profession and had a beguiling ability to answer every question, irrespective of how contemporary, by going back a few centuries and then bringing his answer to the present day. I ended the interview by asking Shamba where he saw Abkhazia in ten years time. He replied that in terms of recognition 'I don't know what is going to happen in ten years and I am not sure about it. What I am sure about is that one day it will happen, that we will be recognized'. As Abkhazia emerged from the post-war isolation and embargo Shamba foresaw increased economic growth. In ten years time, he said, Abkhazia would be a progressive state, socially and economically. Trade barriers would be lifted, investments would increase and, in time, the United States and Russia would reach common ground, facilitating Abkhazia's development.

## The situation today

The last point is moot but other aspects of Shamba's prediction seem to have been largely borne out. Whereas in 2002, there was a fragile hope that things would improve, today there is a rather more assertive optimism that the worst moments have been banished to the past.

Contemporary Abkhazia is a multi-ethnic society where Russian is a lingua franca connecting nations. It is a delicate balancing act to guarantee the rights of all those now living in Abkhazia with a mission to preserve and, indeed, expand the Abkhaz language and culture. The precarious position of the Abkhaz language was emphasised when it was added by UNESCO last year to its list of endangered languages. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, cultural nationalists in Ireland feared that the extinction of the Irish language would produce *Sasana eile darb ainm Éire* (another England called Ireland). I note that Dr Viacheslav Chirikba has recently expressed similar sentiments, arguing that Abkhazia without the Abkhaz would render the country no different from Sochi or Adler. In a book on the state and fate of the Abkhaz language Dr Chirikba has outlined that Abkhaz can either be revived as Hebrew was in Israel or go the way of the Irish language, which, despite generous state support and official status, has suffered from what appears to be terminal decline. While it is tempting to hope for the former, there are grounds to fear the latter.

Finally, the metaphor that always springs to my mind when thinking of the relationship between the Georgians and the Abkhaz is that of a failed marriage. As with many break-ups both sides have differing interpretations as to what went wrong. For the Abkhaz the marriage was an arranged one in which they were not appreciated sufficiently and, as the relationship reached its nadir, was marked by domestic violence. They succeeded in separating and are now waiting for the divorce to be recognised. Georgians tend to have a comparatively nostalgic view of the relationship and stress the duration and warmth of the contact shared over the years. For them, the relationship would never have come unstuck were not the Abkhaz wooed by an interloper who forcibly expelled the Georgians and ensured that any offers of reunion were unattractive. For the Abkhaz the relationship is over; reconciliation can only follow recognition of this fact. Georgians pin their hope on the Russians being removed from the equation so that the Abkhaz see that their interests lie with reintegration. The narratives do not meet - nor can they, for they are mutually exclusive - and so the Abkhaz and the Georgians usually address themselves not to each other but to third parties, hoping



that the message will be communicated indirectly to the other or, more likely, that support will be gained for their position to force the other to accept the inevitable.

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**ELENI SIDERI**

GREECE

**Frozen conflicts, mobility and the future of the Greek-Abkhazians**

Grant and Yalçın-Heckman (2007: 2), argue that the imperial agendas (Russian, Ottoman, Persian among others) deployed in the Caucasus treated the region as an “absent presence”, a view that remained unaltered until very recently complemented by the idea of transition that conceptualized the post-Soviet space as homogenous. In this context, the “unknowability” of the Caucasus contributed to the persistence of older stereotypes regarding an endemic tradition of violence and savagery, nobility, hospitality and pristine beauty. The idea of frozen is not unfamiliar to anthropology. Claude Levi-Strauss (1968) categorized societies into cold and hot depending on their social cohesion and cultural production. If we consider the term frozen conflict in this line of thought, it seems that the latter goes beyond the translation of a political impasse and becomes rooted in a tradition of cultural evaluation and hierarchy embedded in the European history of colonization which the Caucasus took also part in.

A way to start thinking out of the box, though, could be to turn our attention to the historical and more recent mobilities in the region. The Greeks that I met in Sukhum form part of these mobilities. Since the formation of the Greek communities in 19<sup>th</sup> century due to the Ottoman and Russian imperial policies, these Greeks turned Abkhazia into their new home, strengthened by the Soviet Nationality Policy in 1920s. Even the deportation of the Greek-passport holders from Abkhazia and Adjara in 1949 to Central Asia did not stop the Greeks from returning to their land in 1960s in spite of the problems they had to reclaim their properties (Nikolaidi 2006). That is why when the war broke in 1992 their life seemed to have broken into two pieces: before and after.

*The August day was split into two*

*Mourning streets of peaceful villages*

*Burnt in flames villages and cities*

*The seeds of tragedy took roots in the spring land*

(my translation from Russian, Patoulidi 2005: 106)

I visited Abkhazia in April of 2004 with the help of the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia. The organisation of this travel was not an easy task since I needed to engage people from different

countries and positions for crossing some hundred kilometres that separated Tbilisi from Sukhum. The encounter with the Greeks still living in Sukhumi was revealing of the loss they suffered; even those who never had left the country in August 1993 in a rescue mission organised by the Greek Government. The historian of the Greek Abkhazian history Nikolai Nikolaidi in an interview he gave me was adamant. The Greek diaspora in Abkhazia is dead, he told me, since the villages are destroyed and the youth has left either to Greece or Russia, our diaspora is doomed. The trip I went with some of the Greeks to their villages around Sukhumi stressed this impression of loss. What came up frequently in our discussions was the comparison to the past that was idealised: the cosmopolitanism of their city, the pride about being Greek but also Abkhazian, the love for the country and its beauty. In comparison, the present seemed gloomy: most of them, in their middle or old age had lost their families and friends to emigration, dependent economically either on remittances or small pensions from Russia, felt trapped in a country that was changing. However, the important about diasporas is not only their roots but their routes too and this fact makes me more optimistic about their future.

In emigration the memory of Sukhum is cherished. This year in Thessaloniki the Sukhumian Greeks organised a small event in order to honour the memory of their beloved poet Nikos Patoulidi. They prepared videos of the city, before and after the war, they had a live orchestra and singers. What was impressive was the participation of the young people, the children and great grandchildren of those who lived the tragedy. They seemed to share the feelings of their parents and grandparents for their city, but also their pride for their Sukhumian culture. This pride feeds their new identity as Greeks of Abkhazia in Greece. In this renegotiation of their identity the hope for a better future lies. The historical mobilities of the Caucasus do not work only in one direction, inwards, but also outwards, even when the borders are closed and unrecognised. These outwards mobilities, these transnational connections with the wider world could help Abkhazia build its future in a more inclusive way.

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## **EROL TAYMAZ**

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### **Reflections on Abkhazia: A View from Diaspora**

The Adygean-Abkhazian peoples had a long, common history dating back at least to Early Bronze Age. They have lived in their homeland since the time they appeared in the history, and have developed a fascinating culture. They have defended their freedom and homeland against various invaders throughout the history.

1864 is the turning point in the history of Adygean-Abkhazian peoples. After the conquest of their homeland by the Czarist Russia, they were deported *en masse* from their country, and forced to be settled in Ottoman lands, stretching long distances from the Danube River in the Balkans down to Amman in present day Jordan. They have faced with the real threat of physical and cultural destruction after 1864, and their brethren people, the Ubykhs, who shared the same fate with the Adygean and Abkhazian peoples, are now extinct as a result of those tragic events.

The history of Adygean-Abkhazian peoples since the genocide and exile committed against them in 1864 is full of tragedies and heartbreaking stories. In spite of the deportation, oppression and denial of their basic rights, they have survived, and achieved two remarkable successes after the dissolution of the Soviet Union that rejuvenated the hope for their survival. The first success was the elevation of the status of Adyge Autonomous Oblast to that of republic in 1991. The creation of the Republic of Adygea has provided a number of fragile but significant safeguards for the survival of the Adygean people.

The second success, which is very important for the Abkhaz as well as the Adygean people, is the independence of the Republic of Abkhazia. Abkhazians had no alternative but to be independent to survive after they were attacked by the Georgian army in 1992. The aim of the Georgian state was to wipe out whole Abkhazian nation, as Goga Khaindrava, then the Georgian Minister, has summarized succinctly: "[Abkhazians] are only 80,000, that is to say, we can easily and completely destroy the gene pool of their nation by killing 15,000 of their young. And we are perfectly capable of doing that." (*Le Monde*, April 1993) The onslaught of the Georgian army against the civilian people of South Ossetia on the day the Beijing Olympic Games started in 2008 was the final reminder to the world that the Georgian leadership never changes its policy towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia even if the leaders are changed. As a result of the last aggression, Abkhazia is now recognized as an independent and sovereign state by six members of the United Nations, including the Russian Federation.

Abkhazia, with the assistance provided by the Adygean and other North Caucasian peoples, repulsed the military aggression in 1992-1993, and lived under the continuous threat of another military aggression since then. A strict embargo, imposed by the Commonwealth of Independent States, and enforced by the Russian Federation, led to almost complete isolation of the country. Abkhazians were denied their basic rights, were not able to trade, to travel, to keep contacts with their relatives living in the diaspora. However, neither the threat of military aggression, nor isolations had weakened their determination for independence, because they knew very well from their tragic history that independence was, and is, the only guarantor for their survival. Their determination and firm stance led to the recognition of their independence by some members of the international community 16 years after the independence struggle. The process of strengthening independence

and statehood in Abkhazia during the last 20 years makes all of us, Adygeans and Abkhazians living in the diaspora, to be hopeful for the future of Abkhazia and the Abkhazian people.

There is another, and more important process, that makes us hopeful. The peoples of Abkhazia have been successful in building not only a statehood, but also a *democratic* statehood and polity in spite of all aggression and isolation. A simple comparison between presidential elections between Abkhazia and Georgia could provide information on the extent of democratization in Abkhazia. Georgian leadership, since the very first day of the declaration of independence in 1991 has hailed Georgia as a “model democracy” in the Caucasus, a hallmark of Western-style and Western-oriented democracy. Georgia has had three presidents in that period, the first two were ousted by *coups d’etat*. Abkhazia has had three presidents in the same period, too. All of these presidents were elected through free and fair elections, and, in spite of allegations about the “Russian interference” in some elections, the election results reflected nothing but the will of the Abkhazian people. Free and fair elections at all levels (president, parliament and local elections), freedom of speech and organization, respect for all cultures and languages, and flourishing civil society organizations are among some of the indications of the development of democracy in Abkhazia. It is the existence and further deepening of democratic norms in Abkhazia that makes us all to believe in the future of Abkhazia, and the Abkhazian people.

We, Adygeans and Abkhazians living in the diaspora, believe that Abkhazia will never let any power to derail its drive for strengthening independence, and establishing a free, democratic and prosperous country. The diaspora will always provide its support to the Republic of Abkhazia and its people, because the survival of free and democratic Abkhazia is also a *sine qua non* condition for the survival of the diaspora.

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**FERİDUN AKSOY**  
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### **We Call for Sensitivity**

Abkhaz people who have been forced to leave their homeland in a hard period of the history are living scattered among more than 50 countries. They live mostly in Turkey and Syria. And these people have humanitarian problems to which the international public doesn't pay attention.

The civil war in Syria is victimizing mostly our people. Despite its limited financial ability, the Abkhazian State has received more than 100 people and embraced them. While international foundations are lending material aid to the countries receiving refugees, Abkhazia is being deprived of aids on the grounds that it is not a UN member country. However, about 10 thousand Abkhazian living in Syria, because of material inadequacy, are struggling without safety of lives to survive. We hope that humanity won't be sacrificed to politics.

On the other hand, approximately 500 thousand Abkhaz people desire to continue their humanitarian relations with their relatives and fellows in Abkhazia without any obstacles. Our problem is direct inaccessibility to Abkhazia from Turkey. Although there is adequate infrastructure for transportation, we can only access Abkhazia via the Russian Federation with excessive prices because of the partial embargo. We demand the attention of the international public to this problem of ours, too.

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**GEORGE ANCHABADZE**  
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### **Lost chance to avert war**

In the late 80s and early 90s, against the backdrop of the weakening and collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgians and Abkhazians put forward national projects concerning their future constitutional-political arrangement. These projects seriously differed from each other. If in the Georgian models Abkhazia was seen as an indivisible part of Georgia, deserving only of cultural and administrative autonomy, in those proposed by the Abkhazian side Abkhazia was a self-contained unit, free to choose its own path of development.

The start of dialogue between the Georgian and Abkhazian sides was prevented by the constant tension in Tbilisi, where a struggle was being waged between rival political groups which developed in December-January 1991/92 into armed confrontation.

The group that came to power as the result of a violent coup attempted to clarify the position of the Abkhazian side on future relations with Georgia. Ivlian Khaindrava, David Berdzenishvili, Irakli Machavariani and I were delegated to travel to Sukhumi. Having passed through Mingrelia, where armed clashes were continuing, we reached Sukhumi on 2 February. Meetings with the leaders of Abkhazia, including Vladislav Ardzinba, Chairman of the Supreme Council, were constructive in character. There was also a series of informal but very important meetings and discussions. The political environment was conducive to the success of our mission. Shortly before this, the Soviet Union collapsed, and there was already no All-Union Centre to which Abkhazia could appeal in the event of a worsening of relations with Georgia. In addition, we represented the forces who had overthrown President Gamsakhurdia, with whom the Abkhazians had strained relations. It was possible to hope that the new leadership of Georgia would reconsider to some extent the policy of official Tbilisi with regard to autonomous entities.

The Abkhazian side, striving to change the nature of state-legal relations with Georgia, offered to remain within the composition of Georgia on condition of a clear delimitation of the competences between Tbilisi and Sukhumi. At the same time it was stipulated that the issues of foreign policy, defence and finance would be left in charge of the Georgian centre. As for the distribution of competences in other areas, it was suggested that a mixed Georgian-Abkhazian commission be set up for this. However, as a precondition, the Abkhazians demanded to change the country's name to

the "Republic of Abkhazia" (removing the word "autonomous") and adopt a new flag and coat of arms with national symbols, in place of the attributes of the Soviet era. In general, the proposal was for the model: The Republic of Abkhazia in the Republic of Georgia.

I found that the conditions were entirely acceptable, this path did not guarantee a quick solution to all problems that had accumulated over the past decades, but it promised to shift the dispute to the political arena, which would have made it possible to gain time and to create a space to search for a mutually acceptable model. However, when we brought the Abkhazian proposals before the Consultative Council for discussion (the temporary political body established in late January 1992 and renamed after the arrival of Eduard Shevardnadze in Georgia to the State Council), opinions there were divided, and by a majority vote the Abkhazian proposals were rejected. Among the majority of Georgian politicians the idea of compromise with the "separatists" was unpopular.

This meeting of the Consultative Council made a depressing impression upon me. I was convinced that the majority of its members who took it upon themselves to decide the fate of the country were not suitable for this role, lacking political wisdom, experience and relevant knowledge. Some were inclined to the use of forceful methods to resolve the Georgian-Abkhazian stand-offs.

So in February 1992 was missed a real opportunity to find the key to a peaceful solution of the problem. After this, the escalation of tensions between Georgians and Abkhazians began, which six months later led to the transformation of the conflict from the political to the military arena.

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**GEORGE HEWITT**  
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### **A Glimpse into the Abkhazians' Worldview**

The first examples of Abkhazian proverbs to be recorded appeared in the first grammar of Abkhaz, published by the Russian soldier-linguist Pëtr Uslar in lithographic format in 1862. The three he cited were:

*Say little, do much*

*Don't look a gift-horse in the tooth*

*The fish said: 'I would have said a lot, were it not that my mouth is full of water'*

Since those pioneering days, a number of collections have appeared, adding to our knowledge of the genre. The most comprehensive such volume to date is the 2003 compilation by the economist Prof. Oleg Shamba and the late writer Boris Gurgulia, which gathers together from both published and unpublished sources some 8,500 examples, presented exclusively in Abkhaz (i.e. without translation).

Not surprisingly, the man known as the 'Father of Abkhazian Literature', Dmitry Gulia, recognised the importance of registering these cultural gems and published a collection of 394 (plus nine conundrums and six tongue-twisters) in 1907. The following year, in volume XXXVIII of the series *Sbornik Materialov dlja Opisanija Plemën i Mestnostej Kavkaza* 'Collection of Materials for the Description of the Peoples and Places of the Caucasus', Gulia republished the 394 proverbs, but this time there were 11 conundrums and 17 tongue-twisters. His final contribution came in 1939 when he published his 164-page 'Collection of Abkhazian Proverbs, Conundrums, Tongue-Twisters, Homonyms, Homographs, Folk-prognostications of Bad Weather, Superstitions and Spells', which included 1,000 numbered proverbs. This work (in Abkhaz and Russian) came out during the years when Abkhaz was written in the Georgian-based script. The content was reproduced in volume 5 of Gulia's collected works, which appeared in 1985, by which time the orthography for Abkhaz was based on Cyrillic (post-1954), and the Abkhaz material this time was naturally rendered in this Cyrillic-based script; the proverbs in the 1985 publication were not, however, numbered.

The samples of the genre offered below were garnered from the 1939 edition and include the relevant numbering from that edition.

