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"Frozen conflicts" in Europe

Georgia vs. Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia

The conflict in and over Abkhazia¹

Sergey Markedonov

The dissolution of the USSR at the end of the Cold War brought new challenges to the Caucasus. The former republics of Soviet Transcaucasia immediately became international actors which identified their own national interests and foreign policy priorities. The formation of independent states in the South Caucasus has been accompanied by a search for new mechanisms to ensure regional security and enshrine new formats of international cooperation. The newly independent post-Soviet states are, however, not the only product of the collapse of the USST. One of the major consequences of this process was the appearance of entities that have also declared their independence and sovereignty but not obtained UN membership and full-fledged international recognition even though they were able to defend themselves through armed confrontation as well as bloody conflicts².

Abkhazia has become one of the most interesting cases of de facto statehood building in Eurasia. More than twenty years ago, in August, 1992, it was drawn into an almost 14-month-long conflict with the Georgian government and local paramilitary forces. Since 1993, September 30 has traditionally been celebrated in Abkhazia as Victory Day. On that day, the Abkhaz armed forces and volunteers from the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus drove the Georgian troops and militias out of most of the Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. For Tbilisi, that meant the loss of jurisdiction over part of its territory recognized de jure as formally belonging to it. For Sukhumi/Sukhum, in contrast, it marked the beginning of its campaign to secure international recognition. For the whole intervening period, Abkhazia's leaders pursued that objective in the face of controversial inter-action with the "mother state" and adverse external influences. In August 2008, Abkhazia obtained the first recognition of its independence. While the huge role played by Moscow in the transformation of the Georgia-Abkhaz conflict needs to be recognized, the "hand of the Kremlin" was not 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 Abkhaz Autonomous

1 A modified version of this chapter was published in *Abkhazia: Between the Past and Future* (2013). Ed. by Islam Tekushev, Sergey Markedonov and Kirill Shevchenko. Prague. Medium Orient, pp. 16-64.

2 For more detailed observation see: Markedonov, Sergey. *The Unrecognized States of Eurasia as a Phenomenon of the USSR's Dissolution* (2012) // *Demokratizatsiya. The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization*, Vol. 20, no. 2.

Soviet Socialist Republic outside the framework of the Georgian independent state.

Political geography

Abkhazia is located in the north-western part of the southern slope of the Greater Caucasus and on the south-eastern coast of the Black Sea. Its capital, Sukhum (Sukhumi) serves as the administrative center of this 8,700 square kilometer territory. In the north-east, Abkhazia shares a border with Russia (the Black Sea coast of the Krasnodar region) and in the south-west it borders on Georgia (Samegrelo region). Most members of the UN regard the Abkhaz-Georgia border purely as an administrative one, rather than a true inter-state one.

The size and composition of the population of Abkhazia is difficult to ascertain and has often been disputed; the methods for estimating it are extremely sensitive and controversial. According to the last Soviet census (1989), held on the eve of the collapse of the USSR and the Georgian-Abkhaz armed conflict (1992-1993), the total population of the territory of the Abkhaz ASSR (Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic) was 525,061 people (9.7% of the entire population of the Soviet Georgia), of whom 239,872 were ethnic Georgians (45.7% of the population), 93,267 were Abkhazians (17.8%), 76,541 were Armenians (14.6%), 74,913 were Russians (14.3%) and 14,700 were Greeks (2.8%). At various times, however, some of those ethnic groups were identified by different names. In the Soviet census of 1926, the three Kartvelian ethnic groups (Georgians, Megrelians and Svans) were listed separately (there were 41,000 Megrelians, 19,900 Georgians and 6,600 Svans). In subsequent censuses, the generic term "Georgians" was introduced and used to identify all three Kartvelian ethnic groups. As a result of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict of 1992-1993, Abkhazia's population declined by almost a factor of three. According to the census data (collected from 21 to 28 February 2011), the population of Abkhazia is currently 240,705 people³. The country is home to 91 separate ethnic groups. The most numerous are the Abkhazians, of whom there are 122,069 (50.71%); Russians, with 22,077 people (9.17%); Armenians, with 41,864 people (17.39%); and Georgians, with 43,166 people (17.93%). Only 3,201 people (1.33%) were recorded as Megrelians⁴. The data provided by Abkhaz statisticians

3 As a result of the armed conflict of 1992-1993 about 8,000 people were killed and 18,000 were injured. Approximately 200,000 people left the territory of Abkhazia. See more detailed observation: *Abkhazia Today. Europe Report N°176* – 15 September 2006. Brussels, pp.1,13.

4 *V Abkhazii podvedeny itogi pervoi perepisi [The results of the first census are summed up in Abkhazia]*. <http://abkhasia.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/198470/> (28-12-11).

raises many questions, however. It is questionable how, given the number of Abkhazians who left the republic between 1989 and 2011, the number of the ethnic Abkhazians has increased from 93,267 to 122,069. According to Georgian statistics, the total population of Abkhazia stood at about 179,000 people in 2003 and 178,000 in 2005⁵.

The Constitution of the Republic of Abkhazia (Apsny) describes it as “a sovereign, democratic State, historically established by the right of the people to self-determination.”⁶ As of December 2012, Abkhazia has been recognized as independent by six UN-member states (Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru, Vanuatu and Tuvalu). On September 17, 2008 Russia and Abkhazia signed a Treaty of Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance which provides for a Russian military and political presence in the Republic.

From the point of view of Georgian legislation, Abkhazia is considered an “autonomous republic” within the State of Georgia and an integral part of the Georgian state. Article 1, Paragraph 1 of the Constitution of Georgia emphasizes that “Georgia is an independent, unitary and indivisible state, as confirmed by the referendum held on March 31, 1991 across the country, including the Abkhaz ASSR and the former South Ossetian Autonomous Region, and the Act on the Restoration of the State Independence of Georgia on April 9, 1991.” Article 8 declares Abkhazian the official language in Abkhazia, and Article 5 establishes representation for Abkhazia in the upper chamber (Senate) of the Parliament of Georgia “after creating the territorial integrity of Georgia and proper conditions for the formation of local self-government.”⁷

Under Georgian Law, Abkhazia and South Ossetia are considered “the result of the military aggression of the Russian Federation”⁸. Georgia currently hosts a “government of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia”, which acts on Georgian territory and is recognized by Tbilisi as the only legitimate authority of Abkhazia⁹.

The origins of ethno-political conflict

There is no consensus on the question of the origins of the ethno-political conflict in Abkhazia either in scholarly literature or in the numerous policy-

5 *Statistical Yearbook of Georgia 2005* (2005). Department for Statistics, Tbilisi. Population, Table 2.1, p. 33.

6 *The Republic of Abkhazia: The Constitution of the Republic of Abkhazia* (in Russian). <http://dpashka.narod.ru/konstitut.html>.

7 *The Constitution of Georgia* (in English). <http://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/details.jsp?id=7523>.

8 See the full text of The Law of Georgia “On Occupied Territories” (in English). [http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/2009/CDL\(2009\)004-e.asp](http://www.venice.coe.int/docs/2009/CDL(2009)004-e.asp).

9 On the activity of this Government see: <http://abkhazia.gov.ge>.

oriented reports devoted to its aftermath. According to Leila Tania, research director of the “Civil Initiative and the Man of the Future” Foundation, “unofficially the notion is circulated that the confrontation between the Abkhazians and Georgians is not as acute as, say, that between the Armenians and Azerbaijanis, and the enmity arose only in the course of the armed conflict and after it. Unfortunately, such a cursory look at the history and reality of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict has become entrenched within a number of international organizations ... An idealized picture of the pre-war phase of the conflict is more common among Abkhaz and Georgian participants in the informal dialogue, which only reinforces this stereotype among the international actors engaged in the conflict resolution process.”¹⁰

The Abkhaz (self-identification “Apsua”) have long populated the Western Caucasus. They speak one of the languages of the Abkhazo-Adygeyan (West Caucasian) language group. Together with peoples of the western Caucasus to whom they are closely related (for example: the Abazins, Adygeyans and Kabardians [or Circassians]), they play an important role in the ethno-cultural development of the Caucasus. By the beginning of 19th century, the Principality of Abkhazia (the ruling dynasty Chachba/ Shervashidze) was a formal protectorate of the Ottoman Empire. Its incorporation into the Russian Empire began in 1810, and until 1864 it enjoyed de facto autonomy. The abolition of this autonomy gave rise to widespread dissatisfaction among the Abkhaz population. Consequently, as a result of the Lykhny uprising of 1866 and the Russian-Ottoman War of 1877-1878, many ethnic Abkhaz were expelled from the Russian Empire. According to some estimates, 60% of the region’s population in the mid-1860s were forced to leave¹¹. At the same time, serfdom was abolished in the Caucasus, making it possible for landless peasants from Georgia to emigrate and explore the empty and often abandoned neighboring territories. In 1877, the famous Georgian public figure and teacher Jacob Gogebashvili (1840-1912) described this process as follows: “Resettlement is, without a doubt, not temporary, but permanent. Abkhazia will never again see its sons”. Gogebashvili nonetheless stressed that “... the anguish and the lack of land in Samegrelo ... make it highly desirable for many Megrelians to resettle in Abkhazia.”¹² Meanwhile, the Russian imperial administration encouraged the resettlement of Christian peoples in Abkhazia (mainly Armenians, Greeks, Russians and Estonians). As a result, the

10 Leila Taniya, *Varianty strategii uregulirovaniya gruzino-abkhazskogo konflikta* [The variants of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict resolution strategies] (2003). Central Asia and the Caucasus. No. 5, p. 51.

11 Brooks, Willis. Russia’s conquest and pacification of the Caucasus: relocation becomes a pogrom in the post-Crimean period 1995). In *Nationalities Papers*, no. 23(4), pp. 675-86.

