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# Inside Abkhazia: Survey of Attitudes in a *De Facto* State

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**Abstract:** Testing claims about a region often glibly described by outsiders, thus checking assumptions upon which policy recommendations are based, this article examines residents' attitudes in the *de facto* state of Abkhazia. The results of a nationally representative social scientific survey in Abkhazia in March 2010 are presented in five themes—security and perceived well-being, the life-world identifications of respondents, views of state-building principles, the state of reconciliation between the divided communities and the potential for displaced-person returns, and views on current and future geopolitical relations with Russia and Georgia. The findings shed light on the broad contours of the internal legitimacy of the Abkhazian state and society.

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Known popularly as “unrecognized states” and in more academic literatures as “quasi-states,” “pseudo-states,” or “*de facto*” states, over 20 political units lacking widespread international recognition and United Nations membership have appeared on the world political map since the end of the Cold War. The proliferation of these “*de facto*” states (the term we use in this article as the most appropriate and most neutral) is a function of local, regional, and global conjunctures. The new entities typically share some common features: similar structural conditions of origin (the breakdown of a contested “imperial” state apparatus), support from external patrons (ranging from powerful states to transnational black market forces), internal state-building endeavors, unsettled property claims, difficult border regimes, and hostility from the separated (parent) state and most members of the international community of states (Berg, 2007; Kolossov and O’Loughlin, 1998; Kolstø, 2006; Lynch, 2004; Protsyk, 2009). The Eurasian *de facto* states of Abkhazia, Kosovo, Nagorno-Karabakh, Pridnestroviye (Transnistria), and South Ossetia are outcomes of conflicts frozen, to Western audiences at least, until recently. As is well known, on February 17, 2008 the *de facto* government of the former socialist autonomous province of Kosovo (constituted under such a name in 1974 within the Socialist Republic of Serbia of the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia) unilaterally declared its independence from the Yugoslav successor state of Serbia. Unlike other declarations by *de facto* states, this declaration gained Kosovo recognition as a new independent state from scores of powerful countries, including the United States and most members of the European Union. On July 22, 2010, the International Court of Justice ruled (10–4) that Kosovo’s declaration did not violate international law, a judgment that was hailed by *de facto* states as legitimacy for their position.

Six months after the “Kosovo precedent,” in the wake of a new war with Georgia, the leaders of South Ossetia and Abkhazia appealed to the Russian Federation to recognize them as independent states. The Russian Federation Council and State Duma passed motions in support of this. On August 26, 2008, President Dmitriy Medvedev issued decrees recognizing both regions as independent states and establishing formal diplomatic relations with each. Medvedev’s statement of recognition cited the need for this decision “based on the situation on the ground” and the “freely expressed will of the Ossetian and Abkhazian peoples.” “This is not an easy choice to make,” he concluded, “but it represents the only possibility to save human lives” (Medvedev, 2008). Unlike Kosovo, now recognized by 70 states, Abkhazia and South Ossetia did not subsequently attract widespread international recognition. Only Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Nauru followed Russia’s lead, upgrading the status of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from “unrecognized” to “partially recognized” states.

Research on *de facto* states is understandably preoccupied with the conditions whereby they come into existence and either gain, or fail to gain, external legitimacy. But, as the uneven recognition of Kosovo, Abkhazia, and South Ossetia underscores, external legitimacy is linked to the question of internal legitimacy, a lesser-studied subject. This article reports and

analyzes the results of a nationally representative social scientific survey conducted under our direction in Abkhazia in March 2010. It constitutes the first reporting of results from a broader social scientific project involving elite interviews, survey research, and focus groups examining the internal political life of Eurasian *de facto* states in the aftermath of Kosovo's independence and the August 2008 war.

There are three compelling reasons for examining public opinion inside Abkhazia at this time. The first is the academic debate over state and nation-building within *de facto* regimes as one factor accounting for their durability. Kolstø (2006) argues that the "modal tendency" of *de facto* states (what he terms "quasi-states") is a weak economy and weak state structures. Despite the absence of effective state-building capacity, he argues, most *de facto* states "have succeeded reasonably well in their nation-building efforts" (Kolstø, 2006, p. 730). He provides three main reasons for this: (1) the powerful memory of the war that established the *de facto* state; (2) the available and politically reinforced image of a common external enemy; and (3) the fact that, in many cases, the population of a *de facto* state has been homogenized through the violence and forced displacement accompanying secessionism. In an article specifically addressing the cases of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh, Kolstø and Blakkisrud (2008, p. 498) note the tension within the Abkhazian state between a civic and ethnic understanding of the nation. On the one hand, the Abkhazian constitution locates the foundation of its sovereignty in the people and citizens of the Republic of Abkhazia (Article 2). On the other hand, the president is required to be ethnically Abkhaz, and fluent in the Abkhaz language (Article 49). The degree to which the Abkhazian state is seen as an ethnocracy (for definitions and elaboration, see Yiftachel and Ghanem, 2004) is, thus, an important question in understanding internal legitimacy and the precise meaning of "nation-building" in this case (Kolstø and Blakkisrud, 2008). They also write that of the three Caucasian cases "the Abkhaz are perhaps the most determined to establish a permanent independent state." Abkhazia, they conclude from their fieldwork interviews, "exhibits the highest degree of openly expressed political diversity" (Kolstø and Blakkisrud, 2008, p. 506). All these are important claims about Abkhazia but they lack extensive empirical verification, and the support, falsification, or complication that a scientific survey can provide. Our choice of survey questions was informed not only by existing academic claims about internal legitimacy in Abkhazia but by our past survey experience in Bosnia-Herzegovina and the North Caucasus, and our own fieldwork interviews across Abkhazia in November 2009.

The second reason to examine public opinion is the widespread tendency to treat *de facto* states like Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Kosovo as mere pawns in international politics. This diminishment of the internal life and complexity of *de facto* states is partly a function of geopolitical discourse preoccupied with great-power competition. This, in turn, has connections to the symbolic character that certain *de facto* states acquire in the domestic politics of the great powers. This was most evident during and

after the August 2008 war when Abkhazia and South Ossetia became symbols of reinvigorated Russian power within the Russian State Duma, and within the US Congress, where they functioned as symbols of a renewed threat of Cold War–like Russian expansionism. Less appreciated is how the diminution and erasure of politics and public opinion in Abkhazia is part of the Abkhaz–Georgian conflict itself. It is not our intention to rehearse the empirical history of this conflict here. We simply note that the 1992–1993 war, which created Abkhazia as a *de facto* state, was a failed attempt to subordinate and incorporate this previously autonomous region into a newly unified and centralized Georgian state. Analyzing what he terms simply as “Georgian fears,” Kaufman (2001, p. 94) writes that Georgians considered the Soviet-era autonomies of “Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Adjara as ‘mines’ planted in Georgia, set to explode in order to weaken Georgia and frustrate any attempt to escape from Russian domination. The Georgian’s self-image that they are a tolerant people blinds them to the possibility that these minority groups might have legitimate grievances, so they believe almost unanimously that minority restiveness can only be explained by the actions of a malevolent ‘third force’—Moscow.”

Kaufman’s point is perhaps too sweeping and groupist a generalization but it nevertheless articulates a powerful tendency in what we characterize as Georgian geopolitical culture, the re-scaling of Georgian–Abkhazian relations into the frame of Georgian–Russian relations. For a variety of reasons, many very understandable, this tendency led in the wake of the August 2008 war to the re-emphasis by Tbilisi of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as “occupied territories.” The continued insistence on this framing is seen as necessary and central by the Georgian government, a “calling of things by their real names” in the words of the Georgian Ambassador to the United States (Kutelia, 2010). An inevitable consequence, however, is the marginalization and diminishment of politics and public sentiment in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia: the regions are constituted externally, first and foremost, as strategic objects.

Coexisting with this dominant strategic storyline, however, is a potentially countervailing storyline that is nominally more open to public opinion and politics in both places. This finds expression in the Georgian state strategy towards the “occupied territories” released in January 2010 and subtitled “engagement through cooperation.” This document imagines the current residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as citizens of Georgia who have legitimate identities, needs, and aspirations which all Georgians share:

The Government of Georgia strives to extend to the populations in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia the benefits of its continual progress in national reforms, and its closer integration into European and Euro-Atlantic structures and institutions. The Government of Georgia believes that, as a member of these institutions, this integration will provide even more solid

guarantees for the well-being, prosperity, and security of its multi-cultural and multiethnic society (Government of Georgia, 2010).

This citizen-centric storyline is in tension with the dominant strategic storyline because it is nominally open to what the current residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia really think. The document acknowledges that mistakes were “made by all sides” in the past, which involved great human suffering, and “recognizes the existence of political differences with segments of the populations of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/ South Ossetia.” When presenting the new strategy at a public forum in Washington, DC, the Georgian Minister for Reintegration, Temuri Yakobashvili, responded to the potential value of public opinion survey research in Abkhazia by deeming the issue “very sensitive.” He explained that the “information space” in Abkhazia is “blocked” and, in a concerted effort to “indoctrinate the population” with an enemy image of Georgia, anti-Georgian sentiments are exploited for political purposes in Abkhazia. Asking questions under this kind of “information pressure” will produce misleading results, he continued:

Opinion polls in these kinds of areas are very tricky not only because of the information environment. Who will be asking the questions? And how will these questions be formulated, in a society where you have fear? I mean if you conducted an opinion poll in the Soviet Union, you would get very funny results. People are not really expressing themselves freely, and they will be very much scared to answer the question properly if they are not sure that nothing is going to happen to them if their answer will not fit some kind of official policy. Official policy is that we don't need anybody else. We are fine with Russians (Yakobashvili, 2010).