1. One who has lost a goat has also lost the day
36. The death of one whose life is bad is also bad
107. An idiot, when he says nothing, is smart
108. Do for another, learn for yourself
113. Until you eat a pood (40 pounds) of salt with someone, you can't know him
137. One who does evil owns half of it
148. Wealth and happiness do not go together
156. The old man said: 'Would that he who has not witnessed my childhood not witness my old age!'
157. A horse has four legs but still stumbles
173. If a horse dies, it is survived by its field; if a man dies, he is survived by his word(s)
175. Better a good neighbour than a bad brother
206. A good daughter is worth two bad sons
221. One who has not been a guest cannot entertain one
232. One who had no field was asking for seed
236. The trap ensnared the coquettish bird by both feet
240. The one they did not notice seated stood up and made himself known
245. Do not mock one who falls down in front of you

246. Two portions do not fit into one mouth
255. The one who was chasing two rabbits caught nothing
257. You can't carry water far with a sieve
259. If you see a dog, a stick comes to mind
260. A clever foe is better than an idiot brother
263. Boasting engenders boasting
269. If you hold on to a horse's tail, it will convey you across water; if you hold on to a dog's tail, it will cast you in it
272. A lie's foot is short
273. The truth's path is broad
275. Don't stand under a walnut-leaf thinking it to be broad; don't emerge from under a pear-leaf thinking it to be insubstantial
314. Without a child crying, his mother doesn't put him to the breast
326. If you look into milk, you'll always see something black
815. Don't quarrel with water and fire
867. A lie cannot but sometimes shame a man
868. You can open a castle-door without a key by sweet talk
892. The tongue is the apostle of the heart
918. For guarding a beautiful wife you should have seated at home a strong mother-in-law
929. One bad deed wipes out a hundred good ones
932. A pigeon cannot flourish where a hawk has its perch
939. Gold has neither hand nor foot but can do much
944. Rust eats (away at) iron, sorrow (at) the heart
946. What is in a clever man's heart is on the tongue of a drunk
969. If a woman says that she will deploy her wiles, she will deceive a hundred men
984. If you have no neighbour, you must become someone's neighbour



986. An idiot catches a snake by the hand

994. He who eats without having laboured cannot know/appreciate the food's taste

996. If a man blessed with happiness plants a dry stick in the ground, it will sprout leaves

1,000. A girl is a guest for her own home

An example of a conundrum from Gulia's list of 22 would be:

1. That which was born to water, was reared by the sun, and dies, if it sees its mother. Salt

An example of a superstition from Gulia's list of 58 is the following:

55. If, when a man intent upon digging out a well starts digging, he makes mention of a good spring, the water emanating from within that well comes to resemble that spring

An example of weather-prognostications from Gulia's list of 47 (and the title of this section makes it clear that the prognostications relate to both good and bad weather) would be:

4. If fish begin to leap out of the sea, the weather will turn bad

And, finally, an example of a spell would be the following, which was assumed to ward off the 'evil eye':

2. A white skewer struck into a white eye,

A grey skewer struck into a grey eye,

A red skewer struck into a red eye,

A black skewer struck into a black eye.

I cast the evil-eyed one over seven rivers,

I cast him over the seven mountains,

I blew him over the heart of the sea.

The eye of the evil-eyed one is frozen lead,

His foot molten copper.

Thrice does he [the spell-caster] say it, and on all three occasions he blows thrice.

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### **GEORGI DERLUGUIAN**

USA

The non-recognition of Abkhazia, ironically enough, extends to the analytical misrecognition of its taking part in the wave of East European 'colored revolutions' during the 2000s. The scholars studying Abkhazia traditionally focus on the language and folkloric anthropology or the contentious political history and jurisprudence of Abkhazia's relations with Russia and Georgia. In the meantime Abkhazia has been developing surprisingly active internal politics where sparks are flying and a few bullets, too. At the center of this politics, like elsewhere in Europe, is the creation of state capacity — as opposed to the private force and privilege vested in political clans and oligarchic families.

A related process is the forging of national allegiance as opposed to the private kinship, 'friendly', and clientilistic allegiances. Perhaps many Abkhazes (or Georgians, or Armenians) would feel scandalized to be at all questioned regarding their sentiments of being Abkhaz, but what actually happens when an Abkhaz faces a starker choice between state interests and obligations to his relatives? The answer can no longer be assumed. This was proven in the post-Ardzinba successions by the fault lines of internal politics running oftentimes even within the families. This is a fascinating object of study in real time. For the peoples of the Caucasus the institutional outcomes of internal political processes in Abkhazia could have huge import.

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### **GHIA NODIA**

GEORGIA

#### **The Four Conflicts in One**

The conflict in or for Abkhazia is a hostage of conflicting orthodoxies, hypocrisies, and taboos. One cannot be "objective" about them, but one can try to be sober and realistic.

There are at least four conflicts here. First, it is an internal Abkhazian conflict. The ethnic Abkhaz community considers Abkhazia to be the land of the Abkhaz, but ethnic Georgians who lived there thought it to be their land as well. Both sides used historical arguments in order to justify the primacy (or, in the Georgian case, at least equality) of their claims. Other ethnic groups (Armenians, Russians, etc) could not assert historical primacy, but they were legitimate residents of the place as well. This conflict was partly resolved by expelling the Georgians after the war in 1993, but the Georgian state claims they have the right to return, and the international community agrees. There is also a lingering conflict over the status of the Georgians living in the Gali district in Abkhazia. In

addition, Armenian and Russian communities continue to be important players. All these together make long-term Abkhazian-ness of Abkhazia (in the ethno-national sense) problematic.

The second one is between the Georgian state and the ethnic Abkhazian community as represented by de facto authorities in Sukhumi. It is a strictly ethno-political conflict about the status of the territory: Georgia deems Abkhazia to be part of Georgia, Sukhumi authorities insist this is an independent country. Sukhumi and Russia consider this conflict resolved, Georgia and the international community – not.

The third conflict is between Georgia and Russia over Abkhazia. Russia denies Georgia its right to be genuinely sovereign and choose its direction: genuinely independent Georgia undermines Russia's project to be a regional hegemon in the former Soviet space. Abkhazia (as well as South Ossetia) just happened to be the theatres for this conflict: it became fully clear in August 2008 and afterwards, though Russia played an important (if not a decisive) role in the wars of the early 1990s as well. This conflict is still under way: in 2008, Russia failed to change the course of Georgia, but apparently still hopes to have its way. Now Abkhazia and South Ossetia are military bridgeheads for Russia to keep pressure against Georgia.

The fourth conflict is between Russia and the West that exists at least in the minds of the Russian political elite. The former imagines itself to be slighted and squeezed out of its legitimate sphere by the West, with Georgia being the latter's Trojan Horse in its backyard: something Cuba was for the US during the Cold War. NATO expansion – specifically, the project of Georgia joining NATO – is the most annoying expression of this “squeezing” of Russia's power. As the Russian leadership publicly admits, for it the rationale of the 2008 war was to stop NATO expansion. It claims to be successful in that. However, NATO membership for Georgia was not taken away from the agenda, although the war probably contributed to postponing it. Status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia continues to be the point of disagreement between Russia and the West: at this point, they play it down agreeing to disagree, but the issue is still a spoiler. In his second presidency, Vladimir Putin's rhetoric has become even more anti-western. So, this issue is not resolved either.

This makes Abkhazia the ground of four unresolved conflicts. Which of them is more important? It depends, for whom. Over hundred thousand IDPs from Abkhazia who still live in dismal even if somewhat improved conditions have not given up the hope of going back: for them, the first conflict is still the most important one. The international conflict resolution community is focused on the second aspect and is annoyed by the insistence of the Georgian government to shift focus elsewhere. The Georgian government feels existential threat from Russia and is naturally concentrated on it. It reluctantly recognizes that it also has a conflict with the Abkhaz community but the latter is fully submerged under the much more pressing problem of the Russian occupation. The Russian leadership is centered on negotiating its status vis-à-vis Washington and Brussels: Abkhazia and even Georgia are secondary to that. In future, Russia may start looking to Abkhazia more through the prism of its own North Caucasian troubles. For Europe and US, the priority is to avoid new headaches but not to give ground either.

What can one do about all this? I am skeptical about any sizeable progress. 2008 war lead to a deeper refreezing of all the conflicts: it appears that the major actors involved are still not ready to really deal with them. Something very important should happen in order to move us away from this dead point.

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## **IRAKLI KAKABADZE**

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First of all I would like to recall the great initiative of the late Abkhazian President, Sergei Bagapsh, about the demilitarization of the entire Caucasus. I think this was a very visionary statement for 21st century Caucasians: Armenians, Azerbaijanis, Abkhazians, Ossetians, Georgians, Greeks, Russians, Circassians, Chechens, Ingushetians, Karachay-Balkars, Kurds, Aisori, Lezgins, and many other great nations that populate our wonderful region. Since the introduction of Jacobin Nationalism in 1992, we have had many horrible conflicts, because, instead of internationalism, we have blindly followed the idea that led Europe to two terrible wars in the 20th century. Europe itself has said 'no' to Jacobin Nationalism and militarization after World War II. Caucasians have a long tradition of coexistence without petty ethnocentric nationalism. Sergei Bagapsh understood this very well.

Since the Caucasian countries started to militarize and fight each other, everyone has suffered. Big empires have benefited from this and today control the economy and politics in the South Caucasus - that is because of the militarization and ethnic enmity that the recent neoliberal order has created in the region. The great Abkhazian tradition of hospitality is a wonderful proof that people through centuries were able to deal with each other without arms - compassion and solidarity are much more of their human needs than war and competition. Restoring and developing economic, cultural and, first of all, human relationships between Caucasian nations is essential. Adjika and wine are also great tools for this. People sitting around a Caucasian table have always found common ground. To achieve this, it is necessary for Georgians, Armenians and Azerbaijanis to rethink their approach to "Nation-Statehood" and start thinking about a unified Caucasian home, free from military confrontations, where all the minorities will have equal rights, and there will be no 'National Darwinism' in the region. The vision of Sergei Bagapsh for the complete demilitarization of the Caucasus - at least the South Caucasus - is the only way for all of us to live. And it is a much more realistic option than being in constant wars and confrontations.

**Irakli Kakabadze**, Georgian writer, performance artist, peace and human rights activist. Oxfam/PEN Award winner and the author of "Candidate Jokola" the love story between Georgian and Abkhaz. Cornell University, USA. - <http://www.reflectionsonabkhazia.net/index.php/irakli-kakabadze>

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### **Abkhazia: transition to democracy and self-confidence**

Abkhazia is increasingly attracting the attention of people from different corners of the globe. Much of this interest is due to the ongoing ethnic conflict related to the unwillingness of Georgia to give up their illegal and morally corrupt claims to the territory of Abkhazia.

However, we note that the interest in our country begins to extend beyond the long-standing conflict with Georgia. We have become of interest in respect of how society has managed in the toughest conditions to secure in its laws and socio-political practice the principles of modern democracy.

What are the features of the Abkhazian model of post-communist transformation? We shall enumerate the main ones.

Firstly, democratisation in Abkhazia proceeded in parallel with the acquisition of statehood - not simply of a state (the Abkhazian ASSR, as an autonomous republic, according to the Soviet constitution, was a "state"), but the construction of a historically new state-political reality, viz. an independent Abkhazian state. Therefore, if all post-communist countries came up against the famous "dilemma of simultaneity", utterly complicating the transit involved in moving to political democracy, to a market economy and to civil society, the "Abkhazian transit", in addition to these three problems, has been inextricably linked with the greatest challenge, that of "state-building".

Secondly, with the objective of gaining independent statehood is inextricably linked - as cause and effect - the need for an effective nation-building. The multi-ethnic society of Abkhazia changed its composition in the XIX and XX centuries, and it is the demographic factor that has always been fundamental in a number of conflicts. In this sense, "the Abkhazian case" can provide convenient material to verify hypotheses, well-known in political science, about a civic nation being a prerequisite and condition for stable democracy.

Thirdly, it is necessary to take into account the military conflict, which in the case of Abkhazia, plays a system-forming role, affecting all aspects of life, forming a special political and social discourse, and influencing the processes of institutionalisation and the characteristics of external influence.

Fourthly, there are the socio-cultural and structural features of Abkhazian society: small in size, permeated by strong horizontal ties, with a significant component of traditionalist structures and relationships.

Fifthly, transformation in the condition of international non-recognition — the most important parameter of social and political development. With this are linked the particularities of external influence. In the case of Abkhazia, the geopolitical conflicts in Transcaucasia, the absence of an external democratising influence, the "rollover" of the external factor into internal discourses have special significance.

Despite the presence of systemic, institutional and procedural deficiencies, it is possible confidently to speak of the existence of modern Abkhazian democracy. This important thesis affirms the right of the people of Abkhazia to independent statehood.

One way or another, Abkhazia can boast the presence of a viable and vibrant civil society, which is closely monitoring the formation and implementation of public policy, subjecting it to healthy, critical evaluation.

Abkhazia's media enjoy the possibility, rare across the post-Soviet space, of writing anything about anyone, mostly limited to their own ideas about human and professional ethics.

The Abkhazian authorities are maximally accessible to ordinary citizens, being literally within their physical reach: absolutely everyone can personally gain access to the president to express their problems.

Abkhazia's political system has passed the most difficult test of "power-rotation" — political power has been transferred by constitutional means from the ruling élite to the opposition. The elections of the president and of members of Abkhazia's parliament have always been competitive (and often even unnecessarily so), transparent, and with no predetermined outcome, thereby fully meeting the definition of democracy as "institutionalised uncertainty".

Abkhazian society is democratic and egalitarian in nature; it does not have a rigid hierarchy and relations of domination, and preserved traditional structures protect people from the arbitrary rule of the state. Any socially relevant decisions in order to be sound are based on social consensus.

What should be the foreign policy of Abkhazia in order to fit the new realities, both inside and outside Abkhazia?

Of course, after August 2008, Abkhazia took a big step towards strengthening its international legal and political status. The recognition of Abkhazia's independence from Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru, Tuvalu and Vanuatu, all UN member-states, certainly endows Abkhazia with the status of a subject of international law.

At the same time, overall foreign-policy context remains "frozenly unfavourable". We continue to face negative attitudes towards our aspirations and unfair assessment of our achievements from the West. Of course, to represent the West in the form of a monolith would be an unforgivable political simplification. However, if we talk about the official declarations and practical actions of such centres of power as the U.S. and the EU, then it is hardly possible to point to any obvious changes which would adequately take into account the positive processes of the democratic transformation of Abkhazian society.

Unfortunately, the West's policy towards Abkhazia continues to be based on outdated geopolitical and regional schemes and obsolete political approaches. When dealing with foreign representatives one often gets the impression that these people are not empowered to make decisions that run counter to the Georgia's view on current regional situation.

Abkhazian society is increasingly convinced that the West lacks any proper perception of the situation in and around Abkhazia and that Western approaches are merely a continuation of the Georgian interests.

Abkhazia's foreign policy should be based on the principles of openness combined with a thorough account of our national interests. We are ready to collaborate with those actors in world-politics who are tasked with helping Abkhazia to better the lives of its citizens, to facilitate the strengthening of its democratic institutions, to promote the dissemination to the international community of the voice of Abkhazia's authorities and its citizens. Abkhazia will never agree to cooperate with countries

and institutions that will try to impose on us a pro-Tbilisi agenda. We want to communicate with the world, but not at any cost. If such contact is conditional upon control by Georgia, or the necessity of rapprochement with that country, Abkhazia will refuse it.

Our foreign policy becomes more confident as it is grounded on certain internal achievements. That self-confidence, our inner freedom, is something that our opponents, as they fear fire. They want Abkhazia to look like a province with hang-ups, set apart from the whole world. But we are the part of the world, and they have to reconcile themselves with the fact that an Abkhazian independent state and Abkhazian democracy have come into being.

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## **JADE CEMRE ERCİYES**

UK

### **Abkhazia's Diaspora**

On the 14th of August 1992, in Inegol [Turkey], a group of musicians from Abkhazia were performing at a concert in a culture festival when the word of 'war' fell into the scene like a bomb. There was war in the homeland. As the elderly were discussing what action to take, youngsters were already packing up to leave, collecting money and valuables to get passports and tickets to go and fight with their people.

The concert was no coincidence. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, lots of people from the Inegol-Eskisehir region had gone to visit their homeland - to see the conditions for their and their families' return, to find long lost relatives, or just to be 'home' once in a life time. With the connections they and Abkhazians of other regions of Turkey (mainly Adapazari and Duzce) had established; cultural, social and academic visits to the diaspora settlements from the homeland were already taking place in 1991-1992.

The myth of the homeland was turning into a real place of tranquillity in the eyes of the Diaspora through this movement of people. Homeland was where Abkhazian language was spoken in daily life, thought in school, songs in the native style were sang, dances in traditional costumes were performed.

The war changed it all.

The images of war, buildings on fire, women in black clothes representing their grief for their losses, the pictures of boys who went to fight in the war from the Diaspora- becoming martyrs, the words of hunger and suffering replaced the images of the beautiful sea coast and forests of the homeland, with happy smiles on traditional tables of hospitality.

Abkhazia's Diaspora, proved to be not only made of Abkhazians on that day. All North Caucasian Diaspora - mainly the Adyghe, living in Turkey, or the Middle East- united to help the Abkhazians. Some Adyghe went to fight in the war with their brethren, many organized activities to collect money or wheat, or meetings to increase the media awareness of the situation.

Girls followed their brothers and cousins to help as nurses or care takers, and some even found guns and followed the boys to the frontiers.

The Diaspora in Turkey, were organized around 'non-political' cultural associations named first as 'Turkish Solidarity Organizations' in the 60s, and then as 'Caucasian Cultural Associations' and after the 1980 coup d'état as they were re-opening as 'North Caucasian Cultural Associations'. The association in Inegol was first established as 'North Caucasian Culture and Solidarity Association' in 1976. It was officially reopened in 1991 after the 1980 coup d'état. When the war started the Adyghe and Abkhaz taking active role in the organization renamed it as 'Inegol Abkhaz-Caucasus Cultural Association' so that it could directly relate to the suffering homeland, during the war time when it was important to publicise Abkhazia's cause and suffering as well as the fact that there were people living in Inegol who were originally from Abkhazia.

How much influence did the Diaspora had on Abkhazia winning the war and gaining independence is not clear. However, the first president Vladimir Ardzynba knew that it was not possible for Abkhazia to survive without its people, a majority of which was living abroad. He took lots of action to encourage return and repatriation of the Abkhazian Diaspora to the homeland and to increase communications and linkages with the Diaspora.

After the war finished, the Adyghe of the Inegol Association asked to change the name back to its previous name where all north-Caucasians were equally represented. However, the Abkhazians thought, to support the independent Abkhazia, which was by 1995 put under a severe embargo, they needed to keep the name 'Abkhaz'. This resulted in the establishment of Caucasian-Adyghe Cultural Association in 1995 (As of 2010 Inegol Cherkess Adyghe Cultural Association). However, the Adyghe-Abkhaz united activities continued to take place. The necessity to have separate organizations, today, finds their reasoning in the inability to communicate in mother languages within the organizations and different political realities of the homeland.

In the 21st century, with cheaper telecommunication technologies and cheaper and faster transportation, the Diaspora started a constant back and forth movement, establishing lots of new links and networks, re-learning their homeland as a place of beauty and a place of constant change for better.