12 Gogebashvili, Jacob. Kem zaselit’ Abkhaziyu? [With whom should Abkhazia be settled?] (1877) In *Tifliskii Vestnik* [*The Tiflis Messenger*], no. 209, September, 27.

early 20th century was a period of radical ethno-demographic transition in the region.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Sukhum district (created as a result of the conversion of the Sukhum Military Department in 1883) was part of the Kutaisi province and thus subordinated to the Russian Caucasian administration in Tbilisi. From 1904-1917, Gagra and the adjacent areas were included in the Sochi district of the Black Sea province (the smallest province of the Russian Empire). Following the collapse of the Russian Empire and the creation of the newly independent states on its former territory, the “Abkhaz issue” was a focal point in the clash of interests between the Bolsheviks, the Armed Forces of South Russia (the “White Movement” led by General Anton Denikin) and the Democratic Republic of Georgia. In the summer of 1918, Abkhazia was incorporated into the new Georgian state. This process was accompanied by repressive actions against the Abkhaz national movement and ordinary Abkhazians by the central authorities of Georgia and the Georgian armed forces (both the Army and the Georgian National Guard were under the command of General George Mazniev [Mazniashvili]). In March 1919, the People's Council of Abkhazia, the formation of which was decisively influenced by the central government of Georgia, adopted the Act on the Entry of Abkhazia into Georgia as an Autonomous Region. This act was then approved by the Constituent Assembly of Georgia. According to the 1921 Constitution of Georgia (Chapter 11, “Independent control”, Article 107) Abkhazia (Sukhumi region), Muslim Georgia (Batumi region) and Zagatala (Zakatalskaya area) were recognized as “inseparable parts of the Georgian republic” and granted “autonomous government in local affairs.”¹³

The strict and sometimes repressive policies of Georgia's Menshevik government vis-à-vis ethnic minorities created sympathy for the Abkhaz people in Soviet Russia and within the Bolshevik movement. In March 1921, Abkhazia was proclaimed a Soviet Socialist Republic. In December of the same year, an agreement was signed between Georgia (which by that time had become Soviet), and the Abkhazian Soviet Socialist Republic. According to that document, Abkhazia became part of Georgia. Since then, Abkhazia has been considered a contractual republic. The Constitution of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic adopted by the First Congress of the Soviets of Georgia in 1922 said that, based on self-determination, it included: the Adjara Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, the South Ossetian Autonomous Region (Oblast) and the Abkhazian Soviet Socialist Republic. The Constitution of the USSR (1924) stated that “the autonomous Republics of Adjara and Abkhazia and the autonomous regions of South Ossetia, Nagorny Karabakh and Nakhichevan are represented in the Council of Nationalities by one repre-

13 *The Constitution of Georgia* (adopted in February, 21, 1921 by the Georgian Constituent Assembly) (in Russian), http://www.200.org.ge/documents/1918docs/rus/21_02_21.pdf. On March, 1922 four districts of the former Zagatala area became parts of Azerbaijan.

sentative.”¹⁴ In 1925, the Third Congress of the Soviets of Abkhazia adopted a constitutional plan involving a contractual relationship between Sukhumi and Tbilisi, but this document was rejected by the Transcaucasian Territorial Committee of the Bolshevik Party. Subsequently, the leaders of the Abkhaz national movement would call it “the first Abkhaz Constitution”. During the period of “perestroika” and the dissolution of the USSR, it became an important tool in the political and legal struggle for Abkhazia’s secession from Georgia¹⁵.

In 1931, the Abkhazian ASSR was created within the Georgian SSR. Under Stalin, the Georgian leadership pursued a strict policy of discrimination against the Abkhazian population. In 1937-1938, the Abkhaz alphabet was replaced by one based on the Georgian schedule and in 1945-1946 Georgian became the basic language of instruction in Abkhazian schools. Many Abkhaz toponyms were replaced by Georgian ones. “The policy of repression of the Abkhaz language and culture implemented by very specific persons of Georgian nationality (not only policymakers, but also ordinary people) promoted among the Abkhaz people the image of an enemy in relation to the mass of Georgian immigrants who possessed the same social privileges”, says Gia Nodia, a contemporary Georgian scholar and social activist¹⁶. The mass migration of the rural population from the inner regions of Georgia to the Abkhaz ASSR became state policy after the Central Committee of the All-Union Communist Party (Bolsheviks) and the Council of People’s Commissars (Sovnarkom) passed a Resolution “On Measures to Protect the Public Land of the Collective Farms from Being Left to go to Waste” (1939). In an explanatory note on the situation in the Georgian SSR, it was emphasized that “collective farmers and individual farmers could use large areas of vacant lands which were not cultivated by the local population due to the lack of manpower.”¹⁷

14 *Bor’ba za uprocheniye Sovetskoï vlasti v Gruzii. Sbornik dokumentov i materialov. 1921-1925* [The struggle for the Soviet power strengthening in Georgia. Collection of documents and materials] (1959). Tbilisi, p. 80.

15 On July, 23, 1992 the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia abolished the Constitution of the Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the Soviet Georgia and proclaimed the “restoration” of the Constitutional draft of 1925. See more detailed observation: Lakoba, Stanislav. *History: 1917-1989* (1999). In *The Abkhazians* (Hewitt G., ed.). Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, p.93.

16 Nodia, Gia. *Konflikt v Abkhazii: natsionalnye proekty I politicheskie obyazatel’sstva* [The conflict in Abkhazia: national projects and political obligations] (1998). In *Gruziny I Abkhazy: puti k primipeniyu* [The Georgians and Abkhazians: ways for reconciliation]. Moscow, p. 30.

17 Sagaria, E., Achugba, T. (ed.). *Abkhazia: dokumenty svidetelstvuyut. Sbornik materialov. 1937-1953* [Abkhazia: documents testify. Collection of materials.1937-1953] (1992). Alashara Publishing House, Sukhum/Sukhumi, pp. 6-7.

Subsequently the discriminatory measures against the Abkhazian population were substantially mitigated, and education in Abkhaz and the Abkhaz media were revived. In 1978, during the process of adopting the Abkhaz ASSR Constitution, a compromise was reached: the Abkhaz language became, along with Georgian and Russian, a state language in the autonomous territory. In addition, special quotas to fill vacant positions in Party, government, administrative and economic bodies were also introduced. At the 11th Plenum of the Communist Party of Georgia (June 27, 1978), then First Secretary Eduard Shevardnadze publicly criticized the “excesses” of the Georgian Communists with regard to the “Abkhaz issue”¹⁸. The policy of ethnic discrimination had an extremely negative impact, creating among Abkhazian politicians and scientists the perception that even in the 1960s-1980s, the social and economic policies of the Georgian SSR were geared to ensuring the large scale resettlement of ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia with the aim of changing the ethno-demographic balance to the detriment of the Abkhaz people. Whereas in 1959, there were already 158,221 Georgians in Abkhazia compared with 61,193 Abkhaz, by 1970 the number of Georgians had risen to 199,955 while the number of Abkhaz was 77,276). In 1979, Georgians already constituted 43.9% of the population of the autonomous region (213,322)¹⁹. In this case, as it was rightly noted by the authors of an International Crisis Group report entitled “Abkhazia Today” (September, 2006), “the Georgian portion of the population of Abkhazia and society at large within the Georgian SSR perceived a number of ‘liberal measures’ enacted by the Brezhnev leadership directed at the Abkhazians as ‘discriminatory’ against the Georgians themselves. Abkhazians, being an autonomous ethnic minority, occupied about 67% of the administrative positions in the Abkhaz ASSR.”²⁰

Since the creation of the autonomous republic within the Georgian SSR, the Abkhazian population has periodically tried to ask for reconsideration of its status. In 1931, 1957, 1967, and 1977 the Abkhaz national intelligentsia prepared appeals to the leadership of the USSR in favor of secession from the Georgian SSR in order either to join the RSFSR or to form a separate Abkhaz Union Republic. The so-called “Letter of 130” (December 1977) was the last address to this effect directed towards the Kremlin before Gorbachev’s “perestroika” and the subsequent political liberalization that culminated in the collapse of the Soviet Union. However this initiative was rejected and its organ-

18 Kazenin, K. (ed.) *Gruzino-abkhazskii konflikt. 1917-1992* [The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. 1917-1992] (2007). Europe Publishing House, Moscow, p. 27.

19 *Naselenie Abkhazii* [The population of Abkhazia], <http://www.ethno-kavkaz.narod.ru/rnabkhazia.html>. See also: Lezhava, Georgii. *Izmenenie klassovo-sotsialnoi struktury naseleniya Abkhazii* [The changes in the social structure of Abkhazia’s population] (1989). Alashara Publishing House, Sukhumi/Sukhum.

20 Abkhazia today..., p. 6.

izers were criticized by the Abkhaz Party Committee Bureau (on February 22, 1978) for promoting “erroneous nationalist views and calumny”,²¹.

Abkhazia: from Soviet autonomy to a de facto state

Thus on the eve of “Perestroika”, the Georgian and Abkhaz communities inside Abkhazia, as well as Georgian society as a whole, were ready to seize the opening provided by the weakening of the Kremlin’s administrative control and the subsequent political liberalization in order to move ahead with their nationalist aspirations. “The Abkhaz problem” became the main “political trauma” for post-Soviet Georgia. The struggle of the Georgian National Democrats for Georgian independence during the final years of the USSR coincided with, and proceeded in tandem with, the Abkhaz movement for ethno-political self-determination. The events of the late 1980s and early 1990s are considered, in post-Soviet Georgian historiography and political science, a period of national liberation for the Georgian people. During that period, the most important slogans, requirements and programs that became the basis for the political, legal and ideological development of post-Soviet Georgia were proclaimed. The ethno-nationalist slogans and appeals for the restoration of the political and legal continuity of the Georgian Democratic Republic (1918-1921), a state with extremely complicated and rather ambiguous relations with Abkhazia, was in sharp contrast to the rhetoric of the Georgian and Abkhaz national movements of the late 1980s. As a result, the start of Georgia’s national liberation expedited the self-determination of the Abkhaz people. The escalation of tensions was facilitated by the particularities of Abkhazia’s “political demography. In contrast to the Ossetians, whose ethnic homeland was not confined to South Ossetia (most of the Ossetian population of the Georgian SSR had lived outside of the South Ossetian Autonomous Region), the homeland of the Abkhaz was virtually identical with the territory of the Abkhaz ASSR (a further 2,000 Abkhazians live in Georgia’s autonomous region of Adjara). Unlike South Ossetia, in Abkhazia the “titular” ethnic group did not constitute a numerical majority. This created many difficulties for Abkhazia’s secession from Georgia even during the Soviet period. The Abkhaz national movement could not appeal to the “will of the majority”. As a result, its main task was to control “its own territory”, providing full political, social, economic and ideological domination inside of that area. However, in a situation where the largest community in Abkhazia (Georgians) supported the preservation of the territorial integrity of Geor-

21 Markedonov, Sergey. *Sovetskii Kavkaz v 1970-e: predchuvstviye grazhdaskoi voiny* [The Soviet Caucasus in 1970s: Premonition of civil war] (2007). In *Neprikosnovennyyi zapas* [Emergency Reserve], no. 2(52), p. 54.

gia within the Georgian SSR, the Abkhaz movement needed an ally in order to implement its policy. In Moscow (initially the central administration of the USSR, then, following its dissolution, the Russian government), they found such an ally. For nearly six decades, the Abkhaz representatives had addressed their demands to Moscow but a new appeal to Kremlin, adopted on March 18, 1989 (when 30.000 people gathered for a rally in the village of Lykhny in the Gudauta district, the former residence of the Abkhazian princes), demanded a radically different approach from all previous ones. On the one hand, it echoed traditional pro-Soviet slogans such as the “Leninist principles of national policy.” On the other hand, the protesters discussed the “political, economic and cultural sovereignty” of Abkhazia. Moreover, this new appeal to Moscow fostered consensus between the Abkhaz oblast committee of the CPSU and representatives of the Abkhaz intelligentsia, who had been recently accused of “bourgeois nationalism” and “slandorous fabrications.” The creation of the “Aydylara” (Popular Forum) movement on December, 13, 1988 was the practical manifestation of that consensus. Nationalist discourse replaced all other causes in the public sphere and began to play a mobilizing and unifying role. Within the context of conditions conducive to political liberalization, the growing public activity in Abkhazia attracted unprecedented attention throughout Georgia. It accelerated the crystallization of the Georgian national movement, in that it significantly simplified its ideological development search for it. The “enemy image” fell into the hands of its leaders. In the space of a few months, the “communist-dissident” controversy in Georgia was replaced by the discourse of “national unity”²². It was then that the “Abkhazian separatism” movement became linked in the Georgian perception (both national leaders and public opinion as a whole) with Russian intrigues. This discourse did not make any serious distinction between the USSR and the Russian Empire, i.e. the various political forms or incarnations of Russian power. The tragic events of April 9, 1989 (the deployment of Soviet Army troops to disperse a peaceful demonstration on Tbilisi’s Rustaveli Avenue) and the Georgian-Abkhaz clashes in Sukhumi and other parts of the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic in July 1989 ensured the development of blood lines between Georgians and Abkhazians²³. Attempts

22 The Congress of People’s Deputies Commission (known as the Anatoliy Sobchak Commission) that investigated the Tbilisi violence of April 1989 brilliantly demonstrated this trend: “In those conditions the state and party leadership of Georgia faced the necessity to confirm its role of political and ideological vanguard and to follow the “Perestroika” principles in order to influence the public opinion preventing the gap between its status and realities on the ground. However, Georgia’s Communist Party leaders failed to provide a dialogue and effectively cooperate with society”. See: <http://sobchak.org/rus/docs/zakluchenie.htm>. Subsequent developments in Abkhazia and South Ossetia show the Communist leadership’s willingness to exploit nationalist rhetoric to preserve its positions.