Yakobashvili is indeed correct in the abstract, that *de facto* states are difficult environments in which to conduct public opinion surveys. The legacy of wartime violence and trauma, the insecurity of contested status, and desperate economic circumstances militate against the development of open and pluralistic political systems. His questions about the degree to which respondents are free to express opinions are also legitimate concerns, most especially for the Georgian Mingrelian returnees to Abkhazia who are concentrated in Gal(i) rayon. As we will explain, in negotiating, designing, and choosing a firm for our survey, we sought to address these concerns as rigorously as we could.

Methodological and implementation issues are raised by the survey results reported here and we deem further follow-up work necessary. It is our hope that the survey results facilitate greater understanding between the Georgian and Abkhazian states, and provide grounds for a deeper and more informed dialogue about common interests and the human security needs of those still deeply affected by the legacies of warfare and conflict. We fully accept the argument that our survey does not represent the

opinion of all Abkhazian residents prior to the 1992–1993 war. Over 200,000 Georgian, Mingrelian, and Georgian-Mingrelian residents were forcefully displaced from the region as an outcome of this war. In forthcoming work, we plan to report survey results from citizens in Georgia proper, including displaced persons, on many of the same questions we asked in Abkhazia, just as we have done for parallel surveys in Transnistria and Moldova.

The third compelling reason why an Abkhazian public opinion survey is important at this juncture is that Euro-Atlantic policy towards Georgia and Abkhazia is currently under active public discussion (Franke et al., 2010, pp. 158, 170–172). Three recent reports provide useful summations of the issues at stake and recommendations to policy makers on how to move forward productively in the post–August war environment. In February 2010, the International Crisis Group (ICG) issued a report that documented the deepening dependence of Abkhazia on Russian security protection, budgetary subventions, and investments (ICG, 2010). The issue of growing dependence predates the August war, with Russian–Abkhaz relations warming slowly but consistently over the two presidencies of Vladimir Putin (2000–2008). Amidst changes to its citizenship and passport laws, Russian Federation officials facilitated the acquisition of Russian citizenship by many Abkhazian residents. While geopolitical, not humanitarian, motives have been ascribed to this external “passportization” policy, there has been little discussion and empirical examination of those acquiring citizenship and their motivations (P. Goble in *The New York Times*, September 9, 2008, <http://topics.blogs.nytimes.com/2008/09/09/russian-passportization/>; Littlefield, 2009). We report here only results on passport ownership but plan to follow up with more in-depth analysis of other passport-related questions in future publications.

The manifest evidence of deepening dependence discussed by the ICG report is in the military and economic realm. On September 15, 2009, the Russian and *de facto* Abkhazian authorities signed a military cooperation treaty that enables the Russian military to use, build and upgrade military infrastructure and bases in Abkhazia. The former Soviet airfield facility at Bombora near Gudauta is one of the facilities being upgraded and refurbished, most likely restoring its status as the premier military airbase in the South Caucasus region. A new Russian naval base on the Black Sea at Ochamchira is envisaged. Both are important foundations for Russian power projectionism in the South Caucasus. Finally, Russian forces have taken control of the security of the administrative border with Georgia along the Inguri River (see Figure 1), with Abkhaz officials serving as control agents, managing travel through the only open post on the border. In addition to the substantial investments involved in these military agreements, the Russian Federation provides direct budgetary support to the Abkhaz state. In 2009, this was estimated at 60 percent (1.9 billion rubles, about \$65.5 million) with the monetary figure remaining the same in 2010 but dropping in percentage terms as Abkhaz state revenues rise (ICG, 2010, p. 5). The Russian state also pays local pensions to Russian passport holders that are generous compared to those available from Abkhazia. Russian state companies have also

struck recent deals to upgrade Abkhazian infrastructure. Land in Abkhazia is owned by the state and leased to individuals and businesses. A change to the law in June 2009 opened the way for Russian investors and others to purchase long-term leases to Abkhazian property, previously restricted to Abkhazians only.

The issue of deepening ties between Abkhazia and Russia raises many intriguing questions. Any military alliance between Abkhazia and the Russian state is inevitably asymmetrical. For a community of peoples who have worked assiduously to assert their independence, what degree of autonomy and freedom will they enjoy under Russian protection, especially given the historical memory of imperialistic violence and subjugation suffered by ethnic Abkhaz at the hands of Kremlin rulers in the past? The question of “foreign ownership” of the Abkhazian “jewels,” like its natural resource wealth, hydro-electrical power, or Black Sea coastline, is also politically sensitive. Abkhazian opposition figures, ironically historically closer to Russia than current President Bagapsh, briefly sought to make an issue out of deepening dependence on Russia in the 2009 presidential elections (Fischer, 2009). Measuring the degree to which there is ambivalent feeling within Abkhazia about these deepening economic and political ties was an issue that we considered important to investigate in our survey.

The second report, produced under the auspices of the Harriman Institute at Columbia University, argues for a new US strategy of engagement with Georgia (Mitchell and Cooley, 2010). Authors Lincoln Mitchell and Alexander Cooley address three key aspects of the US–Georgian bilateral relationship: the US–Georgia Charter, democracy in Georgia, and US aid assistance to Georgia. They also devote a separate section to the question of Abkhazia, and advocate a new US strategy of “engagement without recognition,” distinguishing Abkhazia from South Ossetia, whose claim to independent statehood is “prima facie absurd” (p. 24). Their case for the new policy is based on three arguments, two about the weaknesses of existing policy and one about the opportunity costs of not having a policy of engagement with Abkhazia.

The first argument concerns divergences in the production of policy meaning. US and international policy have long consisted of what they term “platitudes” concerning support for the “territorial integrity” of Georgia. “International policymakers and observers use the phrase ‘territorial integrity’ in various speeches about Georgia, but they rarely consider that the phrase has a very specific meaning: that all of the territory that was part of Georgia at the end of the Soviet period should be governed by Tbilisi” (Mitchell and Cooley, 2010, p. 25). This is, to say the least, a contentious issue, and has long been so. Territorial integrity rhetoric functions within post-Soviet Georgia as justification for a state centralization agenda. It risks suggesting that the US and the European Union “are more open to proactive, or even military, efforts to bring Abkhazia and South Ossetia back under Georgia control.” Such rhetoric, they write, “clearly contributed to the belief in Tbilisi in 2008 that, in spite of official warnings,

the United States would support Georgia in the August war" (p. 25). What functions in Washington, DC as a rhetorical platitude is interpreted in Tbilisi as support for state centralization, and then interpreted in Sukum(i) as international support for hard-line Georgian actions against Abkhazia. Mitchell and Cooley point out that Abkhaz views towards Georgia "are rarely considered either in Tbilisi or in Washington" (p. 26). Their second argument is with the policy of "strategic patience" (which they abbreviate as "stratpat"), the contention that the best method for Georgia to reintegrate Abkhazia and South Ossetia is to demonstrate its attractiveness as an economic success and model democratic country. "The central premise of stratpat is that things are getting better in Georgia and that eventually the Abkhaz will see this" (p. 26). This policy, they argue, is highly unrealistic because Abkhazia has greater economic potential than Georgia, though Georgia has hardly demonstrated itself to be a model democracy with strategic patience. Our survey results, as we will see, directly address this issue and provide empirical support for this critique. Their final argument is that, in not engaging Abkhazia, the US and its allies are missing an opportunity to exploit Abkhaz reservations about their increasing ties and overwhelming dependence on Russia.

The third report advocates the potential of specific commercial business projects to foster peace-building between the various parties to the conflict over Abkhazia. Written by David L. Philips under the auspices of the New York-based National Committee on American Foreign Policy, the report outlines the different stakeholders in any mutually beneficial interaction between Georgia and Abkhazia and their varying perspectives. The report argues that the current Georgian state strategy of engagement is "the right approach" but that Abkhazia "will only engage if engagement does not undermine their goal to gain greater global recognition as an independent and sovereign state" (Philips, 2010, pp. 20–21). It argues that, although there is not a lot of common ground between the parties, "business is the common language" and several projects—the Enguri Sand and Gravel Export Project, Black Sea Resorts, and Project Entertainment Centers, revived tea plantations, and agri-business enterprises—offer the potential to produce mutual benefits to all stakeholders. Philips's report raises the question of whether there is a basis for reconciliation between Georgia and Abkhazia in the current context, yet another issue we probed in our survey.

As social scientists, our goal is not to provide specific policy recommendations along the lines of these three reports. Instead, we are interested in shining some light on regions that are often glibly designated "geopolitical black holes," in the process checking on many assumptions upon which policy recommendations are based. To the extent that policy is based on the erasure and absence of perspectives from inside these regions, it lacks adequate foundations and is open to capture by self-interested local players and regional actors. As a matter of general principle, we hold that policy is best formulated on the basis of social facts on the ground in the region. In this respect, we believe that the social attitudes

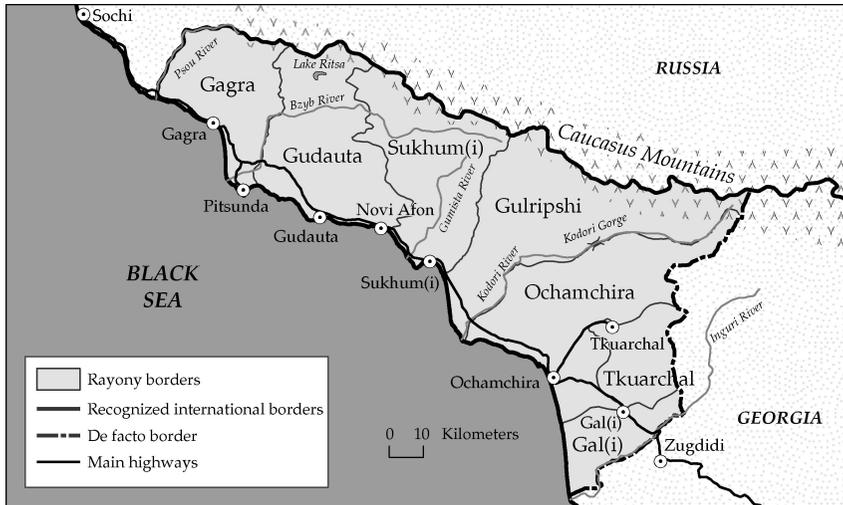


Fig. 1. Cities and rayony (districts) of Abkhazia. Source: Map drafted by the authors from multiple sources.

and divisions evident from our survey are important as realistic foundations for renewed Euro-Atlantic policy engagement with the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict.