The recognition of Abkhazia's independence in 2008 was a breath of relief in the Diaspora (not only for the Abkhazians but for all north-Caucasians) as marking the end of one of the conflicts in the homeland 'Caucasus'. The Diaspora associations started making different projects to strengthen their ties with the independent Abkhazian state.

Though the natural right of citizenship stays as a privilege only for those whose ancestors are Abkhazians and given to Ubykhs due to the fact that they don't have a home-country no more, it is not only the Abkhaz-Ubykh diaspora establishing links with Abkhazia. The Adyghe and the Osetians, and others originally from the north Caucasus - as wives, husbands, sons and daughters, or cousins of Abkhazians or just as friends- pay visits to Abkhazia establishing business, social, cultural and political connections. Many take active discussions 'online' to support the united diaspora organizations' activities and networks, as well as to support Abkhazia's causes in the international



arena. Some choose to claim themselves as an ethnic group relative to the Abkhazians, some as brethren, others as separate groups who should support each other.

2012 is witnessing severe separation within the Diaspora on identities and relations with the homeland. Every word that rises from Abkhazia is reflected in the Diasporic discussions on unity and separation. What is next, or which definition is right, will not be obvious today. However, Abkhazia, needs the power of the wider north-Caucasian diaspora at her back in the international arena as much as she needs the return of ethnic Abkhazians to have a stronger state.

*The information presented here about the Adyghe and Abkhaz of Inegol is based on in-depth interviews from my fieldwork in Turkey, Adyghea and Abkhazia in 2011-2012.*

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**JOHN COLARUSSO**

CANADA

### **Abkhazia Twenty Years On, Some Thoughts**

The Republic of Abkhazia, factually an independent state with limited formal recognition, a client of Moscow, and unlikely ever to be a component of Georgia in any form, bears a mark upon it, "Made in the U.S.A." Permit me to explain.

In June of 1992 I attended a conference in Maikop where I met once again my old friend and colleague, Slava [Viacheslav] Chirikba. He told me that war was coming to Abkhazia, that Georgia was going to invade his homeland, and asked me to send warning to the U. S. State Department. I did as he asked upon my return to Canada, contacting "State" via a public number. My calls went unreturned, unacknowledged. Two months later Slava's fears became reality as Georgian irregular forces invaded Abkhazia. Within three more months I found myself in Washington, escorting the first Abkhazian delegation ever to visit that capital. I was in the company then of Natela Akaba, Liana Kvarchelia, and the two Kazans, Yahya, and his son Yanal. This was my first engagement as a back channel diplomat and advisor to Washington. By the time the Abkhazians had driven out regular Georgian troops in September of 1993 I had attained a status as an advisor to Washington, Ottawa, and Moscow, on matters of the Caucasus. While I went on to deal with the Ossetian – Ingush conflict and the Chechen wars, as well as advising on a wider range of matters, my first experience with the organs in Washington had left an ineradicable impression on me. Several crucial shortcomings in diplomatic thinking had led to the "loss" of Abkhazia. I shall summarize these briefly.

First, the diplomats at State rushed to recognize Georgia within borders that were largely fictional, being lines drawn not merely by the Soviets, until the preceding year (1991) arch enemies, but by none other than Stalin himself. Two factors seemed to underlie this act, which can only be termed simplistic. The first seemed to be the conceptual difficulty of admitting any nuances in the categories

that defined the objects of the international order. Any one with any knowledge of the history of the South Caucasus would have implemented a nuanced policy, reigning in the Georgian forces and softening the territorial claims of Tbilisi. Such a nuanced policy would have benefitted all parties concerned save Moscow. Instead State, and the rest of the West following its example, simply endorsed Tbilisi's claims and demonized Abkhazia in ways that bordered on the fictional, depicting Sukhum (Aqua) as a seat of Muslim terrorists, when in fact it was a largely Orthodox Christian nation, multi-ethnic, and with strong democratic tendencies. Its leader, Vladislav Ardzinba, was viewed with scorn by State as a former *apparatchik*. In fact he had served as Abkhazia's representative to the Duma. Such a Soviet background seemed not to be a failing, however, when it came to Georgia's (second) leader, Eduard Shevardnadze, but consistency was not the issue.

In the case of Shevardnadze the West felt a debt to him for his part in the collapse of the Soviet Union. So, not only was the conceptual apparatus of State impoverished to a crippling extent, it was also bound by matters of personal allegiance and indebtedness. So, it seemed that Shevardnadze had called in an old debt of sorts and that this served to strengthen the resolve of State even when it became obvious after the battle of Gagra that Georgia's chances of victory were growing ever more feeble and that Russia (with support largely in the form of arms and fighters from republics in the North Caucasus) had finally sided with the Abkhazians.

For me State's policies were baffling, because my own friendships (with Ardzinba as well as Chirikba) and my own regard for Georgia, played little role in my assessment of the war, its course, and its consequences. It was my first exposure to the time honoured diplomatic principle of reciprocity, of which personal indebtedness was a variant.

Once the Georgians had been driven out, with the exception of the upper reaches of the Kodor Valley, aid was not extended to Abkhazia despite the fact that it had suffered severely in a war that it had not initiated. Its archives and state library had been burned, many of its citizens displaced or killed, its economy left a shambles. On the contrary, a sort of "anti-Marshall Plan" was put into place to punish the Abkhazians (which included not only ethnic Abkhaz, but Armenians, Russians, and a few remaining Mingrelians). Russia, under Boris Yeltsin at this time, also joined in an embargo against this war-ravaged nation. This embargo, as with others, was porous to some extent, but Abkhazia truly suffered during this time. The strategy articulated to me by senior members of State Department was that the Abkhazians would agree to rejoin Georgia if they understood that the only chances they had for a normal life lay with reunification. Four features of this policy struck me as absurd.

First, the terms under which Abkhazia would rejoin and regain a normal life were never articulated in a stable fashion. They were either vague, or at times shifting, so that rejoining Georgia remained an enigmatic lure at best. Georgia was America's client state, pay back for Cuba in a sense, but America seemed unable or unwilling to force Tbilisi to draw up reasonable terms. Second, the horrors of war were such that no people, including the Abkhazians, would willingly seek a union with an adversary without ironclad guarantees of protection. These guarantees were never forthcoming. Third, the policy clearly ignored the character of the Abkhazian people, their tenacity and love of freedom. Curiously these same features were in line with America's emphasis on democracy, but they did not suffice to prevent Washington from demonizing the Abkhazians. Fourth, the policy was simply a modern equivalent of a Medieval siege: starve them and they will capitulate. The only aid offered was the program unofficially termed 'Abkhazian Maidens,' a plastic surgery program based in Yerevan and sponsored by USAID. Initiated by myself along with Sa'di Duman and Murat Yagan, this program led to the restoration of roughly 400 women from both the Georgian and Abkhazian sides, and yet I personally had to rely on my links to former President Carter to thwart State Department's efforts to shut this program down. Otherwise, there was no assistance. On this last

point the conceptual rigidity and barrenness of State Department again struck me most powerfully. This “siege” policy simply did not work. It was not a policy tailored to the complexities and social norms of the modern world.

In the fifteen years up to the Georgian attack on South Ossetia, seen widely by the Abkhaz as a prelude to a Georgian invasion of their own land, the territorial integrity of Georgia became a predictable trope uttered whenever the South Caucasus was discussed in the West. In all that time, and despite my numerous memos addressing Georgia’s territorial integrity, no one in State or elsewhere in the Western professional diplomatic echelons ever seemed to grasp the fact that the insistence on the Soviet borders of Georgia merely rendered her vulnerable to external subversion, especially by Russia, but also by any other outside party. As she stood with the inclusion of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia was not a stable state. These regions served as potential zones for subversion of Georgia as a state should an outside party so desire. Ironically it was Moscow’s recognition under Medvedev of Abkhazia and South Ossetia that made Georgia into a viable and stable entity, though the rhetoric in the West has yet to acknowledge this. It must not be forgotten, however, that this recognition was itself both an act that fulfilled Russian interests in the South Caucasus, but also one of reciprocity, an act triggered by the West’s recognition of Kosovo.

Today, despite the misguided policies of State Department and the West, Abkhazia has survived, has held successful elections, and has gained a small modicum of recognition. It is now a client state of Russia because only Russia under Putin would engage it in a realistic fashion, and then only in reaction to the affront of Kosovo. Its economy is still precarious, but improving. Any efforts it made to have its case receive a fair hearing were constantly rebuffed over these last twenty years. Despite the moral and democratic agenda State Department sought to promulgate it ignored those same moral features and democratic needs of Abkhazia. In effect State Department, through an impoverished conceptual repertoire and a rigid adherence to protocol and precedent, drove Abkhazia into Russia’s arms.

There is yet a more profound aspect to the events surrounding the Abkhazian – Georgian War. What haunts me now is something that Natela Akaba said early on in the War. As we pulled into Washington, D.C., one evening in January 1993 Natela caught sight of the national monuments spread out and illuminated, the so-called Esplanade. The city glowed and she gave a gasp. She said, “Washington! The capital of the world.” Instinctively she offered Washington an opportunity to render justice to a small corner of the world. Washington missed this opportunity without even being able to grasp that it had come or what it could portend. What State Department lost was not simply credibility with nations small or large, but rather it let slip through its hands a moral moment to be the leader of a new world order. As Paul Goble put it to me then, “Abkhazia is a small place upon which the world will turn.” Abkhazia turned to Russia, rebuffed by the rest of the world. Russia turned to hegemonic ambitions and sought to regain her old sphere of influence, seeing that America could not render justice. America turned her back on an opportunity to articulate a world order based upon a new and moral vision of her national interests. She renounced a new and potentially powerful form of leadership that would have offered justice and help to those in need. The needy of the earth offered America the single most powerful of all tools of statecraft, that of rendering justice. Great empires have been built on this dream. Instead America pursued business as usual in an outmoded and simplistic fashion best suited to a bygone era. The results for Georgia and Abkhazia were entirely predictable. What the ultimate result will be for America remains to be seen.

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## KAI JUVAKKA

FINLAND

### **Who wins from the isolation?**

Abkhazia was cut off the rest of the world two decades ago, when Georgian troops marched on Sukhumi on 14<sup>th</sup> August 1992. After the war, an all-embracing blockade was imposed on Abkhazia as a punishment for ethnic cleansing of the Georgian population and to put pressure for Abkhazia to reunite with Georgia. During the first years of the blockade, only Abkhazian women, young boys and elderly men could cross the border even to Russia. The goods and products that they could bring home were restricted to a few. Russia participated in this blockade until Vladimir Putin's election as president of Russia in 2000.

According to international law, Abkhazians are Georgian citizens. Abkhazian passports are valid only in a few countries which have recognized Abkhazia. In order to travel elsewhere, Abkhazians have to obtain another passport. According to international law, they should acquire Georgian passports, but the fact is that only a few of them are willing to do so. Instead, more than 80 per cent have taken Russian citizenship, which entitles them to a Russian pension, as well.

According to Georgian law, it is illegal for foreigners to run a business or to buy property in Abkhazia. Even though Georgia has not controlled the borders of Abkhazia for two decades, it considers it illegal for foreigners to enter Abkhazia from Russia. Those who do so may be fined heavily when they visit Georgia proper.

The blockade has been counter productive and only broadened the gap between Georgia and Abkhazia. It only evokes bitterness and helps to underscore who Abkhazia's enemy is. While reunion with Georgia is out of the question for Abkhazians, they have had too few options to choose from.

Although Abkhazia has unilaterally proclaimed its independence, the region has become totally dependent on Russia, both economically and politically. Nineteen years after the war ended, the country is like an open air war museum. When you walk on the streets of Sukhumi, you could think that the war just ended. It is hard to imagine that once this town was one of the wealthiest places in former Soviet Union.

Whilst autonomy within Georgia is an option that the Abkhazians exclude, there are no signs on the horizon that Georgia would some day recognize the independence of Abkhazia. To break the ice in this frozen conflict, it is time for the Georgian leadership to acknowledge the fact that isolating Abkhazia from the rest of the world has been a crucial mistake and only pushed Abkhazia into Russia's arms. If Georgia wishes to stop Russia subsuming Abkhazia completely, the first thing it should do is to give the Abkhazians freedom to establish ties with the rest of the world. This would reduce Russian influence in Abkhazia, which would not run counter to Georgian interests.

There are other non-recognized territories which do have economic and cultural ties with rest of the world. Although China considers Taiwan as an integral part of its territory, it has not restricted foreign investment in Taiwan or blocked Taiwan's foreign trade. Taiwanese can freely travel with their own passports to the European Union and the US, although none of these countries have recognized Taiwan.

As for whether ethnic cleansing justifies a blockade, we should compare it to other cases, e.g. the fate of Sudeten Germans or the Palestinians. If we isolate Abkhazians, shouldn't we also isolate the Czechs and Israelis, who carried out ethnic cleansing on an even larger scale?

Isolating Abkhazia has not brought anything positive for Georgia. On the contrary, the present situation – Abkhazia in the hands of the Russians – is the worst scenario come true for Georgia. A new approach is needed. The sooner the Georgian government admits that fact, the better it will be for the country. The government in Tbilisi should lift the sanctions not only for the sake of Abkhazia, but for the sake of Georgia, too.

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## **KARLOS ZURUTUZA** BASQUE COUNTRY

### **What's in a word?**

"You cannot leave Apsny without meeting Mr. Chirikba", Maxim Gunjia - Abkhazia's former Foreign Minister- told me during my second and last visit to Abkhazia, back in 2007. He was absolutely right. I was lucky enough to meet Mr Viacheslav Chirikba, a linguist - among several other facets- who had devoted many years of his life to the study of my own language, that is Basque.

Viacheslav brought with him a beautifully handwritten Russian-Basque dictionary which a colleague had handed him back in 1975. 30 years later, Mr. Chirikba would produce himself the first ever Abkhaz-Basque dictionary.

While I passed with great care the yellowed pages of his Russian-Basque manuscript, I could not stop thinking about the paradox of it all: somebody in that corner of the Black Sea had bothered to study my native language, whereas many of my neighbours back home deliberately ignored it.

In the Basque country we are struggling on a daily basis to keep alive what we consider to be our main symbol of identity: a pre Indo-European language which experts have classified as "isolate", until a genealogical relationship with other languages is found.

Mr Chirikba -today Foreign Minister of the Republic of Abkhazia- also told me about his investigation of a possible link between Basque and the North Caucasian languages, Abkhazian among them. Wherever the truth lies, it is clear that both our languages share a common scenario: that of a language of limited number of speakers coexisting, side by side, with some other spoken by hundreds of millions of people: Russian in the case of Abkhaz, and French and Spanish in the case of Basque.

I'm aware that substantial efforts are being currently made in Abkhazia in order to keep alive their ancient tongue. Nonetheless, I'm fully convinced that my "indifferent" neighbours back home have

never posed any major obstacle for the survival and development of my language. Joxean Artze, a well-known Basque writer and poet, explains why in a verse which is deeply rooted in all of us:

*“Hizkuntza bat ez da galtzen ez dakitenek ikasten ez dutelako, dakitenek hitz egiten ez dutelako baizik”* (A language is not lost when those who don't know it don't learn it, but when those who know it don't use it”).

It is far from being my intention to be patronizing by giving any unsolicited advice. I just want to convey my most sincere hope that both Mr. Chirikba's language and mine are able to address the enormous challenges ahead. Let's not forget the key role language plays in the continuity and the identity of any culture. As one Abkhaz proverb says, “a person's tongue is his medicine”.

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**KAROLINA STEFAŃCZAK**  
IRELAND

### **Vintage politics**

I'm often being asked by my friends – what is so special about Abkhazia? Why do you keep on returning there? Is it so much different from the other places you visit? Is it really worth walking through the Ingur/i river bridge or – even worse – using the horse carriage to get there?

For those, who know me well, it's enough to say in response: the Abkhaz are very political and politicised and the outside world knows little about it; the Abkhazians' “side of the story” is little heard of in Western Europe, the nature is beautiful there, the weather wonderful and the wine even better.

But there is more to it than just Abkhaz internal politics being very dynamic. It's the development of the political culture which is so interesting, respectful and unique. In the last year my husband and I have followed the election campaigns of Alexander Ankvab, Raul Khadjimba and Sergey Shamba as well as those of the dozens of candidates to the People's Assembly. I was positively surprised at how open everybody was with me, how warmly I was welcomed by each of the campaign teams and how much information everybody was willing to share with me. The intensity of public meetings, the bluntness of questions addressed to the candidates and the small amount of time the voters dedicated to the external relations, concentrating instead on local issues like jobs, kindergartens, pensions and health care, was also a source of amazement for me. Unlike what most outsiders think – Abkhaz residents spare little time to discuss their international situation, interactions with Georgia or the EU countries. But in the weeks I had spent with Abkhaz politicians and their electorate, I had learned a lot about the production of tangerines and the growth of various breeds of grapevines.

The grapes and the wine made from them have to be mentioned separately. There is something about the flavour, the smell, and the colour that gives them a unique, inimitable taste.

Nothing is more agreeable than an intensive discussion on Abkhaz internal politics over a glass (or more) of Lykhny.

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**MARCO SIDDI**

UK

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

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.[1]

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.[2] 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.[3]

Following the collapse of the Tsarist Empire in 1917, civil war raged in Abkhazia and Georgia. 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.[4] 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.[5]

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.[6] 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.[7] 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.[8]

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, 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.[9]

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.[10]

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 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.[11]



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.[12] 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.[13]

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 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.[14]

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.[15] 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.[16]

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 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.[17]

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.[18] 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.[19] 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.[20]

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.[21]

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.[22] 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.[23]

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.[24]

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.[25] 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.[26]

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.[27] 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.[28]

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.[29]

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 Adjara 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.[30]

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.[31]

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, 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.[32] 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.[33]

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.[34]

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.[35] Most 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.[36]

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.[37] 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.[38]

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.[39] 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.[40] Although 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.[41]

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.[42]

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.[43]

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 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.[44]

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.[45] 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.[46]

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[47], 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 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.[48]

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[1] 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.

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

[3] 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.

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

[5] 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.

[6] 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.

[7] B. Coppieters, '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.

[8] *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.

[9] 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.

[10] 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.

[11] 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.

[12] Zürcher, *The Post-Soviet Wars*, p. 126; Petersen, 'The 1992-1993 Georgia-Abkhazia war', p. 194.

[13] *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, pp. 74-76.

[14] 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.

[15] *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.

[16] 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.

[17] 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.