23 During the violence in Tbilisi, 19 people were killed and 200 people were injured. During two weeks of riots in Abkhazia, 14 people were killed. See for detailed observations: *Gruzi-*

to preserve Georgian-Abkhaz “unity” within the existing Soviet political framework failed. A landmark event was the split of the Supreme Council of the Abkhaz ASSR in 1990 into the Abkhaz and Georgian factions. On August 25, 1990 the Abkhaz members of the Supreme Council adopted a “Declaration of State Sovereignty” and a resolution “On the legal guarantees of protection of statehood of Abkhazia.” Those documents were voided in turn by the Supreme Council’s Georgian members. The mass political split between the two ethnic communities was reinforced by referendums carried out by the Soviet authorities (on voting for a “renewed Union”), and by Georgia’s attempt to secede from the USSR by means of a referendum on the restoration of the national independence. The first referendum took place on March 17, 1991, and the second on March 31, 1991. The ethnic Abkhaz supported Moscow and Soviet policy almost unconditionally. For this reason, they participated in the first referendum and boycotted the second. Georgians living in Abkhazia, as well as their compatriots in the rest of Georgia, refused to take part in the vote on the future of the Soviet Union and instead participated in the referendum on the restoration of Georgian statehood. Those two referendums demonstrated to the Abkhaz leadership the need to maintain strong relations with allies other than Moscow, and for that reason they sought to secure the support of Abkhazia’s ethnic Russians, Greeks and Armenians²⁴. Abkhazia’s leaders cannot claim all the credit for the referendum outcome, however, as it was primarily the result of Georgian politicians’ collective failure to create a dialogue with their Abkhaz counterparts because of their commitment to radical ethnic nationalism, which included strong anti-Russian and anti-Armenian elements. This greatly strengthened the Abkhazian national movement in its desire to secede from Georgia. Facing Georgia and the largest community inside the Abkhaz ASSR – the Georgians – the Abkhazians in those circumstances could not count on ultimate success without the support of the region’s other ethnic minorities. Representatives of the Russian and Armenian communities of Abkhazia later played a significant role in the formation of this breakaway state.

In the last two years of the USSR (1989-1991), the Abkhazian movement could not be clearly classified as separatist, although it had been identified as such in Tbilisi since the early stages of political activity in the Autonomous

ya: Problemy I perspektivy razvitiya [Georgia: problems and perspectives of development] (2002). Russian Institute for Strategic Studies, Moscow. Vol. 1-2.

24 Thus in Abkhazia among 318,300 enlisted voters on March, 17, 1991 166,500 people (52,3%) participated in the referendum on the “renewed USSR”. At that juncture, ethnic Abkhazians constituted 17, 8% of the total population, including both voters and people with to right to vote. 98,6% of all Abkhaz voters who participated in the referendum (51,6% of the total figure) supported the integrity of the USSR. Representatives of the Russian and Armenian communities (Yuri Voronov, Albert Topolyan, Galust Trapizonyan, and Sergey Matosyan) played a significant role in the Abkhazia’s de facto state-building.

republic. On the one hand, the Abkhazian ASSR, along with the other autonomous communities of the Soviet Union, took part in the process of trying to obtain “sovereignty”. On the other hand, however, in 1989-1991 most Georgians were opposed to the Union state and wanted to destroy it, while the Abkhaz movement supported the territorial integrity of the USSR and was prepared to protect it. Vladislav Ardzinba (1945-2010), the leader of the Abkhaz national movement and since 1990 the Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Abkhaz ASSR, was a member of the parliamentary group “Union that Opposed the Secession of the National-State Formations.” Preserving the unity of the Soviet Union was seen in Sukhumi as a guarantor against ethnopolitical conflict and as a potential opportunity through which loyalty to Moscow could be parlayed into support for a higher status for Abkhazia. In this regard it is important to pay attention to the common argument among the Abkhaz leaders. To them, voting in favor of preserving the USSR gave them the right to secede from the newly independent Georgia after the dissolution of the Soviet state in December 1991²⁵.

At the same time, it would be incorrect to treat the Abkhaz movement as a blind adherent to and champion of the Soviet political system, as Georgian observers and political scientists sympathetic to Georgia both from Russia and the West did later²⁶. As current Abkhazian Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and political analyst Irakli Khintba rightly stated, voting in favor of the USSR “was not a values’ choice for the Abkhaz people.” It was “a tactical move which then made it possible to appeal to the relevant procedure of self-determination of the autonomous republics according to the existing Soviet legislation ‘On the procedure for solving problems related to the secession of a Union Republic from the USSR.’”²⁷

However, some attempts to use new non-Soviet approaches (ethnic quotas instead of majority rule principles) to halt the escalation of ethnic tensions were not so successful. In summer 1991, the Georgian and Abkhaz sides agreed on a draft electoral draft law which determined the distribution of parliamentary seats among the various ethnic communities for the election of the Supreme Council of Abkhazia. Twenty-eight seats were reserved for the Abkhazians, 26 for the Georgians, and 11 seats for all other ethnic groups. Elec-

25 Abkhazia today..., p. 7.

26 The most prominent example of that approach was the book by Svetlana Chervonnaya. See: Chervonnaya, Svetlana. *Abkhazia-1992. Postkommunisticheskaya Vendee*. [Abkhazia-1992. The Post-Communist Vendee] (1993). Mosgorpechat’ Publishing House, Moscow.

27 Cited in: *Irakli Khintba: Razval SSSR stal triggerom etnopoliticheskikh konfliktov na ego okrainah* [The USSR collapse triggered ethno-political conflicts in its border regions], <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/182478> (18-3-11). The Law mentioned here was ratified on April, 3, 1990. Article 3 of this Law gave the autonomous entities the right to determine their status within the Union Republic and the USSR as whole when the Union Republic seceded. For the full text of the Law (in Russian) see: <http://pravo.levonevsky.org/baza/soviet/sss0973.htm>.

tions under this scheme were held in October and December 1991. This practice was later criticized and blamed for promoting apartheid and discrimination. When trying to oppose his predecessor, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Georgia's second President Eduard Shevardnadze reproached him for colluding with the Abkhaz nationalists. Be that as it may, the compromise in 1991 strengthened the Abkhaz side, as it confirmed if not privileged, then special status, as well as providing the Abkhaz with greater administrative capacity to influence the situation in the region. However, the compromise was shortlived, and the ethno-political split reemerged in stark fashion just after the opening of the new Supreme Council. This was because the parties had by then become the hostages of their maximalist demands. According to Bruno Coppeters, "both sides in practice were not ready to give up the dream of establishing their own exclusive control over the territory of Abkhazia."²⁸ At the end of 1991 and the beginning of 1992, new contradictions were added to the age-old inter-ethnic confrontations. On January 6, 1992, the first President of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia (1939-1993), was overthrown and power was transferred to the so-called War Council that was replaced in March of the same year by a ruling State Council. A cleavage developed within Georgian society between the supporters of the elected Head of State and the new leadership that initiated the return to Tbilisi of Eduard Shevardnadze, the former Communist Party of Georgia first secretary. This new division in one sense helped the Abkhaz leaders weaken the political potential of Tbilisi. It made it clear to them that it would be possible to implement a new agenda focused on the secession from Georgia after the dissolution of the USSR in December, 1991. On the other hand, it turned Abkhazia into a hostage of Georgia's domestic political confrontation. Consolidating the champions of Gamsakhurdia (Zviadists) and the supporters of Shevardnadze, who had no legitimacy, became possible by invoking the common enemy of "Abkhaz separatism". It is no accident that on July 24, 1992, 19 ethnic Georgian political parties and movements in Abkhazia were united in the "Council of National Unity of Georgia" which included in its platform a requirement to preserve the territorial integrity of the country. In August 1992, the State Council of Georgia issued a special "Manifesto of Great Reconciliation" addressed to the supporters of the overthrown president.

Against the background of the two political fractures in the first half of 1992, the Abkhaz leaders took a number of crucial steps towards creating the foundation for their own statehood. They unilaterally provided for the transfer of Abkhazia's militia (law enforcement forces), military units, enterprises, administrative structures and their staff to their own political jurisdiction. At the same time, they secured the preponderance of ethnic Abkhazians (Abkhaz Interior Minister Givi Lominadze, an ethnic Georgian, was dismissed and

28 Coppeters, Bruno. *Federalizm i konflikt na Kavkaze* [Federalism and the Conflict in the Caucasus] (in Russian) (2002). Moscow Carnegie Center, Moscow, p. 24.

replaced by an ethnic Abkhaz, Alexander Ankvab). The Regiment of Internal troops of the Supreme Council of Abkhazia was created. In response to these steps, the leaders and activists of the Georgian community in Abkhazia formed their own militias, such as the local units of “Mkhedrioni” (“Horsemen”) and others. In this period, paradoxically, the Georgian authorities helped the Abkhaz side. As Abkhaz historian Timur Achugba correctly observed, “radical views on the political status of Abkhazia were aggravated after the Military Council of Georgia annulled on February 21, 1992 all Soviet-era legislation enacted since February 25, 1921, including the Constitution of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1978.” Instead the Constitution of 1921 was restored, which contained a paragraph about the “autonomous government” in Abkhazia in local affairs but did not consider it an entity with any special political and legal status similar to that which the Abkhaz ASSR had been accorded in the 1978 Constitution. According to Achugba, “the act of the Georgian political elite was perceived as the actual abolition of Abkhazia’s statehood.”²⁹ On July 23, 1992, the Supreme Council of Abkhazia put forward a decision to abolish the Constitution of the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic within the Georgian SSR and replace it with the constitutional project of 1925. This decision spurred Tbilisi to use force, and on August 14, 1992 the troops of the State Council of Georgia entered the territory of Abkhazia. This ethnic conflict developed into an armed conflict between the Georgian state (and Georgian community in Abkhazia) on the one hand, and the breakaway territory on the other.