## SAMPLE DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

Though small local surveys with uncertain levels of reliability have been held in Abkhazia since the 1992–1993 war, large representative samples are difficult to design and complete. Wartime population displacements and the physical destruction of dwellings and public infrastructure devastated communities and attendant social networks. Seasonal agricultural demands and the necessities of survival meant considerable internal movement, external migration, and constant shuttle trading. The Russian anthropologist Anatoli Yamskov, who has considerable experience in Abkhazia, has argued that official estimations of residential populations are subject to double-counting errors (Yamskov, 2009). Like many other activities in *de facto* states, local surveys are highly vulnerable to bias, unreliability, manipulation, and political capture.

To address legitimate concerns about trust and professionalism, we hired a highly reputable Russian public opinion company, the Levada Center from Moscow, to conduct our survey. Having worked in the past with the Levada Center in the North Caucasus, we knew their procedures to be thoroughly professional. The Levada Center is also well-known as an independent public opinion polling organization, with no Russian government ownership or potentially compromising ties. Through the

auspices of the Russian Academy of Sciences, we negotiated two field excursions to Abkhazia to discuss with local government officials the possibility of conducting an independent survey in the territory. We received permission to conduct the survey on the terms we considered necessary, namely, with official permission for the survey firm to work in the country together with a guarantee of non-interference from political authorities at any level. (The Abkhazian government subsequently observed both of these conditions.) An eight-person Levada survey team from Krasnodar was able to freely conduct surveying work across the region in February (pilot) and March 2010. This team conducted the bulk of the interview work (more than two-thirds) by working in two groups; arriving together in survey points, the groups conducted interviews there at one time.

The Levada team hired and trained eight local researchers, most of whom already had experience conducting interviews. These local interviewers worked largely in Sukum(i), where high mobile phone penetration allowed for thorough checking of their work. In addition, nine local Mingrelian-speaking interviewers (nearly all local school teachers) were employed in the south, eight in Gal(i) *rayon* and one in Tkuarchal *rayon*. Hiring these interviewers was considered necessary for a series of reasons. We established through fieldwork that the local Mingrelian population was likely to be wary of the survey, and to providing answers on sensitive questions posed by outsiders, particularly Russians. These local interviewers allowed respondents to answer questions posed by a person with high status in their community. The reputation of the local interviewer was also an assurance that no harm might come to the respondent in answering the survey. Finally, the local interviewers also provided the respondents with translation from Russian to Mingrelian of political terms and concepts that were unfamiliar for them. One-half of the interviewers engaged in polling in these southern regions had experience with interviewing.

Given the poor condition of roads in Abkhazia, there is a strong temptation to sample only in readily accessible locations. We considered it important, however, to make the extra effort to include high mountain villages in the survey sample. We also considered it vital to include a representative sample from the Gal(i) *rayon*, home to the largest concentrations of Abkhazia's remaining Georgian Mingrelian residents, even though it too is plagued by particularly bad infrastructure. Finally, we decided to pursue a large sample size ( $n = 1000$ ) to ensure that the survey is as representative as possible given the less than ideal circumstances of uncertain population estimates, unresolved wartime legacies, and suspicion about the motives of interviewers asking questions on sensitive political topics.

The survey instrument we developed was large (over 140 questions) and printed in the Russian language. All respondents were assured that their responses were anonymous, though a mobile phone number was requested for checking purposes. After completion of a 30-person pilot survey in and around Sukhum(i) in February, some adjustments were made and the survey was administered across Abkhazia from March 19 to March 30, 2010. The distribution of the sample across Abkhazia's major



**Table 1.** Distribution of the Sample by Cities and Rayony, Abkhazia, March 2010<sup>a</sup>

Region and settlement	Official 2003 census data	Corrected data <sup>b</sup>	Percent of population	Sample distribution
ABKHAZIA	215,567	225,567	100	1000
Gagra <i>rayon</i>	36,691	36,691	16.3	163
Gudauta <i>rayon</i>	35,930	30,275	13.4	134
Sukhum(i) city	11,895	11,895	5.3	53
Sukhum(i) <i>rayon</i>	44,690	44,690	19.9	198
Gulrypsh <i>rayon</i>	17,477	17,477	7.7	78
Ochamchira <i>rayon</i>	24,972	21,788	9.7	97
Tkuarchal <i>rayon</i>	14,735	18,843	8.3	83
Gal(i) <i>rayon</i>	29,177	43,908	19.5	194

<sup>a</sup>Source: Official 2003 census data in Upravleniye (2003).

<sup>b</sup>Modified by the research of Yamskov (2009), which takes seasonal and more permanent migration into account.

administrative districts is indicated in Table 1 and the specific number in each community is indicated in Figure 2. Since there has been no official census in Abkhazia since 1989, the exact numbers of persons in the settlements and *rayoni* of Abkhazia are not known. Similarly, the distribution by ethnicity is unknown and any estimates are subject to counterclaims, suspicion about motives, and disparaging of sources. The ethnic proportions are especially sensitive given the historical and contemporary ethnopolitics of the region. Our population estimates are based on Abkhaz government data (estimates) from 2003, which we modified on the basis of the ethnographic findings of Yamskov. Because precise numbers for ethnicities are unobtainable, we do not assign weights to the sample numbers as is common in such surveys to make small adjustments for the differences between key population groups and sample proportions.

While our ratios in Table 2 are in line with the estimates of the governmental authorities in Sukhum(i), they are different from other estimates. In these latter calculations, the Abkhaz ratio is variously between 25 percent and 35 percent, the Georgian/Mingrelian estimates are often higher than the Abkhaz ratio, and the numbers often include the tens of thousands of displaced persons from Gal(i) and Ochamchira *rayony* (ICG, 2010, p. 8).

The boundaries of the 170 precincts used for the December 2009 presidential election in Abkhazia were used as our primary sampling units (PSUs). Each unit has between 500 and 2000 (about 1000 on average) citizens aged 18 and older. Since the rural part of the Gal(i) *rayon* was not divided into electoral districts, separate villages were used as the PSUs. Eighty-four PSUs were randomly selected from this total, with each PSU yielding 11–12 interviews. The selection of households in each sampling

**Table 2.** Distribution of the Abkhazia Sample by Ethnicity, March 2010<sup>a</sup>

Ethnic (national) group	Percentage in sample
Abkhaz	42.5
Armenian	18.5
Russian	10.4
Georgian	12.5
Mingrelian	7.4
Georgian and Mingrelian	4.3
Other	3.4

<sup>a</sup>Source: Authors' data.

point was carried out using the random route method. Following the route, interviewers polled every seventeenth household in multi-floor buildings or every seventh household in rural areas. Interviews were conducted on the doorstep or within the selected residence. If a household or respondent refused to take part in the survey or the interview was not completed after three separate visits, the next address on the list of households of this electoral district was interviewed. Selection of a respondent in a household was based on the nearest birthday for the adults, after controlling for gender and age.

Local and state authorities were informed in advance and were anticipating the study, but did not intervene in its conduct and, according to the observations of the project supervisor and the interviewers, did not demonstrate any particular interest in its outcome or exert any pressure on potential respondents (such as forcing them to participate in the study). In total, 3791 addresses were visited, with 1518 vacant (nobody at home for three visits) or unoccupied. This high vacancy ratio is typical for Abkhazia because of unrepaired war damage, out-migration, and seasonal population movement. Of the 2293 potential interviewees contacted, 809 were beyond the quota that was defined for a category (such as gender or ethnicity), and so 1000 interviews were completed from 1484 contacts (67 percent response rate). The margin of error varies depending on the responses to individual questions (50/50 response is 4.5 percent while a 5/95 response is 2.1 percent).

Since there are over 140 separate answers in the survey, we are able to present here only a partial picture of what the responses reveal about Abkhazia in 2010. With contemporary academic debates and policy questions in mind, we have categorized our analysis of specific questions into five broad themes, each illuminating different aspects of internal legitimacy and political diversity inside contemporary Abkhazia. We first consider the questions of security and perceived well-being. Three questions address the life-world identifications of respondents while

four questions report on their views of state-building principles. Finally, answers to five questions indicate the respondents' views on the state of reconciliation between the divided communities and the potential (or not) for displaced person returns, as well as on current and future geopolitical relations with Russia and Georgia.

In the preliminary analysis of the responses, multiple indicators were separately examined to determine important predictors of differences. Neither gender, age, education, generation (Soviet and post-Soviet, born after 1980), or any other common socio-demographic indicators reveal significant differences in responses. A person's declared nationality—more precisely the divide between the broadly Georgian respondents and non-Georgians—overwhelmed other measures in helping to make sense of the responses, with war experience of forced displacement also showing significant differences. Since displacement experience closely mirrors nationality (the vast majority of Georgians/Mingrelians were displaced, some of them on multiple occasions), we have chosen to examine responses by nationality in this article.