[18] *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).

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

[20] *United Nations Security Council Resolution 937* (21 July 1994), point 6, available at <http://www.un.org/Docs/scres/1994/scres94.htm> (accessed on 11 May 2010).

[21] *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, pp. 80-81.

[22] 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.

[23] *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, pp. 83-84.

[24] *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 Peace Initiatives*, pp. 37-41.

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

[26] *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).

[27] *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).

[28] *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, pp. 85-88.

[29] *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, pp. 88-89.

[30] 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.

[31] *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, pp. 13-14.

[32] '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)

[33] *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, pp. 14-19.



[34] 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.

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

[36] 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.

[37] See chapter 2, pp. 15-16.

[38] Zakareisvili, 'Georgia's relationship with Abkhazia', p. 9.

[39] 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.

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

[41] *Report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia*, Vol II, pp. 47

[42] *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.

[43] 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).

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

[45] 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.**

[46] 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).

[47] However, both missions were terminated in 2009 due to Russian vetoes on their prolongation.

[48] 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.

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## **MARK BRODY**

FRANCE

### **Abkhazia and Chechnya towards the same end**

It would be bold, or completely ignorant, the one who pretends assimilating the recent course of the two secessionist entities of Abkhazia and Chechnya, former Soviet federated subjects of wider Soviet Republics, Georgia and Russia respectively, historically rebellious, who have attempted to impose their independence on the wake of the Soviet bloc explosion in 1991. Russians have in both cases played totally contrary roles. In Abkhazia, they have steadily supported national efforts, politically, diplomatically, economically, militarily, to separate from Georgia. They are still offering security guarantees and the new officially recognized state of Abkhazia, given the international position of their backers, enjoys a status that others, particularly Georgians, cannot ignore. In Chechnya, conversely, the story ends badly. Russia deploys its military forces heavily, crushing the armed uprising of resistance and allowed to develop a climate of terror against the population, thus cementing in blood Chechen attachment to the Federation.

Yet beyond this tragic divergence, there is a single movement combat, a similar mobilization for the construction, probably incomplete, of some form of independent state. Abkhaz have so far,

apparently achieved a bit more than Chechens. Abkhazia *de facto* does not belong to Georgia and Legal non-recognition by a majority of states does not really impede its existence as a real state. Palestine or Taliban's Afghanistan are another examples of such significant real non-states. No one can decently deny their existence. In the Abkhaz case furthermore, a kind of democratic commitment, shown during the last transparent presidential electoral process, has been proven, bringing that non-state, in European eyes, close to European values. Chechnya has taken another way towards independence, largely more absurd, as Kadyrov today has obtained some space for manoeuvre that only the first separatist presidents, Doudaev or Maskhadov, could only dream of. Why then those almost 250000 losses on the Chechen side and 15 years of heavy sufferings? History has not ended in both cases and it would be not surprising that within 10 years, 20 as it is said in Moscow among Caucasian experts, those two republics will be *de jure* independent.

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### **MAURICE BONNOT**

FRANCE

#### **Presidential elections in the Republic of Abkhazia (26 August 2011): Alexander Ankvab**

The observation conducted on the ground of the presidential elections in Abkhazia on 26 August last, the fifth such process since the position was created by Article 49 of the 1994 constitution, allowed one to assess the degree of democratic progress, of popular support for the institutions throughout the territory, of the existence of independent political structures, all criteria serving the classic definition of a sovereign state.

1. Once again, the month of August was marked by a major event Abkhazia. The beginning of a thirteen-month war against Georgia in August 1992 to September 1993, the recovery of the territorial integrity after the reconquest of the upper Kodor Valley during the conflict in South Ossetia in August 2008, the recognition by the Russian Federation on 26 August of that year were similarly striking events. The totally unexpected death of President BAGAPSH occurred in Moscow on 29 May 2011 led to the holding of a new presidential election within, according to the text of the Constitution, a period of three months — thus, the 26 August, the date corresponding moreover to the third anniversary of the first state-recognition.

2. The legacy of President BAGAPSH is important. The six and a half years (2005-2011) he spent as the head of the state saw a marked improvement of the situation, notably internally, although some problems remain unresolved (unemployment, low income, slow recovery in the renovation of infrastructure, including lethargy of the agricultural sector in the south) due largely to the conflict and the blockade by its neighbours (including Russia until 2000). The state-recognition during his tenure granted by the Russian Federation permitted the signing of agreements ensuring all at once the security of the country along its borders as well as prefiguring the improvement of the transport-infrastructure, the renovation of the airport area Dranda, and the railway-line from Sochi.

3. Three candidates presented themselves to the electorate: Alexander ANKVAB, born in Sukhum in

1952, graduated in 1974 from the Academy of Sciences of the University of Rostov before joining from 1975 to 1981 the Ministry of Justice of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia and then the Regional Administration of Gudauta. From 1984 to 1990, he held the post of Deputy Minister of Justice of the Georgian SSR. He served as Interior Minister of Abkhazia from 1992 to 1993 before beginning a career as a businessman in Moscow for several years from 1994. Eligible for the Presidency of the Republic of Abkhazia in 2004, he nevertheless refused to submit himself for an examination of his knowledge of the Abkhaz language, mandatory since the 1999 Constitution because he thought it beneath his dignity and not because he does not know the language. What had prevented him from standing in 1999 was the requirement that a candidate should have spent the previous 5 years living in Abkhazia, which was something introduced specifically to prevent Ankvab's candidacy. He was appointed Prime Minister by President BAGAPSH from February 2005 to February 2010, when he became vice-president after being elected alongside President BAGAPSH on 12 December 2009. He enjoyed the support of the Unity Party the direction of which was set by the late President BAGAPSH, of the Social Movement for Renewal and of the Association of Veterans (Amtsakhara). His partner for election to the Vice-Presidency was Mikhail LOGUA, then Head of the Administration of the region Gulripsh Region. Born in 1970 in Sukhum, the latter studied economics and has an already rich experience in this area.

Sergej Mironovich SHAMBA, born in 1951 in Gudauta, was originally a historian specialising in archaeology. He quickly joined the ranks of the People's Forum of Abkhazia "Ajdgylara" ("Unity"), which he chaired from March 1990. He assumed the position of Deputy Minister of Defence before the 1992-1993 conflict. He has served as Foreign Minister from May 1996 to February 2010, when he was promoted to Prime Minister. SHAMBA took pride at the time of the election in his strong support among the youth: he chose as his partner for Vice-President Shamil Omarovich ADZINBA, the head of the Youth Union who was also responsible from 1996 to 2005 for a famous football club. He developed in particular the theme of the need to build a pluralistic society where all ethnic groups have their place, especially the Mingrelian community of the Gal Region. He was simultaneously supported by the Economic Renewal Party of Beslan BUTBA, a businessman who participated in the 2009 presidential election (8.25%), and by the Communist Party.

Raoul Dzhumkovich KHADZHIMBA, born in 1958 in Tkvarchal, has extensive experience in intelligence, especially in his hometown, where he was the representative of the KGB from 1986 to 1992. Promoted to Head of the Security Services from 2002 to 2003, he was promoted to Minister of Defence and Deputy Prime Minister from 2003 to 2004 before becoming Prime Minister under President ARDZINBA between 2003 and 2004. Candidate in the 2004 presidential election and at one stage declared the winner, he had to accept, after an investigation into the results, a compromise with President BAGAPSH. Both rivals were then elected in an entirely new election in January 2005, KHADZHIMBA as Vice-President. This uneasy alliance was broken with the resignation of KHADZHIMBA a few months before the election of December 2009 in which he won only 15.32% of the votes. He thus attempted for a fourth time to win a presidential election by taking as a candidate for the Vice-Presidency the widow of President ARDZINBA, Mrs. Svetlana Iradionovna DZHERGENIA, who had many supporters among the Abkhazian intelligentsia.

4. The Abkhazian model of democracy thus received an accidental test. During the campaign, the principle of equal treatment was observed in the mass-media and the presentation of candidates. Equal time to speak was granted by the state-TV to each candidate. The way they chose to present themselves was somewhat different: KHADZHIMBA and SHAMBA were surrounded by supporters, whilst ANKVAB preferred the solitary style of intervention.

If all three candidates had to agree to sign their commitment to a code of good conduct, an interview published by the Russian newspaper "Moskovskaja Pravda" came to disturb this fine little

assurance before the election. Tengiz KITOVANI, commander of the Georgian troops during the incursion of 14 August 1992 which triggered the conflict, indicated that ANKVAB had known about these plans but had not informed his colleagues at the time. He added that, should he be elected, he would align his policy with that of Georgia towards NATO and the European Union. Video-excerpts of the interview were aired during a demonstration in support of SHAMBA, an initiative undoubtedly intended to contaminate the reputation of ANKVAB, as with the publicity given to the publication by the newspaper "Respublika Abxazija" of a 2003 interview with President ARDZINBA in which he expressed similar accusations against ANKVAB. The latter responded to such accusations by a discreet silence.

Two other factors somewhat tarnished the comely image enjoyed by SHAMBA, particularly externally: in an interview in the Russian press, he stressed in a somewhat too exaggerated manner his role in the Abkhazian national movement and insisted on personally being identified with the people, suggesting an almost inevitable success and, should the result prove otherwise, his refusal to accept an outcome that did not reflect the popular will.

The main points of the programme presented by candidate ANKVAB were incorporated in his inaugural address on 26 September: "In the future, we will focus on strengthening social protection [...], the search for radical solutions in health and population policy [.....], the resuscitation of rural life and production [.....], on action for youth and graduates returning home [.....] on measures to secure investment, on the fight against corruption and crime in all forms, including economic and financial [.....], on the security of the state, including protection against external threats [.....], on the development of the strategic partnership with Russia [...], and on the continuation of diplomatic efforts to achieve international recognition."

5. The holding of the presidential election became the subject of controversy. In a paper published on the eve of the election on the site "Open Democracy", the former Minister for European Affairs in the Blair government, Denis MacShane, said that "whilst the elections might be an interesting diversion, there is no possibility for them to be considered legitimate or to allow for the election of a truly independent personality". And the illustrious parliamentarian compared Abkhazia to Alsace-Lorraine after 1870 subjected to a similar foreign iron rule. The election would be in his eyes entirely organised by Moscow, recalling Stalin's aphorism that the people who vote do not count — rather what is important are the people who count the votes. He recalled the demand of the European Union that "the elections in this region of Georgia cannot be valid unless all refugees and displaced persons are given the right of return" and charges that Russia "as in Transnistria, is satisfied to create a new space (no man's land) for the denial of democracy", thus demonstrating again that the Kremlin prefers to "keep suppurating sores on the periphery of its former empire rather than establish a new partnership with the nations who have reintegrated the course of history after 1989." One of his former colleagues in the British Parliament, the Rt. Hon. Bruce George, publishes a comment at the same time denouncing in advance in similar fashion "a rigged election" designed to purvey an illusory power, the Kremlin alone pulling the strings in the background. It should be recognised that similar language denying the populations of Abkhazia any right of expression is relayed in an even more outrageous manner by the head of the Georgian State, Mikheil SAAKASHVILI, who, in a speech in early August at Anaklia, facing the border with Abkhazia, spoke of "the Barbarians out there facing civilisation over her" (viz. Georgia). And, continuing: "There they know only Mongoloid brutality and ideological enslavement, whereas here we enjoy the authentic and ancient European Colchis, the oldest of civilizations."

It would require all the skill and long experience of Professor George Hewitt, a specialist in Georgia and Abkhazia, to refute similar associations of bias and a-priori argumentation. Concluding a documented article, he emphasises that "Abkhazia is still a long way from seeing its independence

recognised fully and complete. This remains the adamant ambition of its political élite as well as of its people and is the basis of any progress in resolving the disputes which set it apart from its Georgian neighbour. Nevertheless, much remains to be done in Abkhazia. How the presidency of Alexander ANKVAB will affect the country and the regional scene, the next five years will tell."

6. The best response to the propositions of MacShane and Bruce George, described by some as a "mishmash of disinformation", is probably the opinion of the international observers on the ground. Despite the summer period, a significant number of these eyewitnesses, a total of 119 from 27 countries, observed that, without any noteworthy problems, the electoral process was something which attracted wide participation and continued throughout the day in the greatest calm. The present writer visited fourteen polling stations in the region of Ochamchira, Gal and Tkvarchal. No irregularities were noted. The same conclusion was drawn by all observers dispatched across the whole country, and the same goes for interventions before the Electoral Commission. It should be noted that in the Gal Region, no controversy arose concerning the issuing of Abkhazian passports to the population (mostly Mingrelian) wishing to subscribe to this act of citizenship, which was incompatible with the holding of any link to Georgia (dual nationality is only accepted with the Federation of Russia). The number of passports distributed increased to 9,000 for this last election from the 3,500 of December 2009.

In an article in "The New York Times" published on 27 August, one reads: "The election, unusual in the former Soviet space, was not determined in advance as far as the outcome was concerned" and had "apparently subscribed to the principles of democracy." The newspaper added that one could not draw the same conclusion for national elections in Georgia which are regarded by western governments as a model of democracy that Abkhazia should aspire to reach but which has actually been dominated for years by President SAAKASHVILI's Movement for National Unity." It appears that, according to article, there was no evidence that Moscow had predetermined the outcome and that, by openly rejecting the democratic aspirations of Abkhazia and supporting in so blind a fashion the isolationist line of Tbilisi, the West is denying itself any levers of influence likely to help the evolution of a solution to problems in the sub-region." The Western position towards the elections will indirectly strengthen the growing influence of Moscow.

A Georgian analyst, Irakli SESIASHVILI, goes so far as to suggest that "positive lessons must be learned from the Abkhazian experience and not, as most often happens, propose the opposite."

7. Election results announced on 27 August at the Press Conference of the Chairman of the Electoral Commission, Mr. Batal TABAGUA, were as follows:

Number of registered voters: 148,556

Number of voters: 106,845

Representing a stake of 71.9%

Number of Votes for:

Alexander ANKVAB: 58,657 (54.9%)

Sergej SHAMBA: 22,456 (21.02%)

Raul KHADZHIMBA: 21,177 (19.82%)

Number of voters having cast against all candidates: 2,023 (1.89%)

Number of blank or spoiled votes: 2,532 (2.37%)

Alexander ANKVAB won the most votes in 32 of the 35 electoral districts, with the exception of one area in Gulripsh and two others in the region Tkvaltchal. He won in 148 of the 172 polling stations (86%).

### **The new President of the Republic of Abkhazia Alexander ANKVAB**

The concern for a resumption of control by a pragmatic and somewhat authoritarian hand expressed by an electorate committed more to justice and order no doubt played a huge role in the accession to supreme responsibility of Alexander Ankvab, known as much for his uncompromising as for his enigmatic character. What might appear to some as a lack of charisma seems to be offset in this technocrat by an interest in efficiency and worship of results. The new President was, throughout his campaign, thrifty of promises, conversely insisting on the need and his disposition to tackle corruption and inequalities, focusing on two priority-areas, namely education and the health-sector. This concern not to be bound to any ideological presupposition is reflected in his programme for foreign policy from which the formula, favoured by his predecessor, of a multi-vector policy is absent.

The priority given to strengthening the quality of life and inner harmony within the state-borders, the security of which is now ensured by Russia, should now take precedence over the quest for international recognition, postponed to better days.

The presence at the ceremony of Valentina MATVIENKO, newly elected President of the Federation Council served as a reminder of the interest of the Russian Federation in developing relations between the two countries.

The appointment on 27 September of a new Prime Minister in the person of Leonid LAKERBAJA was the first decision taken with the careful prudence and efficiency specific to the new President. Leonid LAKERBAJA, a trained engineer, was a Member of the Abkhazian Parliament from 1991 to 1996, and from 2000 to 2002. He served as Deputy Prime Minister from 2005.

Many changes have taken place at the head of sovereign ministries. The accession of Dr Vjacheslav CHIRIKBA to the office of Foreign Minister, previously Adviser to the President for International Affairs, notably in conducting the Geneva negotiations, should be welcomed. Thus, the transparent and democratic nature of these elections and reinforces once again, despite the difficulties of all kinds which Abkhazia has had to face during the two decades of its independent existence, the deepening of democratic life. The stubborn refusal to recognise these achievements as expressed by the European Union, NATO, OSCE, and a number of foreign diplomats cannot therefore be considered to assist in the resolution of crises in the region.

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**MAURIZIA JENKINS**

UK

### **The Elusive Right of Self Determination**

Territorial Integrity of Georgia versus right of self-determination of the Abkhaz people is an unresolved dilemma, which, twenty years after the 1992-93 Georgian-Abkhaz war, Western countries and international organizations are still facing.

The contested borders of Georgia and the different histories, cultures and aspirations of the diverse ethnic groups living within them, are posing complex and sensitive questions, which far too often have been examined by Western eyes not on their own merits, but through the old prism of the containment of Russian power. While Georgian aggression over the years has been expediently overlooked, the Russian threat to well established geopolitical areas of influence seems to have been one of the overriding factors shaping US and EU policies in the South Caucasus. However, successful negotiations for the return of the IDPs to Abkhazia and a sound peace agreement between the Abkhaz and Georgian sides can be achieved only if both the West and the Georgian government change their approach.

Internal developments in post-Soviet Russia and Moscow's response to political changes in the South Caucasus, may well be rightly viewed with concern by Georgia's Western friends, but from an Abkhaz perspective, the support of its powerful neighbour has provided the sense of security and hope for a better future, which Georgia was unable to offer.

Over the last twenty years, while people living on Abkhaz territory have endured serious hardship, on-going, unconditional help has been provided by Western nations to the Georgian side. Moreover, the absence of a truly neutral and independent mediator and the economic and political blockade of Abkhazia have led to the hardening of Abkhaz positions and pushed meaningful negotiations out of reach.

So long as the Abkhaz authorities are excluded from participating on an equal footing in international discussions, where questions concerning their status and their future are on the agenda, in my view, there is very little chance of achieving a peace settlement, conducive to the safe return of the IDPs and stability in the South Caucasus.

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## **MAURO MURGIA**

ITALY

### **A prison for Abkhazia**

Can we define the European Union's behaviour towards the Republic of Abkhazia by using the parameter of a people's freedom to travel around the world as a form of objective racism, masquerading under geopolitical pseudo-regulations?