The Georgian-Abkhazian Armed Conflict

A detailed analysis of the Georgian-Abkhaz military confrontation (1992-1993) is not among the objectives of this report. The war will be discussed only in the context of the evolution of the ethno-political conflict in Abkhazia. The Georgian-Abkhaz armed conflict has been interpreted differently by both sides. From Georgia’s point of view, it was a struggle with a criminal separatist regime. According to Eduard Shevardnadze, who was personally responsible for the military solution of the “Abkhaz issue”, an ethno-cratic dictatorship had been formed in Abkhazia by the summer of 1992 and this development necessitated urgent military engagement. In contrast, the wide-

29 Achugba, Timur. *Etropoliticheskaya situatsiya v predvoennoi Abkhazii (Konets 80-h nachalo 90-h gg. XX veka)* [The ethno-political situation in pre-war Abkhazia (late 80s-early 90-s of the XX-th century)], <http://kvkz.ru/history/2439-yetnopoliticheskaya-situatsiya-v-predvoennoj-abxazii-konec-80-x-nachalo-90-x-gg-xx-veka.html> (27-6-10).

ly-held Abkhaz viewpoint sees the events of 1992-1993 as the “Great Patriotic War of the Abkhaz people.”³⁰

In the course of the armed conflict, the Abkhaz elite solved several important problems. First, it desired to preserve and protect an area which could constitute the core of an effective administration and military headquarters outside Georgian control. Second, it sought allies both within the republic (among other ethnic communities) and outside. Third, it tried to create and promote internationally the legitimacy of the Abkhaz secession.

In contrast, the Georgian authorities were interested in swiftly suppressing the separatist challenge in order to focus first on strengthening the domestic legitimacy of the new power structure that had replaced Gamsakhurdia, and then on consolidating the fragmented society on a “patriotic basis”. Apart from Abkhazia, Tbilisi faced a similar standoff with the other breakaway region, South Ossetia. Shortly before the outbreak of the armed conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia, with the help of Russia, negotiated and signed a ceasefire agreement in South Ossetia, the autonomous status of which Gamsakhurdia had abolished. But Tbilisi failed to induce the Ossetian leaders to accept Georgia’s jurisdiction. In addition to the cease-fire, Georgia ceded part of its sovereign control over South Ossetia to the Joint Control Commission and the Joint peacekeeping forces, which consisted of Russian, Georgian, and Ossetian troops. In this regard, a successful operation in Abkhazia was meant to send a “clear message” to the other “rebellious autonomy”. It allowed for the creation of a policy platform meant to politically and psychologically pressure the leaders of the South Ossetian national movement.

Initially, the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict resulted in a military success for the Georgian side. Sukhumi, the capital of Abkhazia, was captured. Even though Tbilisi controlled most of Abkhazia’s territory, including Sukhumi, from the summer of 1992 until the summer of 1993, the Abkhaz leadership managed to create an effective political and military center for their breakaway republic in the small town of Gudauta, which stands at the center of the district of the same name³¹. In 1992-1993 Abkhazia had no clear support from Russia, which itself was being wracked by separatist conflict (primarily in Chechnya), and was therefore not ready to defend the position of the Abkhaz side. Political analyst Oksana Antonenko characterized Russia’s policy toward Georgia and Abkhazia during this period as “multi-polar”.³² In this

30 *Belaya kniga Abkhazii: Dokumenty, materialy, svidetelstva* [The Abkhazia’s White book: Documents. Materials and testimonies] (1993). Moscow.

31 During the first months of the conflict, the Abkhaz leadership controlled only a small tract of territory around Gudauta, Tkvarcheli and several villages in the Ochamchira district. On October, 1992, it retook control over the Gagra district (north-east of Abkhazia).

32 Antonenko, Oksana. *Uncertainty: Russia and the Conflict over Abkhazia* (2005). In *Statehood and Security: Georgia after the Rose Revolution*, Coppieters B. and Legvold R. (eds). Cambridge, MA, pp. 208-217.

case, the Russian military establishment in particular was sympathetic to the Abkhaz side due to its negative attitude to Georgian leader Shevardnadze. They attributed the forced withdrawal of Soviet Army troops from Germany, the change of the official political position of the USSR in Central and Eastern Europe, and eventually the collapse of the Soviet Union to Shevardnadze's actions and policies while Soviet Foreign Minister.

The Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus (CMPC) was active in the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, as were the armed formations of the ethno-national movements in the North Caucasus. The CMPC was created on November 1-2, 1991 on the basis of the Assembly of Mountain Peoples established in August 1989. The CMPC was led by Musa (Yuri) Shanibov and Yusuf Soslambekov, who had been one of the main figures in the "Chechen revolution" of 1991. The ideology of the Assembly and subsequently the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus evolved along similar lines to those of other nationalist movements in the former Soviet Union. In the first phase, national and cultural goals and objectives (the revival of traditions, religion, etc.) dominated. Later, they were replaced by more pressing requirements for the recognition of the political status of a particular ethnic group or territory. The CMPC called for the revival of the single Mountainous Republic within the Russian Confederation. Later, the CMPC espoused separatist principles and it included in its membership people who had participated in the fighting in South Ossetia before 1992. It is thus hard to overestimate the role of volunteers from the North Caucasus in Abkhazia. During the 14 months of the armed conflict in Abkhazia 2,500 Circassian volunteers took part in the fighting. Sultan Sosnaliyev, an ethnic Kabardian, was Chief of Staff and then Defense Minister of Abkhazia during the conflict, and again from 2005-2007. Kabardian groups led by Muayed Shorov attacked the building of the Council of Ministers of Abkhazia, where the pro-Georgian administration had its headquarters. The Abkhaz separatists were supported by the Chechen separatists. On August 17, 1992, the CMPC held a parliamentary session in Grozny, the Chechen capital, during which delegates put forward the political slogan "Hands off Abkhazia". Shamil Basayev, later to become a prominent Chechen field commander, first gained notoriety during the Abkhaz conflict in which he commanded a unit of about 5,000 fighters. In addition to this military aid from the North Caucasus, the Abkhaz side was also supported by most representatives of the republic's other ethnic minorities. Ethnic Russians fought on the Abkhaz side, and the Marshal Baghramyan battalion consisted of ethnic Armenians. On the other hand, a small number of Armenians fought on the side of Georgia. However, most of them were from other regions of Georgia and their engagement was both less structured and less well known in terms of propaganda. Thus, the ethno-military

composition of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict was far more varied in comparison with the Georgian-Ossetian or Armenian-Azerbaijani conflicts³³.

The significant involvement of ethno-nationalist movements from the North Caucasus in the Georgian-Abkhazian armed conflict spurred Moscow to take more decisive action to end the confrontation. In September 1992, a meeting of the leaders of Georgia, Abkhazia and the North Caucasus republics, with the active participation of the Russian Federation, was held and a commission for restoring security in the region was created. However, this peace initiative did not achieve any concrete results due to the lack of a clear and precise procedure for implementing the decisions it adopted. October 1992 saw a turning point in the armed conflict, as the Abkhaz side seized the military initiative and began to extend its control over the north-west of the republic. Abkhaz forces captured Gagra on October 6 and reached the border with Russia on the river Psou shortly afterwards. On July 27, 1993, Russia mediated the signing between the two sides in Sochi of an agreement on a cease-fire and the mechanisms for its implementation. In fact, the implementation of the Sochi agreement would return the region to the situation in summer 1992, i.e. before the military confrontation started. The Sochi agreement did not contain any proposals on the future political and legal status of Abkhazia, which was the issue that triggered the Tbilisi-Sukhumi disagreements in the first place³⁴. The Abkhaz side was not satisfied with these conditions and attacked the Georgian positions in September 1993, inflicting a definitive defeat on the Georgian armed forces. The Abkhaz offensive coincided with a rebellion by supporters of ousted President Gamsakhurdia in West Georgia (Samegrelo). Not having a reliable rear flank in Samegrelo, the Georgian armed forces were unable to effectively counter the Abkhaz attack. As a result of the Abkhaz offensive and the virtually unilateral violation of the Sochi agreement, Georgia lost control over Abkhazia with the exception of a small area in the upper reaches of the Kodori Gorge (the Dal Gorge, sometimes called the Abkhazian Svaneti). Abkhaz forces secured control of that district of the gorge only in August 2008. The active military confrontation ended in the fall of 1993, although sporadic clashes took place in 1994 in both the Gali region and the Kodori Gorge. In April 1994, the Russian-mediated "Declaration on Measures for a Political Settlement of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict" was signed, and in May of that year the Georgian and Abkhazian leaders appealed to CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) Council of Heads of States asking for peacekeeping forces to be deployed in the conflict zone. In July 1994, a Russian peacekeeping operation got under-

33 Cheterian, Vicken. The Face of the Caucasus (2000). In *Armenian International Magazine*. Vol. 5, no. 3.

34 Although the Abkhaz side was responsible for violating this agreement, the Georgian side too failed to implement its conditions, in particular concerning the full withdrawal of military forces).

way in Abkhazia. Although many thought that other CIS member states would make troops available, in fact the operation, which lasted until August 2008, was exclusively Russian. Peacekeepers were deployed in a 12-kilometer territory known as the “security zone” on both sides of the river Inguri that marks the boundary between the Gali district of Abkhazia and the Zugdidi district of Georgia.

Abkhazia’s leaders failed during the armed conflict to convince the international community of the legality of Abkhazia’s secession from Georgia. Indeed, they still have not done so today. Georgia’s territorial integrity is recognized by an absolute majority of the UN member states. Nevertheless, the UN has followed the conflict closely since it began in 1992 and from the outset it recognized Abkhazia as a party to the conflict. That was the approach subsequently followed by the UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG)³⁵.

The armed conflict had disastrous consequences. Four thousand Georgians were killed and 1,000 disappeared. More than 3,000 Abkhazians lost their lives. The economic losses from the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict amounted to US\$10.7 billion. In the years immediately following the end of hostilities, 700 people were killed by landmines. Nearly 250,000 Georgians (nearly half the pre-war population) were forced to flee Abkhazia, of whom some 40,000-50,000 later returned to the south-eastern Gali district, which prior to conflict had been predominantly Georgian-populated³⁶. There was no mass return of refugees (or internally displaced persons, according to the viewpoint of the international community) to other parts of Abkhazia.