We dropped 70 surveys out of the 1000 for this article. Mindful of concerns about truthfulness, we dropped 26 respondents because of interviewers' doubts about the honesty of responses. Because we are focusing on nationality in this article, we have also dropped the small number of those interviewed who chose "mixed nationality" or "hard to say" in response to this question (44 persons out of 1000). In providing nationality categories, we adopted a broad approach, listing Georgian, Mingrelian, and Georgian-Mingrelian as options for respondents beyond Abkhaz, Armenian, Russian, mixed, other, or "refuse to answer." For the purposes of analysis here, we grouped the various Georgian nationalities into one category since the answers were quite similar (in doing so, we do not mean to imply that these identity differences are not meaningful and important). On the graphs, therefore, "Georgian/Mingrelian" indicates those who self-classified either as Georgian (125 persons), Georgian and Mingrelian (43 persons), and Mingrelian (74 persons). It should also be noted that, though there are ethnic Georgians throughout Abkhazia, the majority of the Georgians (217 of 242 of this category) interviewed in the survey were located in the Tkuarchal and Gal(i) *rayoni*. In analyzing differences between nationalities, therefore, we are also analyzing differences between distinct geographic regions within Abkhazia. Finally, all the differences portrayed on the bar graphs are significant at the .05 level.

## WHAT DO ABKHAZIANS BELIEVE? THE SURVEY RESULTS

### Sense of Security and Well-Being

During our interviews with officials in Abkhazia in November 2009, many of them commented on the contrast before August 2008, when the republic faced a remilitarizing Georgia as a still isolated *de facto* state, and

post–August 2008, when Abkhazia, facing a defeated Georgia, was now a state newly recognized by Russia and with Russian soldiers securing its border, Russian aircraft in the skies, and Russian naval forces offshore on the Black Sea. Amongst the Abkhazian officials to whom we spoke, there was a palpable sense that it was a “new day” in Abkhazia. Liana Kvarchelia from the Abkhazian civil society organization “Center for Study of Humanitarian Programs” made this her first point in a presentation in Washington, DC in April 2010:

This is the first time, probably, since 1992 that Abkhazians, that Abkhazian society, is not so much concerned, is not thinking about the immediate threat of war. This is the first time. Though since the end of the war in 1993 we had peacekeepers, we had UN monitors. But never did Abkhazian society feel comfortable or [people] feel sure that if they go to bed at night, tomorrow morning they won’t wake up in a new situation of war. This factor is a very important factor influencing the Abkhazian internal and external situation (Kvarchelia, 2010).

We find empirical evidence for this lowered sense of insecurity in our survey. Figure 3a reports the results of responses to the question about a possible renewed war with Georgia. The predominant sense among Abkhazia’s non-Georgian population is that renewed war is not a problem at all, though Abkhazia’s Georgian population demurs on this question. There are a considerable number (about one-third) of “difficult to say/refuse to answer” responses amongst the Georgian population to this question. Amongst those who consider the possibility of a renewed war to be some type of a problem (“big,” “quite big,” and “not big but, nevertheless, a problem”), it is Georgians who are the more numerous. Explanation for this is partially locational, experiential, and informational. Georgians in the Gal(i) *rayon* have been on the frontline of the Abkhaz–Georgian conflict since 1993. Guerrilla and sabotage actions by Georgian-sponsored partisans left it in a state of permanent low-intensity conflict for the following 15 years. In 1998, these actions flared into a brief war that forced most Georgians/Mingrelians to evacuate the region. They, more than most other Abkhazians, live with the reality of the war on a daily basis, from the securitized boundary that they cross regularly to the military vehicles moving troops and equipment stationed in the region. Inal-Ipa (2009, p. 15) argues that the local population in Gal(i) feel like hostages to the unresolved conflict, with each side making contradictory demands upon them. Both the Abkhaz and Georgian authorities demand that the Gal(i) population make an unambiguous political and civil choice. This, she argues, has led to a condition “close to depression and social paralysis.” Under such stressful conditions, locals try to survive by avoiding situations that demand making choices. In our survey, the consistently high values of “don’t know” and “refuse to answer” responses in the Gal(i) region is in line with this awkward positioning in which the residents find

themselves. Finally, unlike the rest of Abkhazia, the Gal(i) region is part of the information space of Georgian media. Under Tbilisi government influence, it tends to be more inclined to see war as an immanent threat.

We find empirical evidence for optimism within the society, with Abkhaz the most optimistic among the four principal ethnic groups. Almost a quarter of them declare that they are in an excellent mood and another 60 percent feel in an average or normal mood. Similarly, Armenians (87 percent) and Russians (83 percent) report an excellent or normal mood, in contrast to only 57 percent for Georgians/Mingrelians (graphs not shown). This 30-point gap between Georgians and others is crucial, and the difference undoubtedly colors, and is colored by, the related political, social, and economic conditions in the republic. The infrastructure in Gal(i) is especially poor, and after a visit to the *rayon* in May 2009, the OSCE Commissioner for Human Rights called on the Abkhaz authorities to improve education, allow Georgian-language schools, and reduce controls on the border with Georgia to allow local residents access to health care there (Vollebaek, 2009). Mental well-being is strongly related to income and purchasing status; it is no surprise to see these group differences reflected in the perceptions of purchasing power graph (Figure 3b).

In comparing the self-perceived material status of the different groups, we followed the standard question used for many years by Russian research agencies. More than one-quarter of ethnic Abkhaz report that they can afford everything they need, slightly less among Armenians, with few Georgians in this category. The majority of the population of Abkhazia declared that they can buy everything except for durable goods. The share of Abkhaz who report better material conditions is much higher than in Russia and the neighboring regions of the North Caucasus, as seen in our earlier surveys (Kolossoff and O'Loughlin, 2008). It is somewhat paradoxical that, in an area still largely devastated by a war that nominally ended 17 years ago and with only central parts of Sukhum(i) and other major towns restored, the perception of relative prosperity is high compared to other Caucasian regions. Several explanations are plausible. First, after the punitive blockade in the 1990s, Abkhazia began to slowly recover economically as Russia eased the terms of the embargo in 2001. Many former Soviet citizens—including President Putin—have fond memories of holidays in Abkhazia, and these memories have proved an important asset as flows of mostly Russian tourists began to return to the region's attractive beaches after 2001. Due in part to the ethnic Abkhaz diasporic network in Turkey, some outside investment in tourist facilities was seen in alliance with local entrepreneurs (E. Barry in *The New York Times*, May 7, 2009, [www.nytimes.com/2009/05/08/world/europe/08Abkhazia.html](http://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/08/world/europe/08Abkhazia.html)). Special arrangements were necessary because until June 2009, foreign citizens were officially not allowed to develop projects on land in Abkhazia.

Second, the economic situation has significantly improved in the past two years because of the considerable Russian aid directly to the Abkhazian state budget. The ICG (2010) reports that Russia is financing just over half of Abkhazia's budget, but the actual figure could be much

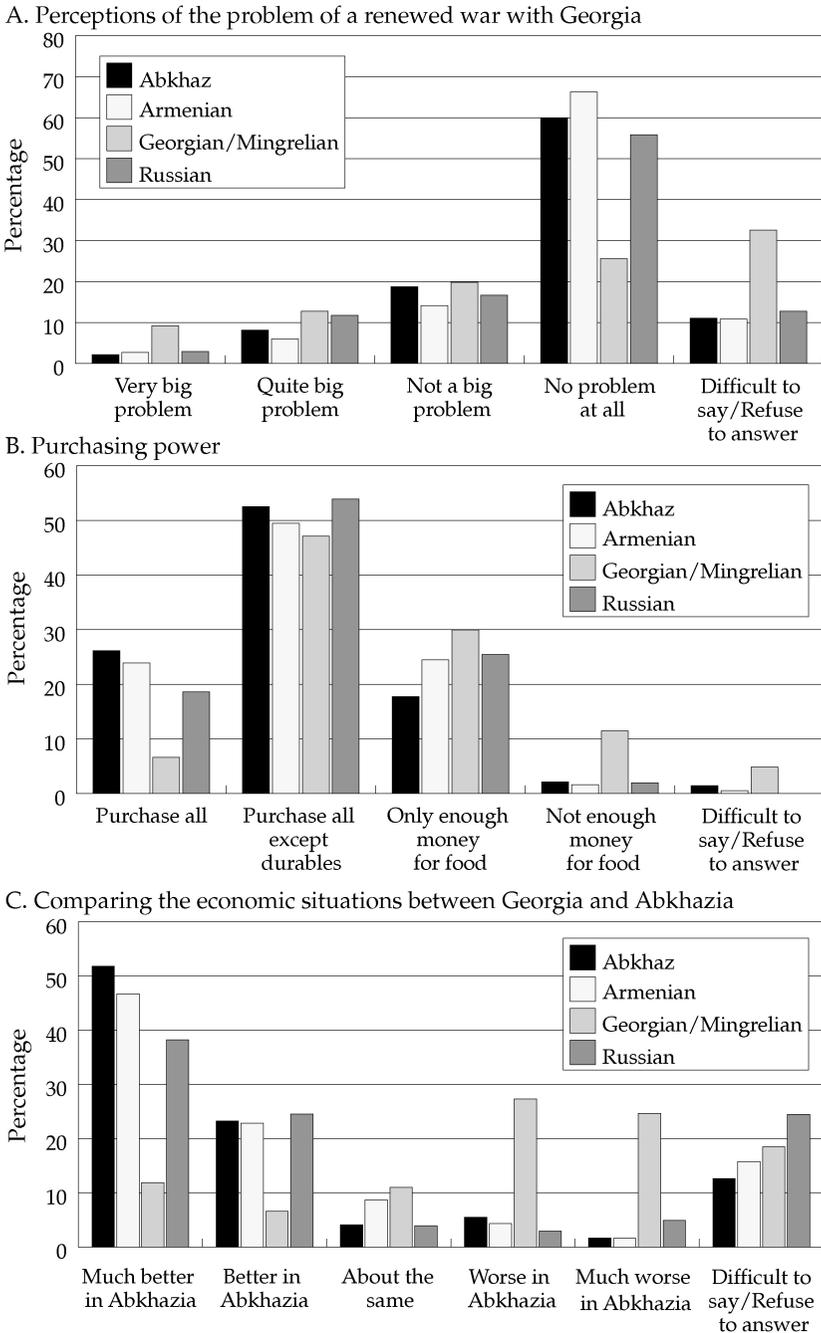


Fig. 3. Indicators of prospects of war and measures of material status in Abkhazia.