Yes, I think that defining the policy being currently implemented by European governments towards the Abkhazians is correctly defined as racism, reflected in the daily procedures of refusing visas and not recognising study-qualifications obtained in the Republic.

No political justification can lead to curbs on the right to travel, to leave one's own country in order to see the sights, to study, to work, to shop, and whatever else travelling can allow.

The obtuseness of this refusal, advertised by signs in consular offices, is the pitiful result of the EU's own political short-sightedness in preferring to turn its back instead of dealing with the problem of the Republic of Abkhazia, or even just to understand it. Luckily, some things are changing. More and more people, intellectuals, scientists, European progressives, private individuals, are discovering the Abkhazian situation and, bravely, are beginning to say 'no' to this arrogant European way.

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## **MAXIM EDWARDS**

UK

### **Scotland Street**

Descending from the ancient fortress of Anakopia, I met an Abkhazian soldier, in a jeep held together with duct tape and hope, who gave me a lift to the town New Athos. I could see the tarmac through the jeep's open gearbox and he could scrutinise me through the rear view mirror. This is Caucasian hospitality, and he made it clear on the journey down into the valley that I owed nothing for the ride, save an explanation. Where was I from, and what was I doing? I was a Brit, I explained, and curiosity had bought me here. He chewed the words over in his mind, spat out his gum and before I left asked me a question. 'Write a letter to that... Queen of yours, will you?'. So began an exploration into the undercurrents of national feeling, which in Abkhazia flow rapidly and burst their banks without much prior warning. 'Brits and Americans' began Artur, an ethnic Abaza who worked for Abkhazia's border service 'aren't much liked here. It won't be obvious, because you are a guest and they have to be hospitable. But beneath the surface there may be resentment'.

If there was a resentment, it was initially watered down beyond recognition with copious quantities of home-made wine. A separation of human beings from the actions of their governments was the standard by which I travelled, planting it firmly into the soil my-government-but-not-necessarily-

myself didn't recognise, to stake a claim to conversation and debate rather than argument and finger-raising. I suddenly have an unsuspected empathy for the overseas Americans who claim they are Canadian, and it's not an entirely pleasant sensation. The east of Sukhum's old town, just across the street from the *Villa Aloiza* and the sagging balustrades and balconies of the tired old townhouses, is home to *Shotlandaa Rimüa*- Scotland Street. The small Midlothian town of Kilmarnock, Sukhum's Scottish twin, unveiled a [monument](#) to the dead of the 1993 war in 1995, whose opening ceremony was visited by then-mayor of Sukhum Garik Aiba[1]. Scotland Street is incongruous to a visiting Brit, yet a token psychological reassurance in a nation in which we, brandishing our unrecognised passports in an unrecognisable land, find ourselves occasionally lost for words.

On the road to Gudauta, a policeman once asked for my documents. The Abkhaz tourist visa was more exotic to him than the British passport.

'Tourist?' he stated, or asked (I wasn't entirely certain). 'Yes', I answered, mumbling about natural beauty and wine to break the thickening ice. One could tell that he wanted to talk, but pretended that he didn't.

'Why do we give *you* tourist visas, yet you give us *nothing*?'

The tension was stifling. You could have made *adjika* with it.

I smiled a stupid English smile, and changed tack.

'Well, who knows, maybe one day we will recognise you?'

'Hah! Well I don't *care*! Russia recognises us and THAT is all that matters!'

I smiled a stupider English smile, and the Marshrutka arrived. It is a situation for which I feel there should be a discussion, but presented with the opportunity I find myself strangely mute.

Two days later we reflected on the Policeman's words, in another ex-military jeep hurtling down the livestock strewn-roads to Lykhny. 'I remember learning about Geography in school and when I saw Great Britain on the map, I told myself, there doesn't seem to be much *Great* about it'. It was a statement which- several months on- still surprises me with its high probability of truth. In ten years' time, after my letter to the Queen which I promised to write all those years ago has yielded no results; if and when politics has fractured our Britain of dubious Greatness into separate passports and separate peoples, I will return to Sukhum to collect my thoughts. Sitting beneath the fronds of Palm on Scotland Street, I will wait to be asked where *on earth* I am from. I'll smile a plastic smile, and exhausting all the Abkhaz I know, tell them *Sara sSHot'landiawaüup*' I am from Scotland.

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[1] <http://kiaraz.org/page11>

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## MAXIM GUNDJIA

ABKHAZIA

### **Challenges of Recognition of Abkhazia**

International recognition of Abkhazia became an immediate foreign policy agenda right after war with Georgia in 1993. The subsequent negotiation process and many (almost four Geneva processes) peace initiatives that swallowed most of the people's romantic aspirations about conflict resolution and honest donors, had deepened mistrust in once so cherished idea that people can find understanding and stop fighting. Looking back I realize that international mediators involved Abkhazia in all those failed processes too much to keep us from spending our efforts on a more active recognition lobbying. However we also were too much preoccupied with the negotiations with the enemy rather than looking for new friends. It was a hard time for Abkhazia which was isolated and ruined. Nevertheless the 90's were so challenging and it felt like the world was going and actually was ready to cure all those horrible mistakes of the XX century. Could we do more or could we gain more recognitions if we concentrate all our efforts on recognition lobbying? It is a rhetoric question. We would never know if we did not try. And we did try, but those attempts were not persistent. There was a need for trigger, a country which would do the first step. At that time it could be any of the partially recognized state or even prospect member of the EU.

Fortunately Russian Federation was the first to make such justified and hard political step. I will not go into details though I foresee usual remarks from those who only operate with post August 2008 terminology. There is an immense attempt of the International propaganda to present the conflict as something that erupted only after August war of 2008, like nothing was before. There is a whole new dictionary of new terms and actually a language which many are trying to speak now at the negotiation tables or official Department of State, EU Foreign Policy or some EU parliaments' statements. There was quite significant international expert community, who actually could easily clarify with simple English language the root and outcomes of the conflicts in the Caucasus and ambiguity of the International Law. However they all disappear. We see new faces and new experts who need to spend another 10 years in the conflict area to finally comprehend at least the geography of population in the Caucasus and what they really think of and desire. Post-communist states' leaders usually keep the trend of saying that democracy needs foreign investment. Such statements are very much appreciated but democracy is something that is to be born from the nation – the nation which is wealthy and the nation that realizes that democracy is not about rioting in the streets against the neighbor, it is more about confidence in the future. The slogans of most of Colored Revolutions were not about social reforms – they had clear foreign policy meaning.

The 90's were good for lobbying also because there were around 5 people in Western Headquarters who knew where the Caucasus is and among them 2 who knew the word "Abkhazia" and that it is ruled by Islamic fundamentalists or some military junta. It was very handy to use Abkhazia as an example of puppet of Russia which concentrate all its policy on targeting small Caucasus states that aspire for democracy. Even today it is easier for public opinion shapers to use the scenario of bad guys and good guys. Why spending efforts on explanations when it is easier to label and leave it there.

Advocating and campaigning for Abkhazia is very exciting process. Young diplomat can learn a lot if involved in this as I did. There are many interesting facts and tricks beneath the surface of newly

gained recognitions. Vastly it is not about Russia paying multimillion bills to those who recognize Abkhazia. Usually it is hard and challenging diplomatic process limited by durable economy class flights and time for gaining new contacts and supporters. There is a trick with so called paid recognitions also created by opponents to present Abkhazia as nonviable project or as attempt of Russia to buy of any state. It hampers a lot to negotiate good will recognition. Nobody mentions millions of dollars spent by US Administration for recognition campaign in Kosovo or political and financial pressure on Latin American, African or small Pacific States. You will never hear about bribing and blackmailing small countries politicians or oppositions leaders by the envoys of those countries that oppose recognition of Abkhazia.

There is no difference in diplomacy of recognized, partially recognized or unrecognized states. All is the same except code of conduct or methods that are used. I spent many years on lobbying for recognition of Abkhazia. Did I face financial constraints – yes, though it was solvable comparing to immense Western capitals' pressures on those countries that I have visited and where I received a clear message that soon we will exchange diplomatic notes. I am thankful to all those kind politicians who only strengthened my confidence in my country's future International wide recognition. And I am also honored to represent a tiny country that is advocating its recognition by small recognition campaigns which are so actively opposed by greater International actors. Thanks to Wikileaks one can confirm those facts that once observed but not believed.

No matter how, one day, when Abkhazia will proudly rise its flag on the first flagpole facing 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue in New York next to United Nations Headquarters, all this will vanish in abandoned archives. New Abkhazian diplomats will join others and possibly Abkhazia like many today will decline aspiration of other newly born country for recognition.

**Maxim Gundjia**, Former Foreign Minister of Republic of ABKHAZIA -  
<http://www.reflectionsonabkhazia.net/index.php/maxim-gundjia>

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**MICHAEL COSTELLO**  
UK

### **The story of the piglet**

He was driving along the rutted village road in southern Abkhazia, somewhat merry and with a friend, when he hit a neighbour's piglet. "What's to be done?" they puzzled, and feeling sorry for the wounded animal, reversed over it to put it out of its misery.

Out came the neighbour, who was in mourning for a relative. She cursed the young men: "May you, also, be run over!" – words not to be taken lightly in Abkhazia, where curses are a serious business. The driver quickly slit the piglet's throat but spilt blood onto the ground, another violation of taboo when a person is in mourning.

Smartly picking the carcass up and throwing it into the boot of the car, he drove to the village shop and borrowed the going price for a piglet, returned to the neighbour's house and dropped the money on the kitchen table.

“What now to do with the piglet?” It was too much meat for two people, so he gathered friends from their houses, found a suitable place and singed and butchered the animal, then roasted it over a fire in a nearby piece of scrubland, well out of sight of where it had lived. It was joyously eaten and washed down with copious supplies of *chacha*, the home made grape brandy. There was wine and bread, cheese, tomatoes, water melon, pickled cucumbers, garlic and some cake – whatever the young men had foraged from their houses. He showed that he knew what he was about: “The piglet’s skin was well rubbed with *ajika*, [a sour sauce made to each family’s recipe, based on *alycha* wild plums and piquant spice] to let it seep into the meat and fat. It was well basted”. Toasts were pronounced, with the obligatory first one “to the *Vsevysny*”, the only god recognised by all religious Abkhazians, who might be *Antsva*, of traditional Pagan belief, the Christians’ Lord or Islam’s Allah, for the Abkhazians tolerate all beliefs and celebrate all religions’ holidays together. “This went so well that some of the men had to be held back from bursting into song; something that would have been very bad: a display of joy within earshot of a family in mourning,” he added. It went well.

Shortly after he got home the husband of the woman who had owned the piglet came in carrying two large water melons. The woman who ran the village shop had told him all about it, including his wife’s curse. He angrily plonked the money on the table in front to our storyteller’s father and wished his own wife “A pip (a bird’s disease) to settle on her tongue, the carrion, bitch”, another curse. No one was to think his family as cheap as to take money from a neighbour’s son. So the father heard about the accident and “you can’t lie to an adult and a father”, so the whole story came out.. When his father summoned him (the narrator was well into his twenties) he cautiously sidled up, ready to run out of the door – “He could have given me a thrashing or killed me for violating custom but, in the event, he quickly let me off.” So it all ended.

The story was told in twenty-five minutes, with no interruptions to an audience of another man and me, in sunshine shaded by the leaves of a camphor tree and the heat made gentle by a light breeze coming from the sea, as we sat at a plastic table by a roadside café in Sukhum. Just a story? But note how it brings out the importance of custom, of ritual, religions and tolerance, of mourning, of curses, of paternal authority and power, of the sense of personal pride, of hierarchy within the family ...of feasting in proper manner, of friendship, ...and how these are all conducted and blended to circumstances... the absence of women at the men’s feast...

Abkhazians are generally convivial and the country is a joy to research.

**Michael Costello**, PhD candidate, School of Anthropology and Conservation, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK. Dissertation topic: “Can Law act as Adjunct to Custom? The relationship of custom and law in Abkhaz and Abkhazian state-building and ‘modernisation’”. - <http://www.reflectionsonabkhazia.net/index.php/michael-costello>

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## **MUSA SHANIBOV**

KBR/RUSSIA

### **Sultan Sosnaliev: First Commander of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus**

Because of the poor state of Musa Shanibov's health he was unable to write anything specifically for this project, but he send a recent but unpublished work about a major figure in the Georgian-Abkhazian war: "Sultan Sosnaliev — First Commander of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus."

I have decided to include this work in this project in its Russian original. The English version will be published in the near future. MS

По причине плохого самочувствия Муса Шанибов не смог написать материал специально для этого проекта, однако он прислал свою недавно написанную, но еще не опубликованную работу об одной из главных фигур грузино-абхазского конфликта: "Султан Сусналиев - первый полководец горских народов Кавказа".

Я решил включить эту работу на русском языке в состав проекта. Английская версия будет опубликована в ближайшее время. Метин Сонмез.

Султан Сусналиев - первый полководец горских народов Кавказа

На фоне эскизов дум и деяний в борьбе за спасение Абхазии.

Сухум – Нальчик. 2011 - 2012

**The full article in PDF can be downloaded at:**

<http://www.reflectionsonabkhazia.net/pdf/shanib.pdf>

**Musa Shanibov**, Former president of the Confederation of Peoples of the Caucasus. Founder and Scientific Director of the Centre for Sociological Research of the Kabardino-Balkaria State University.

KBR, RUSSIA - <http://www.reflectionsonabkhazia.net/index.php/musa-shanibov>

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## **NEAL ASCHERSON**

UK

The sea is Abkhazia's destiny – the Black Sea. It is only by turning its back on continental inland powers – vast like Russia, smaller like Georgia - that this small country can rejoin the world on its own terms. The way to make a reality of Abkhazian independence is to develop – or to renew after so long - the trade routes and passenger routes which once connected Sukhum, Gagra, Ochamchira to Trabzon and all the ports of northern Anatolia, to Istanbul and through the Bosphorus to the Aegean and the Mediterranean, to cosmopolitan Odessa and to Constanza.

If the independence of 2008 is to be completed, to become a reality which the outside world recognises de facto if not yet de jure, then the Abkhazian government must pluck up its courage and open the regular ferry connection to Trabzon and the air route to Istanbul and Athens. From those connections will come not only trade and tourism but education and culture, the exchange of ideas and skills. The European Union is too timid to take a real initiative here. But evidence that a government at Sukhum is not a mere protectorate administration (as Tbilisi pretends) and can take bold initiatives to break the ancient blockade – that will change minds in Brussels.

**Neal Ascherson**, Scottish journalist, author of "Black Sea: The Birthplace of Civilisation and Barbarism". UK

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**RENE WADLOW**

SWITZERLAND

### **Abkhazia: The Role of Small States in the World Society**

In an earlier article for AbkhazWorld at the time I thought that the Palestinian request for UN membership might be accepted and so end a logjam for contested states to join the UN, I had written of "the Liechtenstein Option". Historically, although Liechtenstein was recognized as a European state, all its foreign affairs and economic ties was handled by Switzerland. Liechtenstein had no real international personality and if thought of at all, was considered a fairytale country with a castle on a hill.

However, when in a referendum, the Swiss people had decided not to join the United Nations, Liechtenstein decided that it would join as an independent state. It had also participated from the start in the 1975 Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (become in 1995 the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe —OSCE). In order to highlight that it is not a fairytale state, Liechtenstein has played an active and constructive role in the United Nations, in the negotiations concerning the International Criminal Court and in the OSCE.

Liechtenstein has a small but competent diplomatic corps which it need not move around so that each diplomat learns in detail how the multilateral institution works. As the longest-serving Ambassador to the OSCE, Ambassador Maria-Pia Kothbauer has been the Dean of the Permanent Council since 2004, the Permanent Council being the OSCE's main decision-making body that meets weekly in Vienna.

Liechtenstein has chosen the roles of ethnic and national minorities as its chief focus of expertise and finances an important institute on minorities housed at Princeton University in the USA.

In the same way, Abkhazia must show that it is more than simply existing, but rather that it has a unique role to play in the world society. Although it is not yet a member of the United Nations or the OSCE, it can start to project an image of a strong contributor to essential world issues.

Perhaps a "Monaco Option" could be considered. Monaco, given its Mediterranean geographic location and the interest of its Princely family has made the study of the Mediterranean and its fish

life a long-standing interest. As the concern of the world society for issues of environmental protection, global warming, and ecologically-sound development has grown, the focus of Monaco has moved from being an interesting scientific hobby to a central issue. Now many look to Monaco for its important expertise in the safeguard of the seas and oceans.

Obviously, the choice of a national focus and contribution to the world society can be made only by the people and government of Abkhazia as well as how to promote that "Abkhazia Option." Since for the moment it is unlikely that Abkhazia will be able to join the OSCE (membership must be accepted by all) it might be possible to join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) as its most geographically western member after the Russian Federation. With Afghanistan, Pakistan, India and Iran joining as permanent observers, the geographic centre of gravity of the SCO has moved from its China-Central Asia-Russia origin. We see today a general broadening of what had started as narrower regional organizations.

If Abkhazia proposes joining the SCO, Abkhazia must consider what contribution it can make to a largely Asian community of states with numerous tensions but also old and distinguished cultures. For Abkhazia choices must be made before membership, but joining the SCO would give it a voice in a growingly dynamic part of the world.

**Rene Wadlow**, President and Representative to the UN, Geneva, Association of World Citizens.  
SWITZERLAND - <http://www.reflectionsonabkhazia.net/index.php/rene-wadlow>

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## **ROBERT CRABTREE**

AUSTRALIA

### **Abkhazia: Neighbours, friends and triangles**

There is a commonplace that you can choose your friends but not your relatives. In International Relations the equivalent might be that you can choose your allies (to an extent) but you cannot choose your neighbours.

Abkhazia's quest for Self-Determination and Independence has been fraught by its neighbours, Georgia and Russia, and by its lack of other influential friends. Each neighbour has, in differing ways, scared away other potential friends to Abkhazia's great disadvantage.

The quest has not been a simple one; it is based on the belief/ fact that Abkhazia was only ever demarcated as part of Georgia by others (Stalin and the signatories of the Alma-Ata Protocols[1]) against its will. When Georgia was recognized with its present claimed boundaries, an error was made.