The peace process from 1993-2004: Failures and Successes

By October 1993, Georgia had lost its *de facto* sovereignty over most of the former Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia. The Russian-mediated Moscow ceasefire agreement signed in May 1994 also legally withdrew aspects of Georgian sovereignty over Abkhazia by placing the peacekeeping forces under the jurisdiction of the CIS Council of Heads of States. However, while the end of the military confrontation closed the book on one set of problems, it opened up a host of others. The two parties had different perceptions of the transitions that they had to make. The Abkhaz leaders had to make the transition from a military-political regime to normal civilian rule,

35 On July 21, 1994 the UN Security Council adopted Resolution No. 937 on the definition of the format of its Mission. The mandate of UNOMIG (121 observer) was based on the Moscow agreement on ceasefire on May 14, 1994. See more detailed information on UNOMIG activity: <http://www.unomig.org>

36 Abkhazia Today...

insofar as this was possible under conditions of destruction and blockade. Following the euphoria of victory, it was also critical that they establish elementary order to prevent the total criminalization of society and domination by warlords. In their pursuit of political independence from Georgia, Abkhazia's leaders began, from the first day after the end of the armed confrontation, building a legal framework upon which the formation of statehood could be based (this included the Constitution and the law on citizenship). The harmonization of interethnic relations within the country and the prevention of new ethno-political crises topped the post-war agenda. Additionally, negotiations on the future status of Abkhazia and the development of international contacts became priority directions for policy.

The Georgian side held the opposite view. With no money or resources for a quick military revenge, Tbilisi focused its energies on securing, at the international level, agreement on the “temporary” (suspended) status of Abkhazia and recognition of it as part of the united Georgian state. In addition, the Georgian authorities focused on pressuring Abkhazia economically to force it to make concessions.

The peace process developed on several levels. The first was within the framework of the UN, under whose auspices the first round of negotiations between the parties was held in Geneva, Switzerland from November 28 to December 1, 1993. The first round of that “Geneva process” (not to be confused with the “Geneva talks” on security and stability in the Caucasus launched in October, 2008 after the Russo-Georgian war) led to the signing in December 1993 by the Georgian and Abkhaz representatives of a “Memorandum of Understanding”, in which they agreed “not to use force or threaten the use of force against each other for the period of ongoing negotiations to achieve a comprehensive political settlement of the conflict.” In 1994, the UN Secretary General’s Group of Friends for Georgia (which originally included the United States, Germany, Britain, Russia, and France) was founded. In 1997, a Special Representative of the UN Secretary General was appointed to coordinate the work of the Geneva process, and the UNOMIG opened an office in Tbilisi. The Coordination Council and three working groups, focusing respectively on non-violence, the return of displaced persons, and economic issues, operated within the framework of the “Geneva process”. The last meeting of the Coordination Council was held in May 2006 after a nearly five-year break caused by the aggravation of the ethno-political situation in the Kodori Gorge in the fall of 2001. However, the violation in 2006 of the 1994 Moscow Agreement by Georgian military units that entered the upper part of the Kodori Gorge (a demilitarized zone under the terms of the 1994 agreement) ended the work of the Coordination Council. In 2001, the Special Representative of the UN Secretary General, German diplomat Dieter Boden, presented an eight-point peace project known as “Basic Principles for the Distribution of Competencies between Tbilisi and

Sukhumi” (also commonly known as the “Boden Plan”). This initiative was supported by the UN Security Council (Resolution No. 1393, January 31, 2002). The Plan was based on the principle of the territorial integrity of Georgia and it defined Abkhazia as “a sovereign entity based on the rule of law within the State of Georgia.” According to the Boden Plan, the borders of the State of Georgia as of December 21, 1991 could not be modified other than in accordance with the Georgian Constitution. The distribution of competences was based in accordance with a federal agreement between Tbilisi and Sukhumi having the force of the Constitutional Law. Boden himself insisted that his initiative “was not intended to offer ready-made solutions for the Abkhaz conflict. Rather, its objective was to invite the two sides to the conflict to sit down at the negotiating table and agree on modalities for a peaceful settlement”³⁷. The responsibility for the further implementation of the document clearly lay with the Georgian and Abkhaz leadership, while the UN would potentially be involved as a moderator and the UN Secretary General’s Group of Friends for Georgia would facilitate the process. However, at that time neither the Abkhaz side nor the Georgian side was ready to make use of this opportunity due to a lack of political will and unwillingness to compromise from both sides. The Abkhaz side was adamant in its rejection of any decision that placed them “in the state of Georgia”, while the Georgians were too sure of themselves to accept anything that hinted at the “sovereignty” of Abkhazia within Georgia, with each side convinced that time was in their favor and a drawn out process would allow them to achieve a solution with more favorable conditions. As a result, neither party embraced the peace plan.

The second set of peace efforts consisted of independent attempts by Russia to resolve the conflict. Faced with the Chechen separatist challenge, Moscow initially supported Tbilisi’s goal of restoring Georgia’s territorial integrity. In February 1994, Russia and Georgia signed a series of agreements that provided for assistance from Russia in the development of the Georgian army, the deployment of Russian border guards, and, most importantly, continued basing rights for Russia in Georgia. In 1994, Georgia joined the Collective Security Treaty (CST, which was signed on May 15, 1992) and entered the CIS. On November 26, 1994, Abkhazia’s Supreme Council (parliament) adopted a new Constitution, despite Moscow’s open opposition. Boris Pastukhov, Personal Envoy of the President of Russia on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, repeatedly contacted Abkhaz leader Vladislav Ardzinba to insist that the Abkhaz side not go through with such a “hasty decision”.³⁸ After the out-

37 Dieter Boden on the peace-keeping difficulties in the South Caucasus, <http://www.caucasustimes.com/article.asp?id=20989>.

38 Lakoba, Stanislav. *Abkhazia de-facto ili Gruziiya de jure? (O politike Rossii v Abkhazii v postsovetkii period. 1991-2003)* In Russian. [Abkhazia de-facto or Georgia de-jure?] (On

break of anti-separatist campaign in Chechnya on December 19, 1994, the border with Abkhazia on the Psou River was closed. From 1995-1997, Russia also operated a naval blockade of the breakaway republic and disconnected its telecommunications lines with the outside world. Meanwhile, Russia mediated a Protocol on the Georgian-Abkhaz settlement initialled on July 25, 1995 by Georgian Ambassador to Moscow Vazha Lordkipanidze and Republic of Abkhazia Attorney General Anri Jergenia in his capacity as Ardzinba's personal envoy. The second point of this agreement suggested the following proposal on the issue of Abkhazia's status: "The parties declare consent to live in a single federal state within the borders of the former Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. Their relationship will be based on Constitutional law."³⁹ But the Abkhaz side rescinded its approval almost immediately, and on August 22, 1995, the Parliament of Abkhazia branded the document unacceptable for an independent state.

On January 19, 1996, the CIS Council of the Heads of State, in which Russia and Georgia played decisive roles, adopted a resolution "On measures to settle the conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia". It declared the termination of relations with the self-proclaimed republic in trade, economics, transportation, finance and a host of other areas. After Tbilisi announced the introduction of customs and border control on the territory of Abkhazia, Moscow blocked entry and exit for all foreign vessels at the port of Sukhumi. In 1997, the Russian Foreign Ministry proposed a formulation in which Abkhazia would exist as a "Common state" within the borders of the former Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. This was registered in the new draft of the "Protocol on the Georgian-Abkhaz settlement." Thanks to intensive "shuttle diplomacy", then Foreign Minister Yevgeny Primakov convened a private meeting between Eduard Shevardnadze and Vladislav Ardzinba. But it proved impossible to reach a compromise, as Georgian officials in Tbilisi rejected any agreement based on the "common state" principle.

Russia's position underwent a significant evolution after 1998. This was facilitated by the Georgian government attempts to alter the status quo and "unfreeze the conflict" unilaterally without considering the interests of the Russian Federation, including one such attempt in May 1998 in the Gali district of Abkhazia. After the defeat of Russia in the first Chechen anti-separatist campaign, the official position of Tbilisi towards the leadership of the breakaway Chechen Republic Ichkeria, changed. Georgian leaders over-

Russia's policy in Abkhazia in the post-Soviet period. 1991-2003)] (2001). Slavic Research Center, Sapporo, p. 56.

39 Lepsaya, Abessalom. *Situatsiya v Abkhazii kak model zamknutogo obshchestva pri nalichii vneshnego faktora*; factory, vliyayushchie na uregulirovaniye In Russian. [The situation in Abkhazia as model of an isolated society influenced by the external factor: factors influencing the resolution process] (2004). In: *Aspecty Gruzino-Abkhazskogo konflikta* [Aspect of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict]. Irvine, California. Vol. 4.

estimated “the weakness of Russia”, considering Russia’s military defeat in Chechnya in 1996 to be the beginning of a great geopolitical retreat from the Caucasus. In August 1997, then Chechen Republic Ichkeria President Aslan Maskhadov visited Tbilisi where he met with Zurab Zhvania, then Chairman of the Georgian parliament. Soon after this meeting, an Office of the Representative of the Chechen Republic of Ichkeria opened in Georgia. When Russia launched the second anti-separatist operation in Chechnya in 1999, Georgia opened its borders to Chechen refugees. About 7,000 people moved into the Pankisi Gorge⁴⁰. In addition to refugees, numerous combatant Chechen separatist groups and a number of influential field commanders (such as Ruslan Gelayev) found a “safe haven” on Georgian territory⁴¹. Tbilisi sought to restore its control over Abkhazia with the aid of those Chechen groups. Thus on September 25, 2001, Chechen rebels alongside Georgian units (a total of 450 people) tried to seize the Gulripsh district of Abkhazia after travelling 400 km across Georgia. However by mid-October this attack was repulsed.

The second consequence of Tbilisi’s reassessment of Russia and the perception of Russian “weakness” that it created was the intensification of Georgia’s contacts with NATO. In 1998, for the first time since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a man with a Western military education (David Tevzadze) was named Georgia’s defence minister⁴². One of Eduard Shevardnadze’s main foreign policy slogans during his presidential election campaign in 2000 was his promise to “knock on NATO’s door” by 2005⁴³. In April 2002, the United States and Georgia signed the “Train and Equip” agreement on military cooperation, which was intended to cover the preparation of 2,000 Georgian commandos. The official purpose of the agreement was to prepare Georgian troops for an operation against Chechen “terrorists” encamped in the Pankisi Gorge. Russia, however, saw it as a move to “internationalize” resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts, and as a threat to Russia’s exclusive, preeminent position in the Greater Caucasus.

40 Markedonov, Sergey, Severokavkazskaya karta Gruzii [Georgia’s Map of the North Caucasus] (2010). In *Svobodnaya Mysl’* (Free Thought Journal). No. 12, pp. 49-64.

41 Commenting on this action for the “Rustavi-2” TV channel, Eduard Shevardnadze said: “According to some residents of the villages in Kakheti, Gelayev is a normally thoughtful, educated man, well disposed to Georgia”. See: *Shevardnadze ne schitaet Gelayeva banditom* [Shevardnadze doesn’t consider Gelayev a bandit], <http://www.lenta.ru/vojna/2001/11/08/shevardnadze/> [2001, November, 8].