higher. Add to this the \$465 million in spending on military infrastructure projects by the Russian military. The 2009 removal of legal restriction of outside investments has opened the way to considerable Russian investments in tourism and infrastructure. The governments of Russia and Abkhazia recently worked out "a complex plan of social-economic development of Abkhazia for 2010–2012" whose total cost is more than 10 billion rubles (about 330 million US dollars) (*Nezavisimaya gazeta*, March 26, 2010; for a skeptical view about these investments, see S. Minin in *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, February 18, 2010, [www.ng.ru/columnist/2010-02-18/100\\_abhazia.html](http://www.ng.ru/columnist/2010-02-18/100_abhazia.html)). The main goal is the restoration of damaged infrastructure, including the railway station and the civil airport in Sukhum(i). Lastly, we should not forget the economic ripples from the construction boom in Sochi in preparation for the 2014 Winter Olympics. During the 2009 presidential election in Abkhazia, Russian proposals to locate dormitories for temporary workers on Abkhazian territory and to extract gravel from the beds of Abkhazian mountainous rivers (significantly affecting the environment) generated fears amongst ethnic Abkhaz citizens about the costs and demographic consequences of economic development (Philips, 2010).

As in many of our results, Armenians (the second-largest population group) and Russians share the general positions of the Abkhaz. Even if fewer of them can afford everything compared to Abkhaz, they appear satisfied with current conditions, with over 60 percent declaring their mood as excellent or normal. As Figure 3b reveals, the Georgians/Mingrelians are distinct from the other groups. A majority, albeit small (57 percent), of this group selected the positive material condition options "I can afford everything I need" and "we can purchase everything we need except for durables," but this rate is more than 15 percentage points lower than the self-reported status of Russians, the lowest of the non-Georgian groups. As the rest of Abkhazia continues a slow recovery from wartime devastation, the Gal(i) region remains a world apart. In a still largely ruined and mostly subsistence economy that survives on external aid, incomes here depend on salaries in the state sector (functionaries and public services—e.g., education, health care, and law enforcement systems), pensions, and some agricultural goods trading. The situation in Gal(i) *rayon* is not completely a function of recent mass violence and population movements—in the autumn of 1993 and again in May 1998—and post-displacement looting and low-intensity conflicts involving irregular forces for over a decade. Gal(i) has historically been an underdeveloped part of Abkhazia/Georgia, relative to the northern *rayon* of Gagra, with its resort town of Pitsunda, and Sukum(i), with its government institutions, retail trade, service industry, and tourism. Before 2008, the Abkhazian government was reluctant to make any investments in Gal(i) because of the highly unstable political and military situation there and the overt hostility of many inhabitants to the central authorities. Government officials that we interviewed in November 2009, however, indicated that development in Gal(i) was now a state priority, with the region's Georgian/Mingrelian population represented in ways that ironically echo the paternalism found

in Georgia's new "occupied territories" strategy, as Abkhazian citizens to whose needs and aspirations they should respond. Some Abkhaz political groups do not share this conception, however, and persist in viewing Gal(i) residents suspiciously as a Georgian "fifth column" (Fischer, 2009).

The overwhelming majority of the Abkhazian population finds the economic situation in their republic better than in Georgia, though very few of them can realistically make such comparisons since they never travel to Georgia (Figure 3c; other survey results confirm this lack of travel to Georgia). The Abkhaz group is the most positive about the comparison, again with Armenians and, to a lesser extent, Russians agreeing with them. Since most non-Georgian Abkhazians are convinced that the national economy and their personal lives are better in their republic than in Georgia, they have no economic motivation for reintegration. The vision of Georgia transforming itself into an economic magnet that would draw the breakaway territories back, articulated by Mikheil Saakashvili when he came to power and today urged upon Georgia as the underpinning of a policy of "strategic patience" by the US and European Union, has manifestly not worked on Abkhazia's non-Georgian groups. Their sense that things are much better in Abkhazia is not shared by the Georgian/Mingrelian population living in Gal(i) *rayon*, however; more than a half of them believe that the economic situation is worse in Abkhazia than in Georgia. One explanation is that this group, unlike all others, is better informed because its members can and do travel frequently to Georgia. More pertinent, however, is the different economic contexts of the groups revealed in the perceived purchasing power results. Georgians in Abkhazia live in a marginalized poor region compared to non-Georgians, and are not as prosperous. Abkhazia to most is Gal(i). The material circumstance of Gal(i) *rayon* relative to Zugdidi, the historic capital of Mingrelia just across the border, no doubt shapes their perceptions of relative impoverishment and prosperity.

## Passports, Pride, and Discrimination

Owning a passport from a *de facto* state may be of little utility abroad, but inside the *de facto* state, the document is often a valuable and necessary possession. Until 2006, Abkhazians had only old Soviet passports and Russian foreign passports that were distributed after 2003. Since then Abkhazian passports have been required for full participation in the social and political life of the state, including voting in elections. Almost all ethnic Abkhaz and approximately 80 percent of Armenians and Russians have Abkhazian passports but only half of Georgians/Mingrelians possess them (Figure 4a). Officially, over 100,000 passports had been issued by July 2010 (Fischer, 2009; see also Cooley and Mitchell, 2010). In Gal(i) *rayon*, only 5000 Abkhazian and only 500 Russian passports had been distributed by September 2009 (T. Imnaishvili for *Kavkazskiy uzel*, September 1, 2009, [www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/158758/](http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/158758/)).

Acquiring an Abkhazian passport is not a straightforward matter. Abkhazian laws allow dual citizenship with Russia but not with Georgia, so acquiring an Abkhazian passport officially means renouncing Georgian citizenship. Some important Abkhazian officials, in particular the leader of the opposition, former Vice-President Raul Khadjimba, were strongly against the distribution of the Abkhazian passports to the population of the Gal(i) *rayon*. These leaders feared that the vote of Georgians/Mingrelians could unsettle the political balance in the republic and start to undermine its identity as an ethnic Abkhaz entity. Additionally, they did not favor extending Abkhazian citizenship to Georgians because they assumed that it would contribute to the electoral victory of Sergey Bagapsh, given that his wife is Georgian and he was previously a popular politician from Ochamchira with experience also in Tbilisi.

Among our survey respondents, about 70 percent of ethnic Abkhaz and about 80 percent of Armenians and Russians hold Russian foreign passports (in effect, all active adults who have made application) but only 10 percent of Georgians have these passports. For Abkhaz, Armenians, and Russians, a Russian foreign passport offers the possibility of refuge in Russia if the geopolitical situation deteriorates. It also helps with border controls, visiting family in Russia, and enrollment in higher education. All Russian passports issued to Abkhazians are known to the Russian authorities and other states by their serial numbers so visa offices can still identify and exclude Abkhazian officials from travel should they choose to do so. Our survey results reveal that only 30 percent of Georgians/Mingrelians in Abkhazia possess Georgian passports. Much more than the other groups, about one-quarter of Georgians surveyed continue to rely on Soviet passports, yet another indication perhaps of their desire not to choose between contemporary Abkhazia and Georgia.

A standard measurable feature of identity is attachment and loyalty to one's ethnic group. The only question upon which Georgians and Russians in Abkhazia recorded similar attitudes was ethnic pride, with both groups demonstrating strong levels. Our past survey research in the North Caucasus (Kolossoff and O'Loughlin, 2008; O'Loughlin and Ó Tuathail, 2009) has indicated that high levels of pride in an ethnic group (over 90 percent for Abkhaz and Armenians and over 70 percent for Russians and Georgians/Mingrelians are "very proud" of their group—Figure 4b) is not necessarily coincident with strong feelings of nationalist separatism. Rather, it tends to indicate contexts where social and political life is characterized by competitive affective discourses on ethnicity, and a broader shared culture of assertive identity performance (Bullough, 2010). The lower levels recorded by Russians matches their rank in the North Caucasian surveys, where titular peoples tend to rank highest in this measure in their home republics. The sense of pride among the Abkhaz is palpable and is also reflected in an ability to identify by name Abkhaz writers and other cultural figures at a much higher rate than the other groups (O'Loughlin and Kolossoff, 2010). Individuals lacking ethnic pride are also