On the scorecard of the old and simple test for nationhood, admittedly more discussed than applied, Abkhazia scores quite highly. The oft-stated requirements were: Boundaries, Territory, Population and Viability. This list derives from and adapts slightly the requirements for a State listed in Article 1 of the Montevideo Convention on Rights and Duties of States[2]. Montevideo listed: a permanent population, a defined territory, government, and the capacity to enter relations with other states.



Abkhazia can claim boundaries and territory. There may be conflicting issues on rights to the territory, but there is little dispute as to the geography and boundaries. That there is a population is undisputed. Abkhaz there are. There are also others, including Mingrelians, Russians, Greeks, Swans, and Georgians. Who should be considered Abkhazian may be a matter of some dispute. I have written elsewhere on the problems of minorities, promoting the view that Abkhazia should take what some might see as a risk and be as inclusive as possible. There is a government (the product of free elections) that has capacity to enter relations with other States. This may be limited by the small size of the country and budget, but Montevideo required a capacity, not immediate embassies everywhere. Size has never been the issue.

Abkhazia has received limited Recognition. Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru, Vanuatu and Tuvalu make up the current list of UN members[3]. There are also some undecided 'fence-sitters'. South Ossetia, Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh form with Abkhazia a mutual group of the non-recognized who recognize each other. This list, and the lack of a longer one, can be ascribed to the activities of the neighbours.[4]

Self-Determination, however, logically precedes Recognition and may lead to outcomes other than Independence/Recognition. Since I studied and briefly visited Abkhazia, I have now turned, for my PhD thesis, to issues concerning the small island of Mayotte, in the Indian Ocean, north-west of Madagascar. It may sound surprising, but there are similarities. The status of both turns on the issue of Self-Determination and who may practise it. Mayotte has spent 50 years trying to become a Département of France and not to be a part of the Republic of Comores. It achieved this aim in 2011. This was an unusual Self-Determination - to become incorporated in the former colonial power, not to accede to independence. Mayotte did not want to be in the Comorien republic as much as Abkhazia does not want to be in Georgia. The same amount as, for example, Timor L'Este did not want to be in Indonesia. Abkhazia and Timor L'Este seek and sought independence, not integration into another state: all want the free ability to self-determine. All had neighbours with claims who stood in the way of this.

It has struck me that in these situations, and others, there is a triangulation, and that this is a significant feature. There is the searcher after self-determination, there is the neighbour who opposes, usually by claiming the territory for itself; there is the other neighbour or power that is necessary for an outcome to be achieved. While it remains bi-polar (the S-D claimant and the opposing neighbour), the matter will go on indefinitely. A triangulation is essential for an outcome. West Papua will unfortunately not make headway, however good its claims; Somaliland is unlikely to achieve the recognition it deserves while in a bi-polar stand-off with Somalia. The Chechens had none, nor did the Biafrans, the Bougainvilleans, the Quebecois and many others with claims of more or less merit. On the other hand, Bangladesh had India as a point of triangulation in its attempt to break from Pakistan. It was the complexity of relationships and influences between India and Pakistan, including but not solely force, which made it possible. Where would South Sudan be without the triangulation of the "Witness States"? Timor L'Este 's point of triangulation was Australia, changing its policy of support for Indonesia, scenting oil in the Timor Sea, being a good neighbour, at least volunteering for the triangle, enabling support elsewhere, at the UN, to be garnered. Namibia had its case brought to court by UK.

The Searcher for Self-Determination needs this third party/point of the triangle. It is more than a supporter; success requires a relationship between this third party and the opposer of Self-Determination. Polarity + support is not the same. The successful Self-Determination will emerge from this relationship between the other two points of the triangle and the complex of multiple pressures and interests that go to form it. These will vary from case to case. This is my suggestion; whether it is borne out in all cases will demand much more examination than is possible here.

Can Russia be seen as a benign or useful neighbour to Abkhazia? (Some would doubt, saying that it is a great white shark with its mouth open, others that Abkhazia is just a pawn on Russia's chessboard, cynical manipulator of the Caucasus for its own ends). If Russia – clear third point at present – will only ever eat or manipulate Abkhazia – if these fears are true, then Abkhazia, if it is to achieve its aims needs another in its triangle. In the current triangle, Abkhazia needs to see relations between Russia and Georgia improve, an establishment of mutual self-interest, trade, joint-ventures, cultural exchanges, whatever, not just armed opposition. This is not easy when it is itself a major part of the reason for the armed stand-off. If this cannot be done, Abkhazia must look elsewhere for triangle-formulation.

It will not be the US, while Georgia under Saakashvili is so proficient at learning “Wall Street English”[5]. Georgia may have found it harder these last four years without George W Bush in the White House; the EU may not have welcomed its flag flying on every Georgian public building; they may have over-reached. However Georgia has had considerable success in establishing the US as a counter-triangulation point to extinguish Self-Determination claims. It has positioned itself to paint Abkhazia into the corner of the overbearing qualities of Russian foreign policy, for American and European consumption. If Russia is seen to support unattractive elements in Belarus, Ukraine... Syria even, then Abkhazia with Russian support must be unattractive too. Moreover, the use of the words ‘Territorial Integrity’ gives many another state a subliminal shudder as it either momentarily contemplates its own dismemberment, or its treatment by previous generations of Russians.

Abkhazia may need to look elsewhere for a different third point of its triangle, if it is to achieve the Self-Determination it claims and deserves. Just down the Black Sea lies Turkey, home to the Abkhazian diaspora. Possibly a new best friend?

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[1] Alma Ata Protocols 1991/2/3.

[2] Montevideo Convention on Rights and Duties of States. 1933. Article 1.

[3] The question of why Abkhazia's recognition comes from Latin America and the Pacific is an interesting one and deserves further study. Most of the ‘fence-sitters’ come from here too.

[4] Many Georgians would not like the term ‘neighbour’ to be applied to them, saying you cannot be a neighbour to what is a part of yourself. I can only say that there is a frontier; there are international agents patrolling it; it has been so for many years; they are, de facto at least, neighbours.

[5] A language widely advertised by a certain language school on the Paris metro.

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## **RONALD GRIGOR SUNY**

USA

### **On Abkhazia**

The greatest irony of the history of Caucasia is that this extraordinarily beautiful land, shared by dozens of different peoples with different languages, has been the scene of both great interethnic violence and multinational coexistence. Georgians and Abkhazians lived together for centuries, even as they maintained their differences, as did Armenians and Azerbaijanis. To some Caucasia was the inspiration of how difference did not have to lead to conflict; for others it was the symbol of social turbulence and violence. But built into the mixing of people were the realities of political power: the imperial overlordship of the Ottomans, the Persians, and the Russians; and the restraints imposed on some Caucasian peoples by others. The hierarchies of power, enforced by soldiers and police, eventually led to resistance and struggles for independence and self-rule. Sadly, these struggles eventually created the fragmented Caucasia with which we live today. Battle lines have become contested borders; former friends and neighbors have become dedicated adversaries.

Is there a way out? Will there be a future in which the unique peoples of Caucasia will live in peace and prosperity with one another? One can draw many lessons from history, but certainly one should be that mutual respect and equality, rather than dominance, intolerance, and exclusivity, are requirements for restoring coexistence and peace in the region. What prevents this from coming to fruition? If I had to hazard a guess, I would say that the greatest obstacles to a peaceful future are the ruling elites of the various countries of Caucasia, the entrenched politicians, military officers, and oligarchs who benefit from the status quo, from the current corrupt economic operations and manipulation of elections. Democracy is the method to move from oligarchy and corruption to real self-governance. Yet, it is hard to be optimistic at the moment, as both local authorities and Great Powers seem to favor keeping things as they are. The current regimes, authoritarian as they are, nevertheless have spaces and places where some political activity can take place. Ordinary people have to organize; they must occupy the spaces emptied of idealism; young people who want a better life should take the lead. Old hatreds have to fade away, and in their place a new vision of Caucasia as the paragon of multinational diversity, equality, and tolerance must begin to take the place of the current dystopia of conflict and division.

**Ronald Grigor Suny**, Director of the Eisenberg Institute for Historical Studies and the Charles Tilly Collegiate Professor of Social and Political History at the University of Michigan. USA - <http://www.reflectionsonabkhazia.net/index.php/ronald-g-suny>

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### **Abkhazia's Two Challenges Ahead**

Now that Abkhazia is celebrating two decades of independence, there are two points I think are worth making.

Firstly, it is no small feat what Abkhazia has achieved. Overall, the outside world has done much more to hinder than to help its statehood. Despite this, Abkhazia has managed to build a reasonably democratic and pluralistic society. It is easy to point out shortcomings and it is important that they are addressed, sooner rather than later. But this is only possible, and what has been achieved can only be protected, if Abkhazians are proud of freedom and of tolerance for dissent, and if they step up whenever individual officials place their own interest ahead of that of the state.

Secondly, despite the common misconception in the west, Abkhazia's independence was not an act of secession from Georgia. Rather, it was a consequence of Georgia's own (justified) secession from the Soviet Union. The primary motivation behind Abkhazia's resistance to incorporation into the new Georgian state was that the future of Abkhazia should be up to the Abkhaz. But there was a second, more implicit motivation, that caused many people of other ethnicities to also choose the Abkhaz side: to protect Abkhazia's multi-cultural society. Abkhazia's most difficult task now is to combine these two aspirations.

Abkhazia's multi-cultural responsibility requires that it be a home for all its ethnicities, including Georgians. This is the ultimate moral test for Abkhazia's statehood. Its demographic situation makes this a very difficult task. The Abkhazian national project can only be secured through state and society building, so that Abkhazia's inhabitants develop a civic identity, through a greater resettlement of the Abkhaz diaspora and through the development of the Abkhaz language as the national language of all of Abkhazia's inhabitants. Abkhazia should also do its best to convince member of smaller ethnicities that fled during the war to return, like the Greeks and the Estonians. And it can try to strengthen national unity by stressing the fact that each minority is a particular Abkhazian minority, that they are Hamshen, Pontians and Samurzaqans, whose home is Abkhazia rather than Armenia, Greece or Georgia.

Abkhazia could also use its increasing international contacts to learn from other, similarly small societies. For instance, Suriname provides an example of a reasonably democratic, multi-cultural society, Malta manages to maintain its language and identity in the face of the dominating presence of English, and Bhutan develops its economy and tourism while preserving its culture and natural wealth.

Abkhazia's independence is now so secure that in another twenty years, it will celebrate its fortieth anniversary. But as a state it could still fail, and it is up to Abkhazia's citizens to prevent that.

**sephia karta**, Author of TAKLAMA Blog <http://taklama.com>. NETHERLANDS - <http://www.reflectionsonabkhazia.net/index.php/sephia-karta>

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## **SERGEY MARKEDONOV**

USA/RUSSIA

### **Abkhazia: difficult way from the Soviet Autonomy to partially recognized state**

In 1991 the Soviet Union dissolved leading to the formation of 15 internationally recognized independent states. Since then each of them was able to traverse the difficult path towards legitimacy and establishing statehood. However the newly independent post-Soviet states are not the only product of the USSR dissolution. One of the major consequences of this process was appearance of entities that have also declared their independence and sovereignty but not obtained UN membership and full-fledged international recognition though they were able to defend themselves through armed confrontation as well as bloody conflicts.

Abkhazia has become one of the most interesting cases of de facto statehood building in Eurasia. Twenty years ago, on August, 1992 it was involved in almost 14-month-long conflict with the Georgian government and local paramilitary forces. Since 1993 September 30 is traditionally celebrated in Abkhazia as a Victory Day. That day the Abkhaz armed forces and volunteers from the Confederation of Mountainous Peoples of the Caucasus forced the Georgian troops and militias from the most of the Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. For Tbilisi it meant the loss of jurisdiction over the part of its de jure recognized territory formally belonging to it. In accordance with the current Georgian legislation Abkhazia is a region which is “illegally occupied by Russian Federation” while allegedly “the Abkhaz Autonomy Government in exile” is the only legitimate body representing the breakaway republic[1]. In reality, however Abkhazia was lost not as a result of the Russo-Georgian war of 2008. Tbilisi didn’t control political, legal, social processes within Abkhazia 15 years before the “hot August” and recognition of this de facto state by Russia. For the whole intervening period the Abkhaz leaders tried to realize their own nation-building project, having very controversial dynamics with “maternal state” as well as external factors (Russia, Turkey, international organizations). Recognizing the huge role of Moscow in the transformation of the Georgia-Abkhazian conflict the “Kremlin hand” has not been the core prerequisite for it. The most important reason for it was the desire of the Abkhaz elite to determine the status of the former Autonomy of the Soviet Georgia beyond the framework of the Georgian independent state. Paradoxically the Georgian leaders distinctively helped the Abkhaz national movement in abolishing all USSR period legislation including the Autonomous status of Abkhazia. The Constitution of the Georgian Democratic Republic of 1921 restored by Tbilisi proposed for Abkhazia as the only “autonomous government” in the “local issues” but not a special Autonomy constituency de jure obtained in the Constitution of 1978. Those steps strengthened frustration and phobias among the Abkhaz leaders as well as their will for self-determination as an ethno-political solution. The most decisive attempt for such self-determination was made on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of July, 1992 when the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia adopted a decision abolishing the Constitution of the Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of 1978 and restoring the Constitutional Treaty of 1925 as a framework for future full-fledged republican legislation. The cancelation of the legal framework connected Abkhazia and Georgia before pushing Tbilisi to ill-considered action - putting troops on the territory of the former Abkhaz ASSR. The Georgian military incorporation scenario failure opened the way for the Abkhaz de facto statehood.

It was opened in very complicated conditions of devastated economy and no sustainable government. However since September, 1993 giant development was made. During this difficult evolution Abkhazia faced economic blockade and significant social decline with signs of naturalization of economy and monthly pension rate of 30-50 Russian rubles (equivalent of 1-2

USD). Sometimes (May, 1998, October, 2001 and July, 2006) Abkhazia was challenged by the Georgian attempts to “unfreeze” the conflict violating status quo of 1993. There have been numerous military and political provocations as well as diplomatic pressure, including by the way the Russian one in 1996-1997. Thus the blockade of Abkhazia was legalized by the Board of CIS Heads of States resolution "On Measures for the conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia resolution" on January 19, 1996. Faced with the Chechen separatist challenge, Moscow initially supported the intent of Tbilisi to restore Georgia's territorial integrity. In 1997 the Russian Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov proposed a formula “Common State” for the negotiation process between Tbilisi and Sukhum/i and tried to convince the Abkhaz leaders to follow his political suggestions. And even in 2003 Moscow and Tbilisi signed the Sochi agreement assuming the creation of 3 working groups (refugees return, railroad restoration between Sochi and Tbilisi as well as renovations of the Inguri hydroelectric power station). However the subsequent "Rose Revolution" and the coming of President Mikhail Saakashvili to power in Georgia (2003-2004) made it impossible to implement the Sochi document as well as some other Russo-Georgian agreements. Finally the Abkhaz leadership using profitable geopolitical conditions (“five day war” of August, 2008 in South Ossetia) established the military and political control over the Kodori Gorge (the last part of the former Abkhazian Autonomous Republic, which remained under the authority of Tbilisi). Since the first recognition of Abkhazia by Russia (the 26<sup>th</sup> of August, 2008) its independence was supported by 5 UN members (Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru, Vanuatu and Tuvalu).

However by the standards of history two decades is a very short time. Today, many of those who took part in the ethno-political conflict of 1990s still shape the republican agenda. For them the conflict is topical though after obtaining the Russian recognition and military support the Georgian factor has lost its exclusive status. For the extraordinary presidential elections of 2011 using the “Georgian card” in propaganda and PR was not so effective. Anyway democratization of domestic policy and development of political competition don't assume any radical compromises with official Tbilisi. Expectation of “new Willy Brandt” in Abkhazia is not the near future issue. For appearance of such persons it will take to transform the conflict from “sacred format” to realistic estimations and interpretations not only among the Abkhaz but among the Georgian leaders.

Can we conclude after the two-decade experience that the Abkhaz statehood (albeit de facto) has been sustainable? It seems that unambiguous evaluations can not be made here. According to the experts from Columbia University the Post-Soviet Georgia has not effectively controlled Abkhazia except some months in the early 1990s. Due to this Sukhum/i doesn't perceive Tbilisi as the legitimate ruler[2]. Comparing the two former Autonomies of the Soviet Georgia, Thomas de Waal, an analyst at the Carnegie Endowment comes to the following conclusion: “Abkhazia has travelled much further away from Georgia and there is far less recent memory of co-existence. The Abkhaz and the Armenians and Russians of Abkhazia are much closer to the North Caucasus. Abkhazia has functioning institutions, including a parliament, independent newspapers and a lively political culture”[3]. Thus we can speak about the desire of some US and European experts to abandon the “black and white” pictures of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict and come to understand that the engagement of Abkhazia is needed not for the sake of any specific “pro-Russian” aspirations but following existing realities. It is no coincidence that the EU has proclaimed “engagement without recognition” approach which nevertheless recognizes the fact of the Abkhaz polity existence.

For a long time in the west entities like Abkhazia were called as “breakaway republics”. Their political existence was perceived as temporary one. It was supposed they would be back after the initial “break.” However the two decades of de facto state-building have proved that “the return process” could not be finally completed. In fact the political move of Abkhazia from the conflict to the peace development was based on a very shaky foundation when hard power played a role of decisive factor. But during this time Abkhazia has demonstrated a certain momentum in its development.

The Abkhaz system of presidential elections has passed a difficult way of transformation from the presidential election within the Parliament (1994) through the sole candidate voting (1999) to the competitive electoral process (elections in 2004, 2009 and 2011). In contrast, UN-member state Georgia has been unable to transfer the supreme power from one leader to the other legally and not through military coups and revolutions. For latest parliamentary elections (2012, March) more than half of former deputies including the Chairman and his Deputy were replaced by new people elected during highly competitive campaign.