42 David Tevzadze was trained in the NATO Defense College in Rome (1994), the Marshall Center in Garmisch-Partenkirchen (1995) and the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College in Kansas, USA (1996).

43 Kasayev, Alan. Shevardnadze postuchitsya v dver’ NATO lichno [Shevardnadze will knock on NATO’s door personally]. In *Nezavisimaya gazeta* [Independent newspaper], 11 April 2000.

All these factors contributed to a significant transformation of the Russian position on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. By 1999-2000, Moscow had relaxed the sanctions against Abkhazia, although they were finally lifted only in 2008. The distribution of Russian passports (a foreign model different from the domestic IDs) to the residents of Abkhazia drew the ire of Tbilisi and the West and was regarded by many as a component of the “creeping annexation” of Georgian territory by Russia. In the early 2000s, Russo-Georgian relations deteriorated sharply. In December 2000 Russia introduced visas for Georgian citizens, and in March 2001 the so-called “period of adjustment” for the new rules ended and the visa regime came into force. Bilateral relations were seriously poisoned by the unconstructive public rhetoric of both sides. At a meeting in Sochi in March 2003, Russian President Vladimir Putin and his Georgian counterpart Eduard Shevardnadze attempted to return to a more constructive bilateral relationship. Following this meeting, an agreement was signed that established three working groups: the first on the return of refugees/IDPs (originally in the Gali district); the second on the rehabilitation of the railway line between Sochi and Tbilisi via Abkhazia; and the third on the renovation of the Inguri hydropower plant. However, the subsequent deterioration of Russo-Georgian relations rendered implementation of those proposals impossible.

When discussing the failure of the peace process, it is necessary to stress that since 1993, the Abkhaz leadership had taken a number of steps to strengthen and institutionalize its *de facto* state institutions and independent political identity separate from the Georgian political and legal framework. It managed to survive the blockade by Russia and Georgia and to adopt a package of laws that defined the functioning of the government and administration, law enforcement, the security forces and the army. In 1993, the Abkhaz Parliament adopted a Law on Citizenship (it was amended in 1995, and in 2005 a new version of the law was adopted). In 1994, the Constitution of the Abkhaz Republic was adopted, and in 1999 the “Act of State Independence of the Republic of Abkhazia” proclaimed the fundamental principles of the *de facto* state. Article 49 of the Constitution of Abkhazia stipulated that it was the exclusive prerogative of ethnic Abkhazian citizens of the Republic of Abkhazia between the ages of 35 and 65 to occupy the post of Head of the Republic,⁴⁴ meaning the foundations of this *de facto* state included strong elements of ethnocracy⁴⁵. Later this model evolved into an ethno-democracy, a model in which democratic procedures are complemented by restrictions on the basis of ethnicity. Prior to the “five-day war” of 2008, presidential elec-

44 The Constitution of the Republic of Abkhazia...

45 There are minor exclusions from this general rule. So the Vice-Chairman of Parliament is held by the ethnic Armenian. In the Gali/Gal District, where there the Georgian (Megrelian) ethnic dominance has kept even after 1993, the education in Georgian is provided and the newspaper “Gal” is published in three languages (Abkhazian, Georgian and Russian).

tions had been held in Abkhazia in 1994, 1999, and 2004/2005, and parliamentary elections in 2002 and 2007. In 1994, the head of state was elected by the parliament, while in 1999 there was only one presidential candidate. In 2004/2005, however, the Republic experienced a truly competitive and unpredictable presidential election race, in which the then leadership failed to secure the victory of its preferred candidate. The first peaceful transfer of presidential power took place in 2005. In contrast, in post-Soviet Georgia the first peaceful transfer of presidential power took place in 2013 in the aftermath of presidential elections

Thus during the years of negotiations, the original positions of Georgia (focused on Georgia's territorial integrity and the return of all refugees/IDPs to the entire territory of Abkhazia) and Abkhazia (focused on the independence of the breakaway republic and the return only of those who did not take part in military operations against the Abkhaz forces) did not change significantly. As such, a formula for political compromise was not found. The conflicting parties were nonetheless able to establish a constructive partnership to exploit the Inguri hydropower plant. This large energy facility that services the whole Caucasus region was built in 1977; 60% of the electricity it generates goes to Georgia, with 40% going to Abkhazia.

Unfreezing the Conflict: 2004-2008

New possible avenues for the resolution of the conflict arose between 2003-2005. As a result of the “Rose Revolution”, Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze, who had been associated with the armed conflict with Abkhazia and subsequent lesser confrontations in 1998 and 2001, resigned and a new generation of politicians came to power in Georgia. These new political figures were not burdened by the experience and political pressures of past years. During the 2004-2005 election cycle, Sergey Bagapsh (1949-2011), who had a reputation as “a moderate” leader, was elected to the presidency of Abkhazia. While the image of him as the “dove of peace” had little basis in reality, Bagapsh, unlike his predecessor Vladislav Ardzinba, was not perceived as aggressive by Georgian society. He was not suspected of having participated in or supported the escalation of the military confrontation in the early 1990s. Additionally, some had hoped for a more positive role for Russia in the resolution of the conflict. Moscow's position on the political crisis in Adjara in winter and spring of 2004, where they were constructive and cooperative in their approach, strengthened the confidence of all involved. The armed conflict in that autonomous region of Georgia was averted through negotiations between Russia and Georgia. Russian authorities promised not to oppose the restoration of Tbilisi's control over Adjara in exchange for guarantees of the personal immunity of Ajarian leader Aslan Abashidze, who

finally was taken to Moscow⁴⁶. During the first months of his term, newly elected Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili repeatedly expressed in public his admiration for Vladimir Putin and emphasized his role in bringing about positive changes in Russia. He also repeatedly stressed the necessity of starting bilateral relations anew from a “clean slate”. The initial steps of the new Georgian government vis-à-vis Abkhazia engendered cautious hopes for the development of new approaches to the peace process. Tbilisi took steps to reform the so-called “Abkhazian government in exile”, which together with the Supreme Council of Abkhazia, which played the role of “parliament in exile”, had operated in Georgia since 1995. For many years those two bodies had focused on the domestic Georgian audience. Their bureaucracy was prohibitively bloated, even by post-Soviet standards, and they were incredibly inefficient. By the early 2000s, the “government in exile” consisted of no fewer than 5,000 functionaries⁴⁷. Their members were Georgian refugees and IDPs from Abkhazia who were far less willing to compromise with the breakaway republic than were the government officials in Tbilisi involved in the negotiation process with Sukhumi. After coming to power, Saakashvili significantly reduced the size of the bureaucracy of the “government-in-exile” and dismissed Tamaz Nadareishvili, who had been considered in Abkhazia in the 1990s as the leader of a “Fifth column”. The participation of the “Abkhazian representatives” in the Georgian parliament was suspended, as they had received their mandates in 1992 and had not been reconfirmed through elections at any point since the armed conflict. Tbilisi also stopped cooperating with insurgent groups such as the “Forest Brothers” and the “White Legion” operating in Abkhazia’s Gali district. A young and enterprising politician, Irakli Alasania, was appointed presidential envoy for conflict resolution.

However, this promising start did not lead to irreversible progress. The parties to the conflict agreed only on the text of the Protocol on the Non-resumption of Hostilities (in December 2005). All the positive steps that had been taken by Tbilisi were almost immediately undercut by the irresponsible political rhetoric of the Georgian leadership. Georgia’s new president made the restoration of the territorial integrity of Georgia the *idée fixe* of both his domestic and foreign policies, seeing this as a way to overcome the legacy of Shevardnadze. In May 2004, the new Georgian president stated that: “We will return Abkhazia within my presidential term.”⁴⁸ A number of other factors also had a significant influence on the ethno-political conflict. In May 2004, the process of destroying the existing political, legal, social, economic,

46 Aslan Abashidze was leader of Adjara for 13 years, first as Chairman of the Supreme Council (1991-2001) and then as the Head of the Autonomous region (2001-2004).

47 Abkhazia Today..., p. 29.

48 *M.Saakashvili: my vernem Abkhaziyu* [M.Saakashvili: We will return Abkhazia], <http://top.rbc.ru/politics/26/05/2004/52202.shtml>.

military and political status quo in South Ossetia began. For the first time since cease-fire agreement of 1992, the breakaway republic experienced renewed military clashes and bloodshed. Hopes that a new generation of Georgian politicians could build on the other peaceful approaches to the settlement of these protracted conflicts were quickly dashed. This affected not only South Ossetia, but the entire course of the peace process in Abkhazia, reinforcing the already pervasive distrust between the two sides.

In addition to the deterioration of the situation in South Ossetia, which directly affected Russia's position in the North Caucasus (taking into account the strong political ties between the breakaway republic and the Russian constituency in North Ossetia, as well as the unresolved Ossetian-Ingush conflict), the Georgian authorities moved two other contentious issues to the top of their policy agenda. First, they accelerated Georgia's cooperation and integration with the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), which served to create immense tension in their bilateral relations with Russia as Russia was rather skeptical of and sensitive to NATO enlargement in the former USSR. Second, the new government implemented a full-scale program to modernize the armed forces. The U.S. became the most consistent lobbyist in favor of Georgia-NATO integration. In March 2007, a bill called the "NATO Freedom Consolidation Act of 2007" was supported by members of the House of Representatives by a simple majority of votes. Earlier (November 2006), this document had been approved by the U.S. Senate. In April 2007, the Law was signed by the president of the United States (at that time George W. Bush), and on April 3, 2008 at the NATO summit in Bucharest, a Declaration supporting Georgia's NATO aspirations was adopted. It should be noted that this declaration did not provide for a "Membership Action Plan" for Georgia (the penultimate stage in the process of attaining full NATO membership)⁴⁹. Thus, Washington provided not only military and political support, but also served as a powerful advocate for Georgia internationally, representing the former Soviet Caucasus republic as a "beacon of democracy". Even the tough actions of Georgian law enforcement agencies against the opposition in November 2007, in addition to the short-term implementation of a state of emergency and the postponement of national and local elections, did not induce the United States to modify its approaches to the Georgian administration. All these activities strengthened expectations in Tbilisi that any and all of Georgia's policies on Abkhazia, up to and including military actions, would be supported by the United States and its allies. As such, the budget for defense and security in Georgia expanded rapidly between 2004 and 2008. On September 14, 2007, the Georgian parliament adopted a resolution to increase the troop level of the armed forces to 32,000 people and then on July 15, 2008 to 37,000 troops. In 2008, a fateful year for Georgia, de-

49 See the full text of the Declaration: http://www.summitbucharest.ro/en/doc_201.html.

fense expenditures exceeded a quarter of the total budget, amounting to 8% of GDP⁵⁰. John Colarusso, a well-known Canadian expert on the Caucasus (he served as a back channel diplomat between Washington and Moscow and an advisor on the Caucasus during the Clinton administration), rightly noted that “President Saakashvili listened to some imprudent voices in Washington, and that he himself had based too much of his domestic image on wielding military might and on reintegrating South Ossetia and Abkhazia by force instead of by a realistic process of dialogue.”⁵¹

As for Georgia’s policy with regard to Abkhazia, the most important method of “unfreezing” the conflict was the creation of new structures not covered by the legal framework enshrined in the cease-fire agreement. A revitalization of the Abkhaz “authorities-in-exile” began during this period. In July 2006, the Georgian government deployed law-enforcement troops to the upper part of the Kodori Gorge, a part of Abkhazia that had been designated as a “demilitarized zone” and that, since 1993, had not controlled by Sukhumi⁵². This territory was subsequently proclaimed the residence of the “Abkhaz government-in-exile.” According to Saakashvili this step signified the return of the legitimate authorities to Abkhazian territory. Tbilisi thus violated the 1994 Moscow agreement in two ways: first by establishing the “government-in-exile” in Kodori (renamed “Upper Abkhazia”), and second by deploying military or police units in the region. These steps were followed by comments from Georgian representatives on the strategic importance of the Kodori Gorge, with Saakashvili even going so far as to refer to it as the metaphorical “Heart of Abkhazia.”⁵³ Givi Targamadze, then chairman of the Defense and Security Parliamentary Committee of Georgia, said during that period: “It is a strategic area from which the helicopter flight time to Sukhumi is only five minutes.”⁵⁴ These actions fundamentally changed the tenor of

50 Pukhov, R. (ed.). *The tanks of August* (2010). Center for Analysis of Strategies and Technologies, Moscow, pp. 11-42.