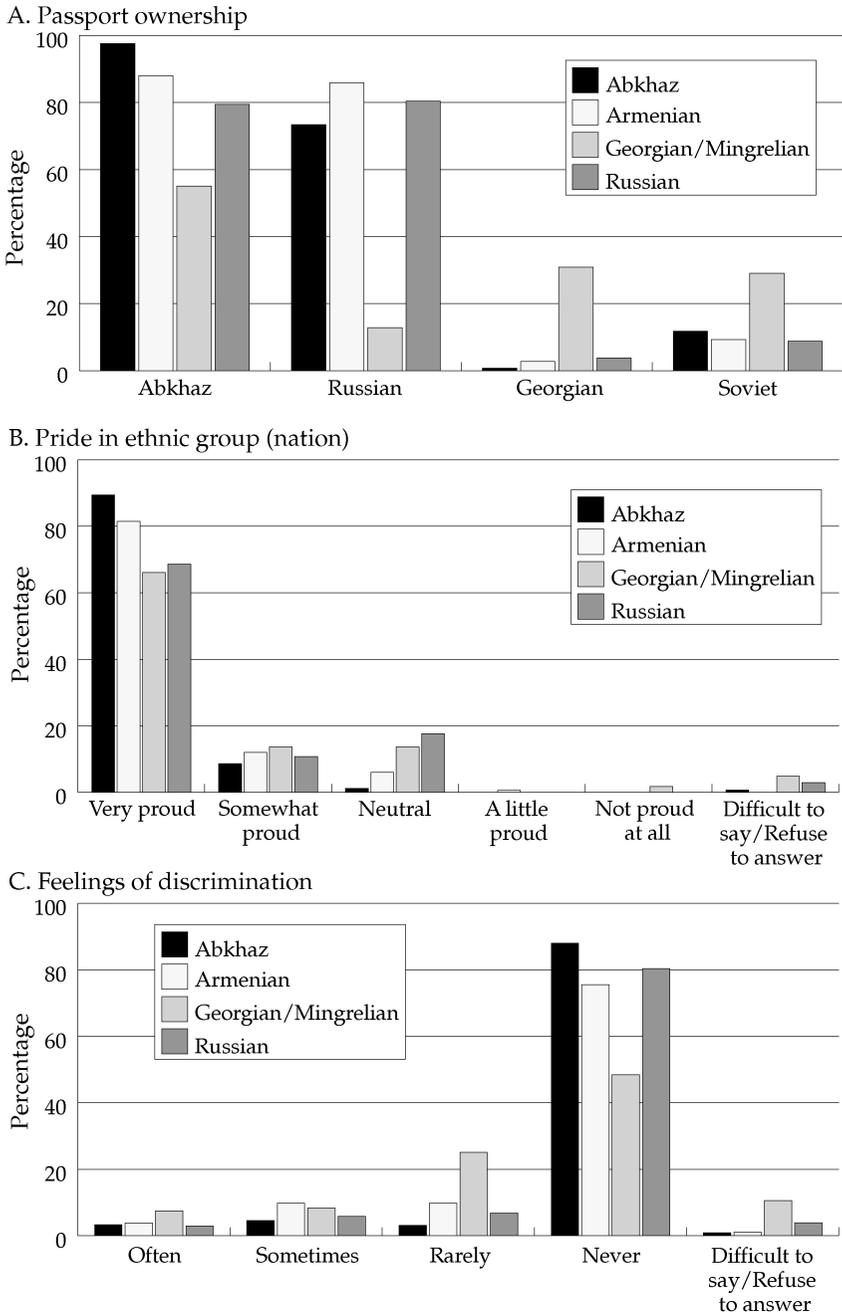


Fig. 4. Passport ownership, and indices of pride and discrimination.

those with dim economic prospects, as we have also previously seen in our North Caucasus work.

To probe the degree of legitimacy of the Abkhaz state, and the degree to which it might be experienced as an ethnocracy by those who are not ethnically Abkhaz, we asked respondents if they had ever experienced what they considered discrimination based on their ethnicity. The results reveal a divide within Abkhazian society, with Armenians and Russians overwhelmingly feeling little sense of discrimination as residents of the Abkhazian state whereas only about half of Georgian respondents felt the same (Figure 4c). Like other sensitive questions in the study, the ratio of Georgians/Mingrelians not providing an answer to this discrimination question ("hard to say" or "refuse to answer") is significantly higher than the other groups at 11 percent. As noted earlier, the difficult positionality of Gal(i) residents accounts for this. Imnaishvili (in *Kavkazskiy uzel*, September 1, 2009, [www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/158758/2009](http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/158758/2009)) notes that residents of the Gal(i) district believe that they are caught between "two fires" (Georgia and Abkhazia): "they prefer to sit silently and not to advertise themselves and their problems 'for the sake of safety.'" Evident in this and many other questions from the survey is an important split in sense of belonging. Abkhaz, Armenians, and Russians reveal a sense of solidarity with the state. Most, though not all, Georgians/Mingrelians are either reluctant to voice an opinion or demonstrate a much higher rate of dissatisfaction on a variety of indicators of well-being.

### **Attitudes Towards Abkhazian State Institutions and the Political System**

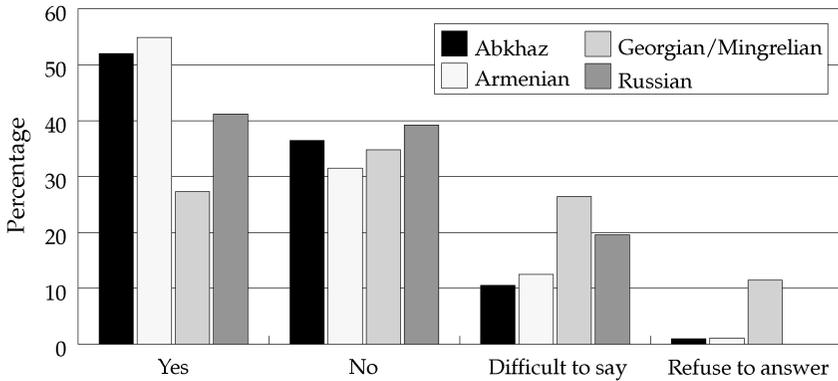
Strong identity with a particular ethnic group is often inversely correlated with the loyalty of respondents to the state or sub-state entity. In Bosnia-Herzegovina, for example, there is a significant contrast between Bosnian Serbs, who exhibit strong ethnic identity and support for the Republika Srpska institutions (like its police), and Bosniaks (Bosnian Muslims), who demonstrated high levels of support for Bosnia-wide institutions (Ó Tuathail et al., 2006). In a similar vein, we asked multiple questions about loyalty and trust in the Abkhazian state and about respondents' perspectives about state-building. In a post-conflict situation, the operations of the institutions of the state are especially sensitive, none more so than those of the police, the most visible part of the state's law enforcement system. The police can favor a particular social or ethnic group, and therefore, different ethnic groups can consider police operations as an instrument of security in their lives or as a hostile arm of a state that excludes and harasses them. Yet trust in the police is not always just about ethnicity or belonging. Typically, in post-Soviet states, the police rank among the lowest in measurements of citizens' trust in state institutions (Shlapentokh, 2006). Following the same line of questions as in our earlier work, we asked Abkhazians if they trusted the police. Though the percentage values for Figure 5a are much lower than for many other

questions, the trust level among Abkhaz (about 52 percent), Armenians (54 percent), and Russians (41 percent) can be considered high—at least as compared, for instance, with our research in the North Caucasus region of Russia, where the corresponding figure is about 20 percent. On this most sensitive of questions, the Georgian/Mingrelian population is absolutely split, with only 26 percent of them expressing trust in the police, while 34 percent have the opposite opinion and nearly 40 percent avoid answering this question by “hard to say” and “refuse to answer” responses. Given the nature of the question and its obvious relation to the operations of the state apparatus, we can interpret this high ratio of non-response (highest of any question in the survey) as an indicator of lack of trust, raising the total non-trusting value for Georgians/Mingrelians to three-quarters of the respondents. It is reasonable to conclude from these data that Georgians/Mingrelians consider the Abkhazian police, and, correspondingly, the state they represent, as an institutional apparatus that cannot be trusted. The reason for such perceptions may be ethnic exclusion in the abstract but it is more likely simply experience with predatory behavior, since relations between law enforcement authorities and Gal(i) residents are tense.

Is the flip side of the fact that Georgians demonstrate lower levels of civic trust and greater feelings of discrimination that the Abkhaz are a privileged ethnicity? Obviously the Abkhaz are the dominant political group in the republic, and if they profit from their privileged status, the republic could be considered an ethnocracy. In such a system, representatives of a dominant ethnicity disproportionately hold government posts and other key political positions and use their political power to advantage in other areas, such as the economy (Yiftachel and Ghanem, 2004). A sizeable ratio of each non-Abkhaz minority (more than 40 percent of Armenians and 30 percent of Russians and Georgians/Mingrelians) believe that they do not have the same opportunities as ethnic Abkhaz (Figure 5b), in effect endorsing the notion that the republic is an ethnocracy. By contrast, most Abkhaz (over 60 percent) are convinced that other ethnic groups have the same access to well-paid jobs and governmental posts as their group.

Though there exists support of the notion of equal access by Armenians and Russians, with about 40–45 percent of these groups believing themselves to be equal to the titular group in access to governmental and well-paying jobs, evidence of a sense of ethnocracy in Abkhazia pervades the answers to this question. The landscape of memory in Sukhum(i) and other places in the republic, as well as the discourse of contemporary Abkhazian historians and political scientists, show that the Abkhaz believe that their contribution to the victory over Georgia, as well as their sufferings and deprivations, are unique (O’Loughlin and Kolossov, 2010). As a consequence, they believe that they deserve the right to determine the destiny of the republic (Avidzba, 2008). Members of the Armenian community openly complain that their political representation does not match their role in Abkhazian society and economy. Only 22 non-Abkhaz (out of 128 candidates) ran for parliamentary office in the 2007 People’s

A. Trust the police



B. Opportunity for non-Abkhaz to have well-paid jobs and significant posts

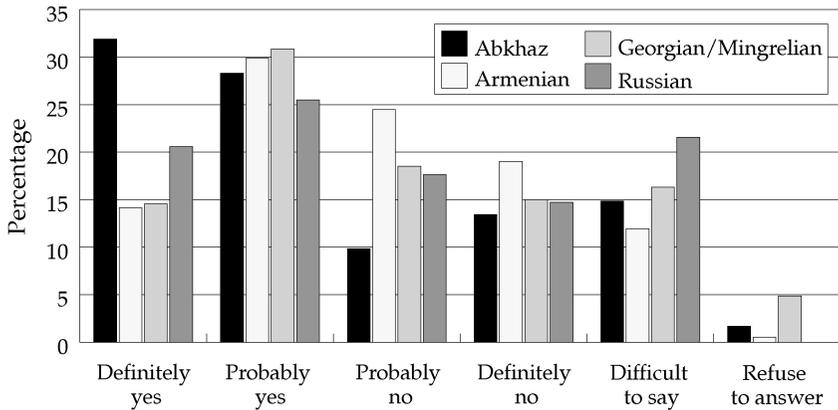


Fig. 5. Attitudes towards Abkhazian state institutions.