Unlike Chechnya, the Abkhaz authorities could pacify the republic and insert “the spontaneous revolutionary creativity of the masses” into the more or less legal framework although a plenty of excesses have taken place. Here it’s necessary to pay special attention to painful issues, both for the Abkhaz and the Georgian audience, as the problem of refugees (sometimes they are also called as “temporarily displaced” or “internally displaced” persons). Numerous facts of selective ethno-political violence in the post-Soviet Abkhazia are well-known. So far in this republic there is no solid legal framework to ensure property rights. The reason for this lies in the “winner takes all” principle which was realized in fall events of 1993 and afterwards when a plenty of real estate left by ethnic Georgians were seen as a legitimate trophy. Subsequently this approach was also applied to the representatives of other “non-titular communities.” Unlike the cases with the ethnic Georgians those facts were often “packed” with the quasi-judicial statements, though it could not change the principle. But the ethnic Georgians’ “exodus” has another dimension which has often been out of focus. In one of his commentaries, well-known Abkhaz journalist Vitaliy Sharia remembered the day of the 27-th of September, 1993 (when the capital city of Abkhazia was captured by his countrymen): “That evening we had a discussion with some correspondents on the latest developments. Constantine Gulia said dreamily that when the whole Abkhazia would be liberated they could set the highway Sukhum/i-Dranda long holiday table to celebrate the victory!” After it someone noted that the Georgian guerrillas living around the highway would attack this table. None of the participants in that conversation ever mentioned that day of the mass withdrawal of Georgians as the best solution. On the contrary, we discussed the ways for restoration of confidence and old destroyed relations and human ties with our neighbors and colleagues”.<sup>[4]</sup> If we discard the usual emotional excesses of journalism, the story of Vitaliy Sharia would look more rational. In fact, ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia for the most part were not ready to live in a country in which the first places could be concentrated in the hands of the other ethnic group representatives. Their engagement in the conflict itself was predetermined by different social and political expectations. Thus many of them left Abkhazia even if they were not abused specifically. In one of the private conversations the author’s Georgian friend and colleague noted: “You, Russians are very fond of Georgia but only as a part of Russia!” The similar formula could easily (and maybe today) be applied to the evaluation of perceptions of Abkhazia among the Georgians.

Thus, the work to normalize relations between the neighbors is necessary regardless of how the final status of Abkhazia would be recognized by Tbilisi. The case of the Abkhazia self-determination has a lot of unique aspects but nevertheless it can be considered as a case of nation-state building practice. Eastern and Central Europe survived a similar experience half a century ago which was accompanied by borders changes and population withdrawals. Anyway those excesses were moved down due to inter-state rapprochement and normalization. It seems that normalization the international legitimacy of Abkhazia will always be without such changes. Meanwhile any compromises with Georgia do not mean the victory of Tbilisi, and even more so, a return to the situation prior to 1993. Such a scenario should be immediately discarded as unrealistic. In today or tomorrow’s context it is possible to discuss only finding of some Modus Vivendi between the neighbors.

Of course, the problem of building relations with Russia and the Western states world also poses many difficult questions of Abkhazia. How can the Abkhaz authorities find the keys for a diversified foreign policy having limited resources and depending politically and militarily on Moscow? Many other questions have been raised. The Abkhaz security and self-determination from Georgia are guaranteed by Russia. But how much does it cost politically and economically? What impact will the penetration of big Russian business ("Posneft" of "Russian Railroads") have on the Abkhaz development? Will it decrease windows for the national business? What about taking care of the Abkhaz environment? Similar questions could be addressed to the security, military areas as well as governance. Will Moscow keep the domestic policy (electoral campaigns and governmental appointments) of Abkhazia? Today those questions form new agenda for Abkhazia because the direct threat from the Georgian side after 2008 has been minimized.

Apart from the relations with neighbors Abkhazia will face plenty of topical domestic issues. According to the American analyst Gerard Toal, "Abkhazia's biggest challenges today are not about recognition but about creating stable foundations for its internal legitimacy"[5]. Indeed after the war and in the conditions of suspended sovereignty it is impossible to create a liberal open society. But it is required to find the most optimal nation-building model. Abkhazia is not Nagorno-Karabakh Republic or even South Ossetia where "the titular ethnic groups" have evident numerical superiority. Indeed, it is unlikely for the Armenian, Russian and Georgian (Megrelian) population of the republic to be satisfied with the constitutional provision (Article 49 of the Constitution of Abkhazia) with the exclusive right for the Abkhaz people to obtain the presidential position. It is necessary to take into account the growing economic role of the Armenian community (the size of which is practically equal to the number of Abkhaz) in the republic. Hence new approaches to the nation-building would be claimed sooner or later. And the last (but not least) it is the need to uphold law and order. The state which is based on the ideas and practices of expediency (because without them it could not survive in the conflict) should make a shift to the dominance of formal procedures. Following this way the Abkhaz partially recognized state could reach the real independence not just the independence from the Georgian sovereignty.

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ABKHAZIA

### **Thirty years of "guilt" (1877-1907)**

Immediately after the Caucasian War (21 May 1864), in June 1864 the independent principedom of Abkhazia was abolished, and the sovereign prince Mikhail Shervashidze (Chachba) was subjected to political repression; in 1866, he died in exile in Voronezh. The abolition of Abkhazian statehood, the renaming of Abkhazia as the "Sukhum Department" under a "military-national government", the introduction of direct imperial administration and the death of the last ruler of Abkhazia, all this caused great dissatisfaction among the people and led to the Lykhny (Abkhazian) Uprising in 1866 and the massive forced resettlement (Makhadzhirstvo) of the Abkhazians to Turkey in 1867.

In 1877, there broke out in Abkhazia a new insurrection. Similar uprisings occurred at that time in Daghestan and the Terek Region; they were closely related to the events of the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878. In early May 1877, the Turkish fleet bombarded the coast of Abkhazia and landed a contingent of troops in Sukhum which consisted mainly of Abkhazian Makhadzhirs.

The Head of the Sukhum Department, General Kravchenko, on the eve of this attack, ordered the abandonment of the city, thereby depriving the population of central Abkhazia of necessary defence. The behaviour of the General pushed the Abkhazians to come out on the side of Turkey. A monk-chronicler from New Athos wrote as follows: "Kravchenko not only made no preparations to defend the city but even withdrew his troops from it." Immediately after the surrender of Sukhum, General Kravchenko was recalled to Tbilisi. In Abkhazia, only the Samurzakan (now the Gal) District remained under the protection of Russian arms.

As a result of military operations, up to 50,000 Abkhazians were forced in 1877 to abandon their homeland and relocate to Turkey. The new head of the Sukhum Department, Colonel Arakin, reported on 24 August 1878: "The area that lies between the River Galidzga and the River Kodor is already shewing significant traces of devastation: the area around Ochamchira is razed to the ground ... The expanse from the R. Kodor all the way to the Gudauta area, together with Tsebelda, is almost a perfect desert." Sukhum and Gudauta were torched and ruined.

Colonel Arakin proposed to declare the entire Abkhazian population "guilty", because "to determine the degree of involvement in the mutiny of each community and of individual persons through an investigation would require too much time." As an advocate of measures "of a punitive character", he thought it necessary to "group together" the Abkhazian population, thus violating the traditional farmstead-character of the way that the Abkhazian peasantry had settled on the land. Fortunately, this point was not implemented.

Abkhazians were forbidden to carry arms, to settle near the coast (except for the upper classes), or live in Sukhum, Gudauta, Ochamchira. The devastated central part of Abkhazia between the rivers Psyrtskha and Kodor became a colonised land-fund of the imperial administration. There was established here a kind of buffer-zone between the Gudauta and Ochamchira Abkhazians. Abkhazians had no right to settle in this part of their own country. Meanwhile, thousands of Armenians, Mingrelians, Greeks, Russians, Estonians, Germans, Moldovans and others who were resettled began from 1879 to take root here in today's Sukhum and Gulripsh districts. Thus, in the aftermath of the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-1878 and the huge outward flow of the Makhadzhirstvo [Great Exile], the ethnic situation in Abkhazia changes dramatically: from being homogeneous, basically mono-ethnic in its composition, it turns into a cosmopolitan region.

The active expulsion of Abkhazian rebels to the interior-provinces of the Russian Empire as political exiles went on throughout 1877-1880. At this point the following should be noted. The Abkhazians were deemed "guilty" from 1877, but officially it was by an order of the tsar of **31 May 1880** that their "guilt" was recognised. Henceforth, the peasants of the 22 communities in the Gudauta and Kodor districts (with the exception of the Pokvesh and Ilor communities) were restricted in their rights to land-tenure, were subjected to an increased tax, and "because of their low political reliability" were not recruited into the army ... The population of the 12 communities of the Kodor and Samurzakan areas was deemed to be "innocent".

Soon after the war, an administrative reform was carried out: The "Sukhum Military Department," which was equal, in fact, to a province [gubernia], in 1883 was renamed the "Sukhum District" (and remained so named until 1919).

From the 90s of the XIX century, tsarism begins to conduct a new policy with regard to the indigenous population of Abkhazia. It abandons the brute force, so characteristic of the period 1810-1880, and the policy of "the stick" turns into the policy of "the carrot".

The Abkhazian people did not participate en masse in the revolutionary movement of 1905-1907. Statistics on the court-proceedings for the Sukhum District show that of 46 revolutionaries convicted only five were from Abkhazia. The bulk of the revolutionaries were agitators who had come from elsewhere and peasant-labourers from Guria and Mingrelia who had come in from Western Georgia for temporary work at different points along the Abkhazian coast.

The "silence" of the Abkhazians in 1905, who then made up half the population of the district, was caused not only by their "guilt" but also by their lack of understanding of the political objectives of this revolution. The Abkhazian farmer, who pursued subsistence-farming, who lived in a circle of patriarchal traditions, and who was not involved in trade, daily work, or seasonal occupations, considering these activities to be "shameful", was unable to fathom Marxism and social-democratic ideas. Among the Abkhazians there were no indigents and no proletarians.

In 1906, one of the leading newspapers, "Purlius of Russia", declared: "Socialism has not yet taken root among the Abkhazians, and for this reason one can live with them." And in 1910, the son of the last ruler of Abkhazia, G. M. Shervashidze, remarked: "Then something unexpected happened. How did it come about that the Abkhazians, 'known insurgents', were suddenly sitting quietly, when Russia was in turmoil? You don't understand these scoundrels at all. Always doing a something that you never expect. But this is very simple, say the wise officials. The feudal system still survives amongst them ... Revolutionary propaganda has met no success here because here there is no class-strife".

The Abkhazian peasantry perceived the events of the Russian revolution in Abkhazia as a "Georgian" revolution and viewed with distrust those who had recently occupied the lands of their brethren, the Makhadhirs, and now appeared before them in the role of revolutionary agitators. The main driving force of the revolution in 1905 in Abkhazia were settlers who had relocated from Western Georgia: land-tenants, merchants, labourers, porters, etc., angry that they were considered temporary residents of the Sukhum District.

Telling is one of the demands of the Abkhazian people with which, in October 1906, candidate for deputy in the IInd State Duma, Prince P. L. Shervashidze, appealed to the Viceroy in the Caucasus: "Suspend the colonisation of the Sukhum District by new elements, as only the indigenous population can be satisfied with the available free lands, in view of there being an insignificant number of them."

The imperial administration in the Caucasus tried to make use of the distrust and tension prevailing in Abkhaz-Georgian relations in 1905 in the spirit of a policy of "divide and rule."

About three decades had passed since the time when the Abkhazian people had been deemed to be "guilty". In May 1906, it was specifically emphasised in the Council of the Viceroy in the Caucasus: "During the events of recent months, the population of Abkhazia, carrying the title 'guilty', stood out by reason of its loyalty to the Government, as compared both with the population of neighbouring regions and with the immigrant element in Abkhazia".

In December 1906, the proposal to lift the "culpability-charge" from the Abkhazian people was supported by the Chairman of the Council of Ministers, Russia's Interior Minister Pyotr Stolypin, and, on 27 April 1907, Nicholas II approved the proposal put forward by the Government "On equalising land-tenure rights of the inhabitants of the Sukhum District" and cancelled the imperial commandment of 31 May 1880. Thereafter, parcels of land were allotted to the residents of the "guilty" communities with right of ownership. The Tsar's Viceroy ordered General Pavlov and member of the Viceroy's Council, E. Vejdenbaum, to the "Sukhum District for the solemn announcement to the population of His Highness' commandment on the restoration of their rights to the guilty Abkhazians who participated in the uprising of 1877".

After a solemn prayer in the ancient Lykhny church, coincidentally on the birthday of the Empress, General Pavlov and Vejdenbaum announced on 25 May 1907 the Tsar's pardon under the title "To the population of the Kodor and Gudauta areas of the Sukhum District".

This document contained the proclamation of the withdrawal of the "culpability-charge" from the Abkhazian people, and it was said that "in the troubled times of 1905 ... the Abkhazians passed the test with honour."

Appendix:

## Къ населенію Кодорскаго и Гудаутскаго участковъ, Сухумскаго округа.

Тридцать лѣтъ тому назадъ, съ появленіемъ во время войны въ Сухумскомъ округѣ турецкихъ войскъ, жители части этого округа подняли оружіе противъ своего законнаго ГОСУДАРЯ.

Непріятельскія войска, однако, вскорѣ были вынуждены удалиться, а возстаніе абхазцевъ было подавлено.

Велика была вина мятежниковъ, и они понесли должное наказаніе.

По окончаніи войны, въ Возѣ почивающій ГОСУДАРЬ ИМПЕРАТОРЬ АЛЕКСАНДРЪ II повелѣлъ ограничить провинившихся абхазцевъ въ ихъ земельныхъ правахъ по сравненію съ тѣми жителями, которые остались вѣрными своему Державному ЦАРЮ.

Такое ограниченіе правъ населенія длилось много времени, и тяжесть наказанія испытана имъ въ должной мѣрѣ.

Зная поведеніе кореннаго населенія округа во всѣ позднѣйшіе годы, я не могъ не обратить вниманія на то, что оно искренно старалось загладить прошлое исполненіемъ въ полной мѣрѣ своего долга въ отношеніи нашего АВГУСТѢЙШАГО МОНАРХА. Мнѣ особенно пріятно было въ этомъ убѣдиться въ смутное время 1905 года, когда абхазцы съ честью вышли изъ испытанія.

ЕГО ИМПЕРАТОРСКОМУ ВЕЛИЧЕСТВУ благоугодно было уважить мое ходатайство, и имѣя за жителями Адзюбжинской, Тамышской, Джгердинской, Чиловской, Моквиинской, Беслахубской (бывшей Аваскской), Ткварчельской, Бвитаульской, Гупской, Колдахварской, Лдзавской, Блѣбурхвинской, Бармышской, Мугудзырхвинской, Отхарской, Джирхвинской, Звандришской, Дурюпшинской, Лыхнинской, Ацынской, Ачандарской и Абгархужской общинъ Сухумскаго округа отводимые имъ земельные надѣлы утверждаются на правѣ собственности, съ распространеніемъ этого права и на земли уже отведенныя симъ лицамъ въ потомственное подворное пользованіе.

Абхазцы! Между жителями Сухумскаго округа имѣть теперь дѣленія на виновныхъ и невиновныхъ. Старая вина предана забвенію.

Привѣтствую Васъ съ великой ЦАРСКОЙ Милостью и твердо вѣрю въ то, что абхазцы виновными противъ своего ГОСУДАРЯ ИМПЕРАТОРА никогда и ни при какихъ обстоятельствахъ болѣе не будутъ.

Намѣстникъ ЕГО ИМПЕРАТОРСКАГО ВЕЛИЧЕСТВА на Кавказѣ

Генераль-Адъютантъ *Графъ Воронцовъ-Дашковъ.*

11 мая 1907 года.

Гор. Тифлисъ.

*Публикуется впервые*

## To the population of the Kodor and Gudauta Districts of the Sukhum Region [okrug]

Thirty years ago, with the appearance during the war of Turkish forces in the Sukhum Region, the inhabitants of part of this Region took up arms against their legitimate SOVEREIGN.

However, the enemy forces were soon constrained to withdraw, and the uprising of the Abkhazians was quashed.

Great was the insurgents' guilt, and they received necessary punishment.

At the end of the war, the late (in God) Sovereign Emperor Aleksandr II ordered that the guilty Abkhazians be restricted in their land-rights in comparison with those residents who remained true to their Ruling Tsar.

Such restriction of the rights of the population lasted for a long time, and the weight of the punishment was experienced by them in full measure.

Knowing the conduct of the indigenous population of the Region in recent years, I could not but draw attention to the fact that it has sincerely endeavoured to atone for the past by fulfilling in full measure its duty with regard to our MOST AUGUST MONARCH. It was a particular pleasure for me to be convinced of this during the troubled period of 1905, when the Abkhazians emerged with honour from their trials.

HIS IMPERIAL HIGHNESS found it entirely to his satisfaction to accede to my intercession, and henceforth the right of ownership of the plots of land allocated to them is confirmed with regard to the residents of the Adzjubzha, Tamsh, Dzhgerda, Chlou, Mykw, Beslakhuba (formerly Akvaska), Tkvarchal, Kwtol, Gup, Kaldakhwara, Ldzaa, Blabyrkhwa, Barmysh, Mygwydyrkhwa, Watkhara, Dzhyrkhwa, Zhwandrypsh, Dbrypsh, Lykhny, Atsy, Achandara and Abgarkhwy communities of Sukhum Region, with extension of this right also to lands already allotted to persons by way of inherited farmstead-usage.

Abkhazians! Among the inhabitants of the Sukhum Region there is no longer any division into guilty and innocent. The ancient guilt has been consigned to oblivion.

I salute you with the TSAR's great grace and firmly believe that the Abkhazians will never again under any circumstances be guilty of any offence against their SOVEREIGN TSAR.

Viceroy of His IMPERIAL HIGHNESS in the Caucasus

General Adjutant Count Vorontsov-Dashkov

11 May 1907

Tiflis.

**Stanislav Lakoba**, Professor in Archeology, Ethnology and History at the Abkhazian State University.  
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**THOMAS de WAAL**

USA

### **Abkhazia Essay 2012 Unaccustomed isolation**

The history of Abkhazia over the last century has been like an old cinema-reel with abruptly changing images, a kaleidoscope in black and white. It is hard to think of a place that has undergone so many sudden changes and reverses in the modern era.

There have been many traumas: the terror unleashed by Lavrenti Beria in the 1930s, the deportations of Greeks and Turks in the 1940s, the first violence of the late 1980s. In that respect, the conflict of 1992-93 was tragic but sadly not unique.

Apart from the sad and repeated story of human suffering, what has distinguished the story of Abkhazia since 1992? I would point out two things that are unusual in Abkhazia's history: isolation and uncertainty. It is unusual for any place in the modern globalized world to be so shut off and so uncertain of its place in the international order, let alone a place with such a cosmopolitan past as Abkhazia.