51 Colarusso, John. *It is time for the West to look for the new discourse for Georgia*, <http://www.caucasustimes.com/article.asp?id=20404>.

52 From 1993 to 2006, the Kodori Gorge was actually “no man’s land”. It was not controlled by Sukhumi, but Tbilisi’s authority there was also nominal. In reality, the territory was dominated by Svan warlords. The Georgian authorities tried to bring those units under their formal control. In 1998, the “Monadire” (“Hunter”) formation was incorporated into the armed forces of Georgia, and in 1999 its commander, Emzar Kvitsiani, was appointed a Special Envoy of President Eduard Shevardnadze in the region. In July 2006, Kvitsiani’s formation was disbanded and the Gorge itself came under the control of Tbilisi. More on the situation in the Kodori Gorge in the post-Soviet period, see: Marten, Kimberly. *Warlords, Sovereignty and State Failure. Chapter Three: Lessons from Post-Soviet Georgia* (2009). In *Saltzman Working Paper*, no. 12 – November, pp. 42-67.

53 *Saakashvili: V abkhaziyu vozvrashchaetsya legetimnoye pravitel'stvo* [Saakashvili: the legitimate government returns to Abkhazia], <http://regnum.ru/news/680582.html>.

54 Cited in: International Crisis Group. *Abkhazia: Ways Forward. Europe Report N°179* – 18 January 2007, p. 20.

relations between Georgia and the breakaway republic of Abkhazia. The “government-in-exile” that had previously been a secondary structure became the sole source of legitimacy in Abkhazia in the eyes of the Saakashvili government. The Georgian president decreed that all foreign diplomats engaged in the settlement of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict should travel to the village of Chkhalt'a, which had become the residence of the “Government of Abkhazia”. In this sense, Tbilisi demonstrated that its priority was not the harmonization of Georgian-Abkhaz relations, but rather the imposition of exclusive Georgian political and military control over Abkhazia. The operation in the Kodori Gorge became very important symbolically and served as an unambiguous message to the de facto leadership of the Republic. Tbilisi’s determination to position the representatives of the former Georgian community of Abkhazia as the only legitimate spokesmen for the interests of the disputed area destroyed the old status quo that had been in favor of Georgia and could potentially have put an end to the de-facto statehood status of Abkhazia. In this case, the issue of recognition did not play a primary role. Until 2006, Sukhumi and Tbilisi negotiated, albeit in fits and starts. After the operation in the Kodori Gorge, the negotiation process ceased. Each side prepared for further changes to the status quo that had prevailed since 1993-1994.

At the same time that it violated the status quo, Tbilisi appealed to Sukhumi through populist initiatives. On March 28, 2008, at a meeting with political analysts from the Tbilisi Foundation for Strategic and International Studies, President Saakashvili offered Abkhazia “unlimited autonomous status” within Georgia, as well as “federalism and security guarantees of peaceful development.”⁵⁵ But Georgian leaders’ proposals contained fundamental contradictions (for example, autonomous status and federalism cannot be identified as identical political and legal principles). The last conflict resolution proposal prior to the “five-day war” was made by then German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier in July 2008. The first stage of Steinmeier’s three-step peace plan envisaged that Georgia would abjure the use of force and Abkhazia would agree to the return of Georgian refugees. At the second stage, the conflict parties would start to elaborate and implement joint projects, and at the third, the status of Abkhazia would finally be determined. The Steinmeier project was supported by Russia (especially on the issue of an agreement on the non-use of force), and partially supported by Georgia (which was especially concerned with the steps included in the third stage), but was almost unilaterally rejected by Abkhazia, whose representatives voiced many comments, objections and complaints.

Russia too contributed to the “unfreezing” of the conflict in the spring and summer of 2008. On March 21, 2008 the Russian State Duma considered

55 *Saakashvili predlozhit Abkhazii shirokii federalizm i post vitse-prem'era* [Saakashvili offered Abkhazia broad federalism and the post of deputy prime-minister], <http://www.m.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/134226>.

revising the conditions of the Russian approach to the recognition of the territorial integrity of Georgia. The lower chamber of the Russian parliament identified two conditions for possible recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the first being Georgia's accession to NATO and the second being the use of military force against the two breakaway republics. In April 2008, Russian President Vladimir Putin instructed the federal government to render assistance to Abkhazia and South Ossetia, stressing primarily economic and humanitarian issues. On May 30, 2008 Russia's Railway Troops (400 in all) were deployed to Abkhazia to restore the delapidated railway infrastructure. That deployment was not envisaged under the conditions of the 1994 Moscow ceasefire and separation of forces agreement.

The Russo-Georgian war in August 2008 affected Abkhazia to a much lesser degree than South Ossetia, where Russia was directly engaged. However, the leadership of the Republic of Abkhazia exploited the situation to their benefit. On August 9, 2008, Abkhaz armed forces opened a "second front" and took control of the Kodori Gorge, without encountering serious opposition from the Georgian military and police units deployed there, who ceded the territory and retreated together with the "government of Abkhazia-in-exile." For the first time since 1993, the de facto government established complete control over the entire territory of the former Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. On August 26, 2008 Russia became the first country to recognize the independence of Abkhazia. On August 30, 2008, Georgia withdrew from the 1994 Moscow Agreement.

After Recognition: New Realities and New Challenges

The recognition of Abkhazian independence opened up a new page in the history of the conflict. For the first time since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, a precedent for the recognition of a former Soviet autonomous entity as an independent state was created. The formation of an Abkhazian state received little international recognition and minimal support outside the Eurasian region. Only five other countries have recognized Abkhazian independence. Indirectly, however, the new realities in the region have nonetheless been recognized by the West. Abkhazia gained access to the "Geneva discussions" on security and stability in the South Caucasus (which began on October 15, 2008), although the Abkhaz representatives have not yet obtained official diplomatic status but participate as "experts". Even so, their very participation in multilateral discussion on humanitarian issues and the prevention of further incidents has partially served to confirm the recognition of Abkhazia's status as a separate political entity. Interest in "engagement with Abkhazia" without it having received explicit recognition from the European Union also demonstrates this point. The EU sponsors projects to rehabilitate

and support the non-governmental sector in Abkhazia, as do other international agencies and NGOs.

Meanwhile, the recognition of the independence of Abkhazia by Russia has contributed to an increase in Russian military, economic and political influence in Abkhazia. After the “five-day war”, international engagement in Abkhazia was scaled back. The UNOMIG (consisting of approximately 150 observers) ceased its activities after Russia used its veto power in June 2009 to block a routine vote in the UN Security Council on extending UNOMIG’s mandate. The Russian side, in agreeing to recognize the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, formulated the following approach: the territorial integrity of Georgia that had been recognized by the countries of the West and the Russian Federation prior the August 26, 2008 had ceased to exist. Assuming the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as a legally accomplished fact, the Kremlin initiated the reformulation of the UN mission. According to this approach, no international mission which operated on the de jure territory of the Georgian state through August 2008 should ignore the new realities and consider their activities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia as part of their activities in Georgia. On February 13, 2009 the UN Security Council adopted Resolution No. 1866, which extended the UNOMIG mandate for four months. Both Moscow and Tbilisi expressed satisfaction with that decision. However, the February resolution did not resolve the political and legal deadlock in which all of the interested parties were engaged. The primary issue was not only the Russian desire to expel the international observers, but also the fact that the UNOMIG mandate was not suited to the post-2008 realities, as it had been defined and adopted prior to the 2008 war. The mandate was based on the Moscow Agreement of May 14, 1994, which, after August 2008, lost its judicial power. Georgia’s decision to withdraw from the Agreement was guided by a Parliament resolution on “Peacekeeping Forces Located on the Territory of Georgia”, adopted on July 18, 2006 and “The Law on the Occupied Territories of Georgia” adopted on August 28, 2008, as well as emergency orders of the Georgian government from August 27, 2008. With its recognition of the independence of Abkhazia, Russia abandoned its peacekeeping status and became the patron of the ethno-political self-determination of the two breakaway republics. The realities established in 2008 were radically different from those of the early 1990s, when Moscow had recognized the territorial integrity of Georgia, and Tbilisi had supported the involvement of the Russian Federation as a mediator. However none of these new factors were taken into account in the drafting of the extension for the missions’ mandate. In fact, the proposals were limited to a so-called “Technical Extension” (i.e. the extension of the mission for the sake of its activities). Moscow refused to support such a scenario.