Assembly elections and only nine non-Abkhaz sit in a parliament of 35 members (Ó Beacháin, 2010). In the sensitive Gal(i) rayon, all the local officials are Abkhaz though the support staff are Georgians and Mingrelians (ICG, 2010).

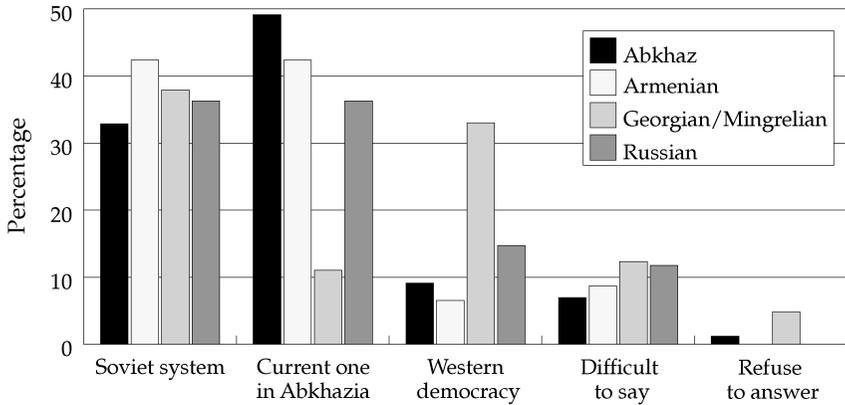
In further probing the sense of attachment to the Abkhazian *de facto* state, we asked two broad questions about the best political system and about the direction of the country. All major ethnic groups in Abkhazia, including Georgians, are unsurprisingly nostalgic for Soviet times when this region was a prosperous and popular tourist zone, unemployment was low, ethnic relations seemingly positive or at least antagonism was dampened, and residents did not suffer the indignities and difficulties arising from the multiplicity of political boundaries that came to exist after

1991. In answer to the question about the best political system (Figure 6a), a range between 32 percent (Abkhaz) and 42 percent (Armenians) of the sample believe that the Soviet regime was the best political option of the four presented. Such nostalgia is common across the former Soviet Union, with over half of Russians believing that the Soviet collapse was “a disaster” (White, 2010). In a 2009 poll in Russia, 43 percent preferred the Soviet political system to the alternatives, Western-style democracy (32 percent) and the current system (6 percent). The biggest group differences in Abkhazia are evident in the responses to the choice of the “current system,” with Armenians and Russians showing similar percentages (about 40 percent) while Abkhaz pick this option as their first choice (about half), a sharp contrast to the low level (only 10 percent) of Georgians/Mingrelians. This group showed more than three times the level of support for a “Western-style democracy” than the average of the other three groups. However, it would be wrong to interpret these results as indicating some kind of “civilizational divide” between “pro-Russian” (Abkhaz, Russians, and Armenians), and “pro-Western” (Georgians/Mingrelians) camps. As the left columns of the graph in Figure 5a show, Georgians are no more democratic than their compatriots in preferences for the Soviet model. The biggest differences are in the preferences to the “current system” of the Abkhazian state, where Georgians/Mingrelians again clearly underscore their weak identification with the Sukhum(i)-based state.

A common measure of political opinion in a variety of polities is the rating of whether the country is heading in the right or in the wrong direction. Tracked over a period of years and governmental administrations, responses to this question are particularly insightful. Not surprisingly and as expected from previous graphs, in Abkhazia the overwhelming majority of non-Georgians (Abkhaz and Armenians slightly more than Russians) are persuaded that the republic is moving in the right direction (Figure 6b). Though 38 percent of Georgians/Mingrelians opt for this answer, equal numbers of this group offer “don’t know” or “refuse to answer” responses. This high non-response rate is in keeping with the pattern we have already discussed. Combined, the non-response and “wrong direction” responses constitute the majority Georgian sentiment. Repetition of this question in future survey research, sensitive as it is to the overall economic conditions in many countries where it is asked, would allow a general sense of whether the gaps between the groups are narrowing or widening.

Our survey results provide evidence for two conclusions on the internal legitimacy of the Abkhazian state. First, the post-1993 Abkhazian leaderships have been partly successful in building a common political (nation) identity shared not only by ethnic Abkhaz but also by Armenians and Russians. Members of these groups associate themselves with the *de facto* republic, are more likely to trust in its institutions, and maintain good inter-ethnic relations with each other. In early 2010, their majorities seemed satisfied with the accommodation of their needs in the fields of language, education, and culture; most are optimistic about the future and

A. Best political system



B. Direction of the country – right vs. wrong

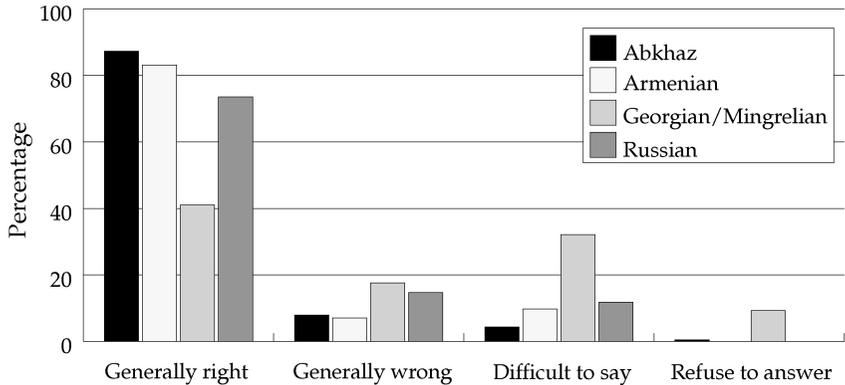


Fig. 6. Attitudes towards the Abkhazian political order.

the economy. Second, Abkhazia’s Georgian/Mingrelian communities are not part of this dominant consensus on the direction of state-building and the future. For them, the *de facto* state in which they live remains untrustworthy and somewhat alien, a situation aggravated by the geographical concentration of this group in Gal(i) rayon on the border with Georgia across the Inguri River. “Caught between two countries” is an apt and succinct description of their status.

**Peace-Building and Reconciliation**

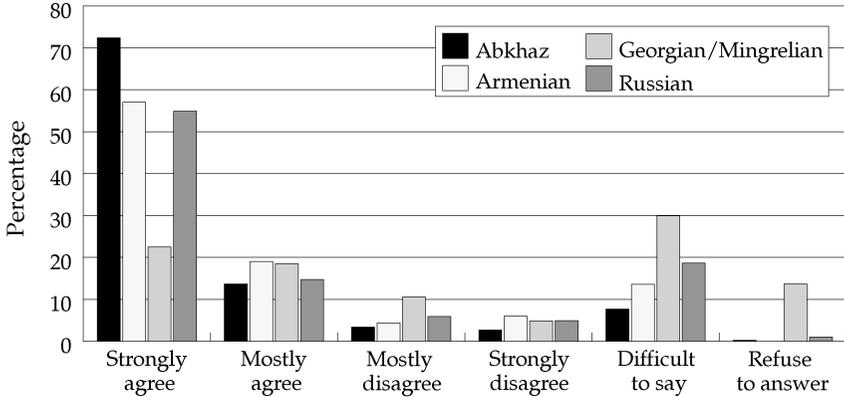
One of the most distinguishing features of the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict is the large number of residents from the region displaced by the

1992–1993 war and successive conflicts. Organized as a government in exile and a separate society within Georgia proper, and living for years in desperate social conditions, Abkhazia's displaced Georgians/Mingrelians have clung to the hope that one day they can return to their property and homes in Abkhazia. The Abkhazian authorities, however, have long resisted the prospect of those violently displaced from Abkhazia ever returning. The official Abkhazian position is that returns are possible but, for now, only to the Gal(i) region. Returns beyond that region to the rest of Abkhazia, and restitution of the property of those ethnic Georgians displaced and killed, are highly sensitive subjects. A common conceptualization of the issue among officials and the public that we encountered frequently in Abkhazia during our field visit in November 2009 is that those Georgians "who did not commit crimes" or "fight against us" are welcome to return. Given that there was never any postwar accountability for war crimes committed during the 1992–1993 war, this discourse appears to be more a rhetorical construct than a realistic basis for a returns process. Who would decide what were crimes, and how these would be adjudicated, is left unspecified. Our overriding impression is that little to no consideration has been given to the prospect of large numbers of Georgians returning. Yet government officials, such as President Bagapsh's external affairs advisor, Nadir Bitiyev, have stated that if Georgia recognizes Abkhazia's independence, then this will allow the refugees to come home or get compensated (Philips, 2010, p. 19).

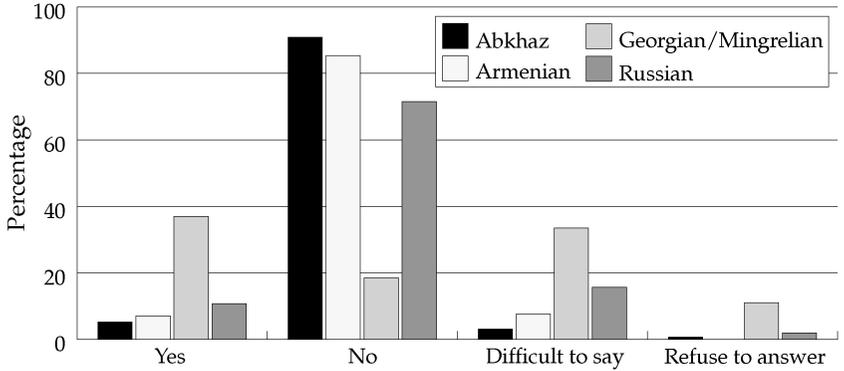
Informed by our past work on the issue of return and reconciliation in Bosnia-Herzegovina (Ó Tuathail and O'Loughlin, 2009; Toal and Dahlman, 2011), we posed three questions on these issues in Abkhazia. The first sought to test the degree to which Abkhazian society was open to the possibility of Georgian returns. Rather than use these latter two words ("Georgian returns"), we approached the question by asking the degree to which respondents agreed with the generic and more neutral statement that "among those displaced by war, there are people who should not be allowed to come back to Abkhazia." The question, in effect, tested the strength of the rhetorical commonplace we found from interviews among non-Georgian Abkhazians, in both the elites and the public, when talking about a possible return.