I first visited Abkhazia in May 1992. It was in retrospect a "pre-war situation," a time of curfews and seething tensions as well as persistent hopes that conflict could be avoided. I did not return for ten years, until 2002, and of course I found an utterly different place, much of it abandoned or destroyed, still visibly recovering from war. I then made regular visits until my most recent one at the end of 2010. On a physical level, the slow but impressive recovery was all but complete—but of course the psychological scars remain and much of the pre-war population, the Georgians in particular, is still missing.

It was unnatural that this piece of Black Sea coastline, with its rich and varied history, should have been so closed off and that its people should find it hard to travel.

Abkhazia has had isolation before. In 1922, Konstantin Paustovsky lived in what he called a "small paradise" which had made the decision "to cut itself off from the rest of the world and do everything so that not a single mouse crossed the frontier." But that was a deliberate act to isolate Abkhazia from typhus and hunger. The recent isolation has been something different, the decision by Abkhazia's neighbours to isolate it.

"Who is to blame?" ("Kto vinovat?" as Russian intellectuals are fond of asking). Everyone, to some degree. To a significant degree the isolation comes from the persistent policy from Tbilisi of offering either isolation or engagement on unilateral terms. It is also due to an international approach which has continuously neglected this conflict and the people at the center of it or seen it only through the prism of other issues, chiefly bilateral relations with Georgia and Russia. And Abkhaz inflexibility has also led to some self-isolation: the authorities have sometimes given the impression that they want to build an "ethnocracy" in which Georgians will have fewer or no rights.

I wish Abkhazia and all its people a much better and more peaceful two decades than the last 20 years have been—and many more connections to the outside world.

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## **UCHA NANUASHVILI**

GEORGIA

### **The Sorry Campaign: Revising Georgian-Abkhazian relationships – Challenges and lessons for the future**

The Georgian Human Rights Center (HRIDC) launched the Sorry Campaign in March of 2007 with the aim of changing the dynamics and direction of the relationships established between Georgians and Abkhazians during the last fifteen years.

It is not easy to apologize, neither to accept an apology. The Georgian Human Rights Center (HRIDC) launched the *Sorry* campaign in March of 2007 with the aim of changing the dynamics and direction of the relationships established between Georgians and Abkhazians during the last fifteen years. This campaign was not in any way connected to politics; it was a movement against war, as we consider that there is no alternative to peaceful dialogue and mutual settlement of the conflict.

The Campaign envisaged the reestablishment of trust between the Georgian and the Abkhazian people and to break through the informational vacuum. We wanted to encourage people to think about the horrors of war and the mistakes we had made. The Human Rights Centre is popularizing Abkhazian language and culture, tries to destroy image of enemies among Georgians. The Center has organized events about the tragic events of Muhajirs genocide on 21<sup>st</sup> May.

It was a two-way street and it was designed for both sides. The Georgians should realize that neither one side nor the other is totally responsible for what happened. The Abkhazians are not the guilty ones and the Abkhazians should also know that every Georgian does not think of taking out revenge over what happened.

Many people have asked us cynically “what did you gain from apologizing to Abkhaz people? Nothing!”

The Sorry Campaign was initiated by the group of Georgians to compel us to confess our mistakes and learn from these mistakes. It was right on the part of the Georgians to take the first step. We are greater in numbers and Abkhazia was part of Georgia and not vice versa. We had a bigger degree of responsibility and it will not do us any harm if we start living up to our mistakes. We wanted to say that we have more responsibility for what is happening in the country. And it made no sense whether somebody would apologize in reply now or never. It was an individual act. The point is that we have done our duty and will not keep those words in our heart and they can be free from the burden resulted from the war.

Radical steps are always painful for the society. We might be declared traitors, but the society gets the chance of reconciliation through these sincere, open and peaceful initiatives. Everybody looks back into the past, even those who resisted the Sorry Campaign.

During the campaign we received threats. Several people called us traitors and spies. President Saakashvili in his statement in November of 2007 said: “why should we apologize to them? Shall we apologize to them because they cut our heads off and evicted us from there? Shall we apologize because they destroyed Georgian churches? For our children who got frozen on the mountainous pass and thrown out from the plane? Shall we still apologize for that? Who are those people and which international organization funded them to write such nonsense?”

Our appeal was immediately spread on the internet. It became a topic for consideration on many forum sites, both by Georgian and Abkhaz people. Some of them did not like it; others became extremely irritated. Many people understood the campaign as if we were apologizing to criminals, military offenders or to Abkhazian de-facto authorities. That is not the case. We wanted to communicate with just ordinary people. Today, Georgians are considered only as enemies for Abkhaz people who will return to their homeland and kill every member in their families. Until Abkhaz people believe that there can be another way, they will do everything to keep the bridge over the Enguri River blocked for the Georgians. To tell the truth, their fear is to some extent real. Based on the reactions that followed the campaign, many Georgians still dream with the day of rushing into Abkhazia with guns. We are against this; we do not want to fall into the abyss of war. Such a hole we have already experienced and have not been able to escape its consequences for fifteen years. And counting.

Five years have passed since the campaign started. The society has started to discuss the topic and there are people who are not ashamed to say sorry. Ordinary citizens discuss the reasons why one nation should apologize to another one. Three years ago the word ‘sorry’ was tabooed. Speaking about this topic was neither popular nor safe. The campaign has succeeded because many people speak about it now. And now everybody thinks about it. In fact, it was a provocation in positive. This provocation worked. The word and concept of sorry exposed many things; it showed how the Georgian society has a real peaceful attitude towards Abkhaz people and how big is the military spirit in the country; how far the government and the society are from peace.

One of the main problems is that the Georgian society still lacks the opportunity to speak with Abkhaz people directly and vice versa. The citizens receive extremely filtered (dis)information. Very often mass media of both sides releases false information and they create the image of the enemy of the opposite side. It continues endlessly.

There are not unsettled conflicts and there are always ways out of the complicated situation and alternatives. The question is how well does Georgian society realize it? Our society still relies on emotions and cannot see the way to resolve the conflict peacefully. It does not have a clear understanding of war reasons and results; they see everything through a narrow and unilateral position and cannot confess its mistakes and problems. We see the guilt in everybody but not in ourselves: the government blames Russia and the opposition, the opposition blames the government, people blame everybody: Russia, USA, Europe, Abkhaz and Ossetian peoples...

The most part of Georgian media still blocks not only the campaign but the word “Sorry”. Only several small-edition newspapers, radio and online sources spread information about it. Everybody speaks about conflict resolution, but unfortunately people have forgotten a simple reality: nothing can be done without love and forgiveness. After physical violence and war end, conflicts still continue in the hearts and minds of people. Hate and anger control human lives for a long time.



These emotions paralyze people and make them hostages of hate. When a person is busy with anger and hate, s/he cannot clearly evaluate the situation and look forward to the future. The “Sorry” Campaign might be a first step to break the negative circle. Exposing human sides of the opposite side can make people overcome obstacles.

Does anybody remember in Tbilisi who are Abkhaz people and how many people know at least one Abkhaz word. Word “Hatamzaait” (Sorry) is the only Abkhazian word that is familiar to many Georgian people.

We know that such a campaign can only have a result in 10 or 20 years. The point is that everybody can do something and we focus on the responsibility of each person, on public responsibility. Honest relationships shall be built between the two nations, relying on truth, sincerity, love and forgiveness. It shall be done by people. The Georgian and Abkhazian peoples demand only peace and open dialogue between the sides. The Campaign learns lessons from our past mistakes. It assumes our responsibilities in the conflict. Both nations lost in the conflict. Having realized this, people might come together. This step is always taken by one side and it will definitely have a follow-up; it shall become a kind of catalyst for social changes. Sorry – this is the way towards each other’s hearts.

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**UWE KLUSSMANN**  
GERMANY

### **Abkhazian impressions**

When I first visited Abkhazia in June 2003, I witnessed one of the strangest countries I had ever seen. I had been to other countries marked by war, to Chechnya and Afghanistan. There however the war-torn places were part of internationally recognised states and could rely on internal and external help. The ruined cities and villages of Abkhazia can expect nothing of the sort. I was visiting a land with no mobile telephony and with no petrol pumps. Petrol was filled into frail cars from road tankers, with the aid of hoses. Many people, especially the elderly, were scrawny and undernourished, many were dressed very modestly. Even Vice Premier Vladimir Zantaria, who picked me up from the border, only had an old Volga as his official car.

Despite the poor standard of life, I did not meet a single Abkhazian who considered conceivable what all western politicians were demanding: to rejoin Georgia. Time and again I asked Abkhazian interlocutors whether they could imagine under any circumstances existence as an “autonomous republic” within Georgia. An old Abkhazian woman at the market of Sukhum gave me an answer I shall never forget: “Again with Georgia? Not even our dogs will survive that”. Her answer gave me an inkling of what had passed here ten years before.

The Republic of Abkhazia was not a sovereign state, recognition by Russia or even by other states was not in the picture in the Summer of 2003. But nevertheless, the Abkhazian people had decided its path with internal sovereignty, thereby accepting many hardships. Ignored by the world, a

republic had come into existence here with all the attributes of state: a government and a parliament, police and army, local administrations, schools and a university, and Abkhazia wanted to be a democracy. The effectively organised Ministry for Foreign Affairs immediately helped with organising talks, also with members of the opposition and with critical journalists. Vitali Sharia, editor-in-chief of the newspaper “Echo of Abkhazia”, surprised me by wearing a t-shirt depicting the silhouette of Hamburg. He had been hosted there for talks with Georgians organised by a peace studies scholar. Straight away there were two things I was able to deduce from that: 1 The Abkhazians are quite willing to hold talks with the Georgians, 2 Europeans, Germans included, are welcome as mediators.

At a newspaper stand next to the memorial for the fallen of the 1992/93 war, I bought Sharia's book “The tank is not more horrible than the dagger”, tales superimposed on the background of real episodes of the war, which the Abkhazians call the “patriotic war” – a war that holds a similar importance for the people as the Second World War for the Russian people. Because almost every family saw one of its members die in the war. Sharia's book, thus far only published in Russian, would have deserved translation into other languages. It is a unique literary document for understanding Abkhazia.

It also became visible for me that Abkhazia does not just have debate-happy coffee drinking democracy, say at the “Brekhalovka” at the promenade in Sukhum, but also political abysses. In the wall of the office of the erstwhile opposition organisation “Amtsakhara” (fire of the ancestors) there was a glaring hole, torn open by an explosive device. It was impossible to ignore that Abkhazia was a post-war society where some still wanted solve political problems using violence. This was compounded by the fact that at the time, a power vacuum could be felt in the republic. The first President Vladislav Ardzinba was already very ill. I too could not meet him, whereas Prime Minister Raul Khajimba immediately had time, even on a Sunday.

When five years later, in the May of 2008, I once again traveled to Abkhazia, in some ways the situation had improved. There were petrol pumps and mobile telephony, in Gagra hardly a trace of the war was still visible. Foreign Minister Sergei Shamba said that Russia was building “practically inter-state relations” with the republic. Abkhazian insistence and the confrontational course of US-armed Georgia had induced Russia's quite risk-averse leadership to eventually and unspectacularly help the small country, including financially. But diplomatic recognition was still not in the picture.

Vitali Sharia was quite clear during my visit in 2008 that despite all their gratitude for the Russian help, the Abkhazians do not see themselves as a meek outpost of Russia: “We are no pawns of Moscow, our society is developing” – The Abkhazians witnessed with attention moments of stagnation and democratic deficits in Russia. The private TV channel Abaza-TV also contributed to a greater diversity of opinions. There political issues were debated more frankly than the correspondent from Moscow was accustomed to from the channels of the Russian capital.

During a visit to a tank battalion near Ochamchira, I realised that in the worst case scenario of a military conflict Abkhazia would only be able to defend itself to a very limited extend without Russian help. There young soldiers were driving a more than 30 year old T-55 tank in front of a building burnt out in the 1993 war. As impressive as the soldiers, prepared to defend their native land with outdated military material, were the students at the university of Sukhum. The independence of Abkhazia was as self-evident to them, who had grown-up in their republic, as the wish to travel to Europe for internships – something thus far made impossible by the refusal of EU countries to grant visas to Abkhazians. Half a year earlier during the Georgian Presidential election I had seen in Tbilisi a propaganda movie by Saakashvili's party. In it, elegant Georgian women mounted a train “headed for Sukhumi” – propaganda does not come further from reality than that.

Compared with 2003 I saw more confident than merely worried faces at the Ministry for Defence in Sukhum in the Summer of 2008. The building was being renovated, the Abkhazian army had employed experienced trainers from Russia, who quite probably hadn't come to Abkhazia merely on their own initiative. However, in May 2008 as in 2003 fear could be felt amongst civilians that war would once more beset this coastal land. Some hesitated to refurbish their home, to open a store – what would become of it if tomorrow war breaks out? Spoken and unspoken this question was omnipresent, affecting the attitudes towards life and spirits of the people.

In the August War of 2008, the Abkhazians were spared new victims partially thanks to the military protection by Russia and the presence of Russian soldiers. The recognition of the republic by Russia opened a new chapter in the history of Abkhazia.

The Abkhazia, which I experienced in June 2009 during my third trip, had gained not just formal sovereignty. Vitali Sharia condensed the consensus amongst his compatriots into one phrase thus: “Life forces us to take a pro-Russian stance, but we don't do this blindly”. His editorial board has just relocated, to a modest but better accommodation. The rickety official Zhiguli had stayed, with its patient driver, whereas Abkhazia's government officials had traded their Volgas for heavy Jeeps produced in the west.

Georgia had failed to win over even a minority of Abkhazians to join its state. Vitali Sharia explained why with a short look back: “The atmosphere since the war of 1993 has removed the foundation for any collaboration”. Stanislav Lakoba, then Secretary of the Security Council, phrased it less diplomatically: “The Georgians don't have a fighting spirit, they're no fighters” and added with a sarcastic smile: “The smaller the people, the longer the dagger”.

The US steel helmet on top of the TV set in the office of major-general and Deputy Chief of Abkhazia's General Staff Garri Kupalba was symbolic for what the small Abkhazian people had achieved. The helmet had been carried off by Abkhazian soldiers in the August of 2008. At the time they took over control of the Kodori Valley, which had been occupied by Georgian forces in contravention of the 1994 cease fire agreement. The former teacher surprised me with his cheerful and unmilitarily loose manner and his boyish mischievous smile. The teacher in his general's uniform was representative for a small people's army, that had been victorious over the army of an ally of the US empire. For at the borders of Abkhazia, the US, a power foreign to the Caucasus, had failed.

It was also a type of romanticism made of steel that enabled the victory of the Abkhazians over their enemies. A lot of this spirit could be felt when I was a guest of the writer Gennadi Alamia in June 2009. He maintained contacts with the Abkhaz diaspora, especially in Turkey. The author of the national anthem of Abkhazia is Secretary-General of the international organisation of Akhaz-Abaza peoples. In his living room, among expressionist paintings of the Black Sea coast and one Abkhazian and one Russian flag above the fire place, he told of the war years of 1992/93. At the time, he mobilised volunteers from the North Caucasus to Abkhazia. Alamia, a graduate of the Moscow Institute for Literature, is like most Abkhazians also a citizen of the Russian Federation. But his world view is not that of the Russian capital. “I think in Abkhaz first”, says Alamia, and he criticises the Caucasophobia that is widespread in the Russian society. He complains that for example, Chechens are often “depicted as man-eaters” in Russia. He even claims to have got to know the Chechen leader Shamil Basayev, later mutated into a terrorist, “as an intelligent, rationally reasoning man” at the side of Abkhazian independence fighters in 1993. Alamia sees me off with a confession: “We don't want to be a colony, but a free, independent country. We need people who consider this ground as their native country, and we don't want to dissolve into humanity at large.”

“This here is the Caucasus, here one should behave accordingly”, said President Sergei Bagapsh to me during an interview in June 2009. I didn't foresee that this would be our last conversation. Impressive about him was his level-headed, calm manner. He could be angry, but he always tried to keep this anger under control. He called the Georgians “a talented people”, with a view to the long-term neighbourhood but not under the illusion that reconciliation would take place soon. Sergei Bagapsh was primarily a realist, and the recognition by Russia did not cause him to underestimate the internal problems of his small country.

I had sat several times across Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili, listening to his fantasising about a “re-unification” of Georgia with Abkhazia. No two statesmen could be less alike than Bagapsh and Saakashvili. If evidence was still required that here two peoples with contrary national characters stood opposed to one another, it was expressed in these two personalities. The only thing that worried me during the conversation was Bagapsh's health. For the President was smoking incessantly, as if with every breath he wanted to relieve himself a bit from the pressure that he was permanently exposed to, by enemies and friends alike.

Walking through Sukhum in 2009, at first sight one could see that a new Abkhazia was taking shape. More than ever before, houses were being renovated and extended, the promenade “Naberezhnaja Maxadzhirov” (“Embankment of the Exiles”) had been renewed, freshly lacquered wooden benches stood where previously potholes had been. However, the most crucial change was detectable in the faces of people and in conversations. The fear that tomorrow might bring war once more had disappeared from them.

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**VANESSA BOAS**  
GERMANY

### **Picking up shards in the Caucasus**

My heart races as I cross the border: a step into the unknown.  
What does an unrecognized state look like and how does it function?

The flirty border guards do not make me feel at ease.  
I bite my nails nervously as I await permission from the capital to pass.  
It seems my endless emails have not assured my entry.

Potholes forcefully impose themselves as pauses in my conversation with the taxi driver.  
Tales of suffering, of resentment, optimism and pride are told in foreign tongues.  
Time stands still.

Nationalism burns brightly in the Caucasus' heart and manifests itself in the form of blind passion.

Neighbours turn into enemies.  
The other is stripped of his face.  
Objectivity is trampled on in the mud.

And what about you Abkhazia?  
What will your justice be?

It is undoubtedly tempting to close one's eyes and hide behind the treacherous banner of nationalism.

And how could I blame you,  
when it is your neighbours who taught you.

**Vanessa Boas**

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<http://www.reflectionsonabkhazia.net/index.php/vanessa-boas>

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## REFLECTIONS ON ABKHAZIA

[14 August] 1992-2012

[www.reflectionsonabkhazia.net](http://www.reflectionsonabkhazia.net)

[www.abkhazworld.com](http://www.abkhazworld.com)