The character of Russian-Abkhaz relations has changed during the formation of the new status quo. The peacekeepers were replaced by military

troops and border guards meant to directly support the ethno-political self-determination of Abkhazia, rather than to maintain the ceasefire between Abkhazia and Georgia. On April 30, 2009, Moscow and Sukhumi signed an agreement establishing joint efforts for the protection of the state border of Abkhazia, as a result of which a special Office for the Protection of the Border of the Republic of Abkhazia was created within Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB). The first outpost of this office was opened on December 8, 2010 in the village Pichora in Abkhazia's Gali district. On February 17, 2010, Moscow and Sukhumi agreed to establish a joint military base with Russian troops on the territory of Abkhazia. In 2010, Russia allocated 1.8 billion rubles in grants for Abkhazia and the carry-over for 2011 amounted to 1.2 billion rubles. These facts pointing to Russian patronage have caused some authors to conclude that Abkhazia was not transformed into a partially recognized Republic, but rather into a "Russian protectorate".⁵⁶ Today it is probably too early draw any final conclusion about the evolution of Abkhazia into a full protectorate. After August 2008, the issue of "the Georgian threat" in Abkhaz politics was rapidly marginalized. It is significant that for the first time since the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict of 1992-1993, none of the candidates in the December 2009 Abkhaz presidential election was labeled "pro-Georgian". Two new issues came to dominate the Abkhazian agenda: first, the quality of Abkhazia's independence and statehood; and second, the "cost" of Russian patronage (primarily focused on the military-political and socio-economic penetration of Russia into the Republic). These issues became a major subject of discussion between the candidates for the December 2009 presidential election, the first following the recognition of national independence. As in 2004-2005, the campaign between five registered candidates was highly competitive. Incumbent Sergey Bagapsh won in the first round with 61.16% of the vote. Two of his opponents, former Vice-President Raul Khajimba and former parliament deputy Beslan Butba, criticized the government for yielding to Russia's interests and neglecting Abkhazia's national interests. (Of particular concern was the transfer of strategic assets like resorts and the railway to Russian control). However, criticism of the authorities did not violate the political consensus on the political and legal status of Abkhazia established in the early 1990s. An important feature of the 2009 campaign was the restraint shown by the Kremlin. Unlike in 2004-2005, the Russian authorities tried to not intervene in the election and Vladimir Putin, then the Prime Minister of the Russian Federation, even met with opposition candidate Raul Khajimba during the campaign. This was a typical practice for Russian diplomacy in Eurasia. Thus that election cycle saw Russia re-

56 David Petrosyan, *Nepriznannyye gosudarstva Yuzhnogo Kavkaza v 2009 godu. K novomy status-quo v regione* (in Russian). [Unrecognized states of the South Caucasus in 2009: Towards a new status quo in the region] (2011). In *Kavkaz-2009. Ezhegodnik Kavkazskogo Instituta* [Caucasus-2009. Yearbook of Caucasus Institute]. Yerevan, p. 83.

place Georgia as the primary issue on Abkhazia's domestic and foreign policy agenda.

Today we can register several contradictions within the asymmetric Russian-Abkhaz partnership. The first is the scale and volume of Russian business penetration into the Abkhaz economy, which had been devastated during the armed conflict of 1992-1993 and had not undergone full-scale privatization and integration into the regional and international economy). The second is the prospect of an increased Russian military presence in Abkhazia. The third is the wide range of property issues in Abkhazia, as the extended ethno-political conflict prevented the full development of the norms, regulations, and legal institutions that ensure a functioning market and respect for private property, offsetting the prioritized rights of the "titular" ethnic group to its "primordial land". The fourth concerns the prospects for broad international recognition of Abkhazia, which is in the interests of Sukhumi and at the same time constitutes a "headache" for Moscow, as it challenges its exclusive presence in the region.

The sudden death of the second President of Abkhazia, Sergei Bagapsh, on May 29, 2011, occurred in a partially recognized republic facing this new set of complex problems. Bagapsh died half way through his second presidential term. He did not manage to name a potential successor, and yet this problem was little discussed. In Abkhazia, his death occasioned both pain and regret due to the fact that during the six years of his presidency he had demonstrated the ability to negotiate and reach a compromise even in the most difficult of situations. His name will be inextricably linked with two historic events for Abkhazia: the recognition of the republic's independence and the civilized and peaceful transfer of the presidency. Three candidates participated in the pre-term election for Bagapsh's successor, all of them well-known political figures: acting Vice-President Aleksandr Ankvab, Prime Minister Sergei Shamba (previously a long-serving minister of foreign affairs), and Raul Khajimba, who placed second after Bagapsh in the presidential elections of 2004 and 2009. The campaign in 2011 was not as heated as the elections in 2004. It was rather like the first presidential elections following the recognition of the independence of Abkhazia in December 2009. Fears that Bagapsh's death would provoke domestic political splits with serious geopolitical consequences contributed to this muted electoral atmosphere. All three candidates signed a "Charter for Fair Elections", which nonetheless failed to prevent a major scandal caused by an interview in which former Georgian Defense Minister Tengiz Kitovani claimed Ankvab had ties to the Georgian intelligence services. However, the "black" PR-technology that had proven effective in 1990s did not work in 2011, and Ankvab ultimately emerged victorious. As Irakli Khintba (a political analyst and the current deputy foreign minister) rightly noted, "people are tired of this topic. We have a whole generation that grew up after the war. Besides, there is public demand for fair

elections and when someone openly violates [the charter], it can only annoy people.”⁵⁷

The military and political defeat of Georgia in August 2008 strengthened and provided momentum for the pro-American and North Atlantic vector of Georgian foreign policy. Georgia signed a Charter on Strategic Partnership with the United States in January 2009. This document designated Georgia a special partner of Washington outside NATO. The steps by the Kremlin to recognize independence of the two former autonomous regions of the Georgian SSR were perceived in the West not as support to two states for years *de facto* existing outside Georgia, but as Russian territorial expansion. In this regard, Strobe Talbott, an iconic figures in Russian-American relations who served as the Deputy Secretary of State on CIS issues from 1994 to 2001, spoke for many when he affirmed that: “It may be that officially Russia considers Abkhazia and South Ossetia independent states, but in the West it is perceived as an extension of the Russian territory. It happened for the first time since the end of the Soviet era and I think this is a dangerous phenomenon.”⁵⁸ The United States and its allies have followed this line since 2008 in spite of the change of heads of state, foreign ministers and the heads of the legislative bodies. The United States and Georgia began talks on American military bases in Poti and Marneuli (this step is considered a counterweight to the creation of Russian military infrastructure on the territory of Abkhazia in Ochamchira and Gudauta). There is a paradoxical situation in which the strengthening of the Russian military presence in Abkhazia and the U.S. (and NATO) presence in Georgia can only reinforce the new post-August 2008 *status quo*. The military capability of the United States will not be used against Russia, and vice versa. The presence of the military “fists” of Moscow in Abkhazia and an American military presence in Georgia would serve to deter Tbilisi on the one hand and Sukhumi on the other from any “reckless actions.” All these factors would objectively work to preserve the status quo that emerged in the aftermath of the war of August 2008. Meanwhile, the Russian military buildup in Abkhazia creates difficulties for Moscow itself. Deployment of bases on one side would improve the internal infrastructure in Abkhazia (where today tourism is actually limited to the space between the Russian border and Sukhumi/Sukhum, though to the east of the capital it has been underdeveloped). New security guarantees from Moscow will also help guarantee the revival of Abkhazia. At the same time, however, the arrival and presence of troops from large neighboring countries does not contribute to

57 Allenova, Olga. V Abkhazskuyu kampaniyu dobavili Gruzii (in Russian) [Georgia was added to the Abkhaz electoral campaign] (2011). In *Kommersant-Daily*, no. 157 (4698).

58 “Nadeys’, chto leduyushchaya administratsiya SSHA vernetsya k idée Dogovora po protivoraketnoy oborone” [I hope that the next U.S. administration will return to the idea of the ABM Treaty]. *Vremya novostey* – 2008, November 1, no. 204.

the development of national statehood over the long term. On the contrary, it creates new collisions.

Though the Ukrainian crisis has had no direct impact on the situation in Abkhazia and around it the Georgians view the situation in Ukraine as part of a wider geopolitical stand-off between Russia and the West rather than as a crisis *sui generis* resulting from domestic political developments in Ukraine. The Ukrainian crisis and worries about Moscow's real intentions strengthened Georgia's desire for joining the Euro-Atlantic institutions. Thus in 2014 Tbilisi signed an Association Agreement with the European Union. NATO at the Wales summit in September 2014 reaffirmed its promise of Georgia's membership and provided for a substantial package of assistance to strengthen Georgia's defense capability and its interoperability with the Alliance.⁵⁹

Georgia's fears seemed justified also by the developments in Abkhazia, where the Ukrainian conflict was cited by the secessionists as calling for further moves away from Georgia. It also made topical some issues related to the Georgian minority in the East of the republic. The revolt against President Alexander Ankvab in May 2014 was attributed to public anger over his policy toward the ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia. This policy was widely perceived as too liberal, particularly since it allowed the ethnic Georgians to register as voters and to receive Abkhazian passports. A. Ankvab resigned and was replaced as President of Abkhazia by Raul Khadzhimba who favors stronger politico-military ties to Russia and freezing all contacts along the breakaway region's frontier with Georgia.

In November 2014 a new bilateral treaty with the Russian Federation was signed. It meant deeper economic integration and further liberalization on the *de facto* Russia-Abkhazia border. Its first ("Moscow") draft provoked heated discussions among Abkhaz politicians and NGO leaders. The Abkhaz political elite strongly objected to full "integration" as contrary to the cause they have fought for. The Abkhaz side managed to remove some stipulations from the initial draft, which for example, would have allowed Russian citizens to acquire also Abkhaz citizenship. At present the Abkhaz elite is much more afraid of a potential shift in the ethnic balance than of the Georgian threat. The easier access to Abkhazian citizenship would have opened the way for the Russian citizens (including the ethnic Georgians holding Russian passports) to acquire property in Abkhazia or to attempt to reclaim confiscated property they owned previously. The Abkhazian negotiators also insisted on maintaining Abkhazia's military forces and did not accept obligatory "coordination" of its foreign policy with Moscow. In fact the treaty has not changed much in the asymmetric relations between Russia and Abkhazia although it did not exclude the possibility of their further evolution.

59 NATO's relations with Georgia, http://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/topics_38988.htm.

Abkhazia aspires for independence but remains highly dependent on Russia for its defense and security, not to mention the balancing of its budget and everything from social benefits to post-war reconstruction. For its part Russia desires a greater access to the Caucasus and the Black Sea, which would offer additional opportunities for Russian big business and create an additional barrier to NATO's penetration into the post-Soviet space. At the same time, however, Moscow cannot support Abkhazia's ethnocratic policy, since any discrimination of its own citizens on ethnic grounds would create a dangerous precedent. The Abkhazian elite, on the other hand, refuses to move away from the ethnocratic rule which it has developed since the armed conflict with Georgia.⁶⁰ Abkhazia is not Nagorny Karabakh, or even South Ossetia, where the titular ethnic groups enjoy a clear numerical superiority. It is unlikely that the Armenian, Russian and Georgian (Mingrelian) population of the republic will accept indefinitely the constitutional provision (Article 49 of the Constitution of Abkhazia) reserving to the ethnic Abkhaz only the exclusive right to occupy the post of President. It will be also necessary to take into account the growing economic weight of the Armenian community, which is almost equal numerically to the Abkhaz. Hence sooner or later new approaches in developing an optimal nation-building model. will be called for. A state which has been based on expedience (because otherwise it could not survive in the conflict) will have to evolve and move towards the rule of law. According to the American scholar Gerard Toal, "Abkhazia's biggest challenges today are not about recognition, but about creating stable foundations for its internal legitimacy."⁶¹ By taking this path, the partly internationally recognized Abkhazia could achieve its real international independence, not just independence from Georgia.

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- Abkhazia between the Past and the Future* (2013). Co-editor and author of two chapters: The ethno-political conflict in Abkhazia: origins, dynamics and implications for regional security and The Caucasian Chalk Circle": Abkhazia in the changing regional and world politics through the prism of experts' evaluations. Medium Orient Information Agency, Prague.
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