The results (Figure 7a) record the degree to which non-Georgian Abkhazians emphatically agree with this statement on possible returns and how Georgians/Mingrelians living in Abkhazia are much more ambivalent about it. Over 70 percent of ethnic Abkhaz strongly agree with the statement, as do strong majorities among Armenians and Russians. Again, as in other questions, the "hard to say" choice is the largest amongst the Georgian/Mingrelian sample, which, when combined with the "refuse to answer" responses, indicates considerable dissension from the posed statement. Georgians and Mingrelians who expressed an opinion, however, exhibit a range of attitudes, with over 20 percent "strongly agreeing" and less than 20 percent "mostly agreeing." The overwhelming conclusion from the responses is that there is no unconditional openness

A. Refuse to allow some displaced to return



B. Accept return of refugees for international recognition of Abkhazia



C. Unable to forgive others for violence committed in 1992-93

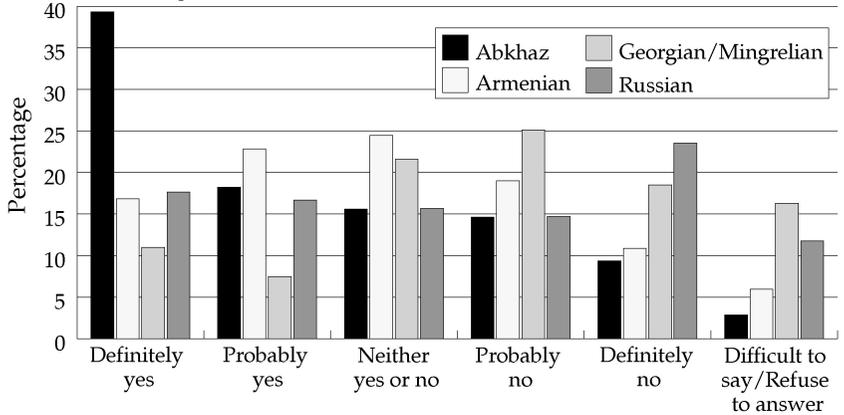


Fig. 7. Indices of reconciliation and forgiveness.

to returns among the vast majority of current Abkhazian residents. Indeed, the prospect of returns is generally unwelcome in an environment where the events of the 1992–1993 war, with its associated claims and counter-claims of atrocities, is still very much present in discourse and are visible on the landscape as destroyed and empty homes and buildings.

This conclusion is affirmed by a second question that addressed the degree to which respondents were open to accepting returns as part of a more comprehensive settlement that would involve widespread international recognition of Abkhazia. One could envisage the possibility that the international community might use the prospect of recognition of the status of independence to induce the Abkhazian authorities to adopt international norms concerning a return process for displaced persons. In effect, this question tested the degree to which the populations in the republic support a rhetorical position that is close to that articulated by the current government to the international community. The wording of the question puts the trade-off a bit more starkly than the government, for whom negotiated “compensation” is a get-out clause from any prospect of full return. The survey question asked: “Would you be willing to accept the full return of Georgian refugees to Abkhazia in return for the recognition of Abkhazia as an independent state by the West and the rest of the international community?” The results (Figure 7b) generated the largest percentage difference between Georgians/Mingrelians and non-Georgian Abkhazians in the whole survey. Over 80 percent of ethnic Abkhaz and Armenians choose “no,” as did 70 percent of Russians. By contrast, only 18.5 percent of Georgians held the same attitude. The largest cohort of Abkhazian Georgians answered “yes” (37 percent), followed closely by “hard to say” (33.8 percent). The question places the wish of ethnic Abkhaz (and, to a lesser extent, Armenians and Russians) for widespread recognition of their independence against the desire to preserve the current demographic condition. The result emphatically underscores how demographic security (or, framed more negatively, preserving the legacy of violent displacement) is more important to non-Georgian Abkhazians than is international recognition. Should any Abkhazian government ever seek compromise on the displaced-persons issue, it would have to contend with strong public sentiment against such a move.

Our third question tested the degree to which there was openness among Abkhazian residents to forgive other nations for the violence during the war of 1992–1993. As already noted, there has been no accountability for the many war crimes committed during this conflict. As in most postwar situations, each group’s position is, in effect, to forgive those who committed crimes on its side and to vilify those who committed crimes against them. The question also approaches the issue of the degree to which Abkhazians still see themselves as victims of the war. The results, like the others, do not bode well for the prospect of reconciliation. Ethnic Abkhaz are distinct in expressing an inability to forgive people of other nations for the violence (58 percent either “definitely yes” or “probably yes”). Armenians are close to the Abkhaz position, while Russians tilt

slightly towards the position of forgiveness (Figure 7c). The most forgiving community, those most willing to distinguish themselves from those who can never forgive the violence of the war, are Abkhazia's Georgian/Mingrelian population (45 percent answered "probably not" or "definitely not"). To a considerable degree, the positions on this and related reconciliation questions are understandable. Ethnic Abkhaz suffered greatly in fighting for their independence from Georgia and have no incentive to forgive in the current political environment that ensures their political and economic status. Indeed, a considerable part of the Abkhaz identity is their positionality as a small, historically victimized people that cannot forget or forgive (Clogg, 2008). Georgians/Mingrelians have the most to gain from any generalized forgiveness of others since their reputation within contemporary Abkhazia has long been constructed as enemies and potential fifth-columnists. "Caught between two fires," since they are also suspect in Georgia because of their willingness to live in Abkhazia, they remain vulnerable to policies from both governments.

### **Abkhazian Security and Its Relations with Russia and Georgia**

During her April 2010 visit to Washington, DC, Liana Kvarchelia, an NGO activist from Sukhum(i), articulated an important self-fulfilling dynamic characteristic of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict:

The more, I think, Georgia insists on the fact that there is no conflict with Abkhazia, that there is only conflict with Russia and that Abkhazia is only Russia's puppet, the more Georgia insists on this, the more Abkhazia will be drawn to Russia, and will be dependent upon Russian support (Kvarchelia, 2010).

As already noted, Abkhazia is heavily reliant on Russian economic aid. In February 2010, it signed agreements to install S-300 air defense missile systems in the republic, to have Russian troops guard its border, and to station up to 3000 troops at Bombora (A. Ferris-Rotman for *Reuters*, February 16, 2010, [www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE61F3JE20100216](http://www.reuters.com/article/idUSTRE61F3JE20100216)).<sup>2</sup> The President of the Republic, Sergey Bagapsh, articulated this incompatibility with Georgia, stating emphatically to us: "we will never again be part of Georgia: that issue is done" (Bagapsh, 2009).

We have already noted that the Russian-Abkhazian relationship presents certain challenges for the Abkhazian leadership. The growing presence of Russian economic and political capital in the republic is a topic of daily conversation as well as a geopolitical brickbat from the government of Georgia. Temuri Yakobashvili, the Georgian Minister for Reintegration, believes that "it's the very people the Russians supposedly saved who

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<sup>2</sup>To compare the situation in Transnistria, see Protsyk (2009).

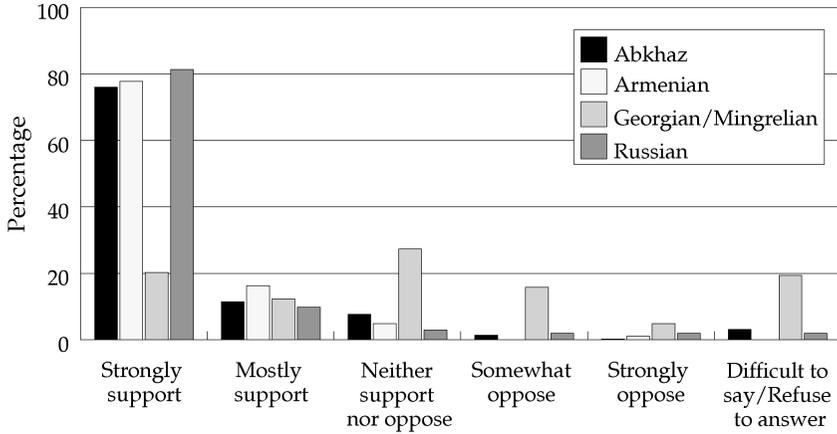
will feel occupied by them. Many already do" (cited in Kaylan, 2010). In his conversation with us on November 10, 2009, President Sergey Bagapsh stressed that Abkhazia was "a European country" committed to a non-aligned policy, though he lauded the presence of "Russian peacekeepers" and recognized the growing integration of Abkhazia into the Russian economic sphere. He explained that his economic vision is based on small resort tourism ("not like Sochi"), strengthening agricultural exports, and rebuilding the destroyed infrastructure. Bagapsh rejected Western and Georgian accusations that Russia wants to absorb Abkhazia and claimed that Russia wants security and stability in the south Caucasus as it secures its borders (Bagapsh, 2009).

In our survey, we asked respondents about their attitudes towards Abkhazia's growing security relationship with the Russian Federation. Attitudes about the (re)establishment of the Russian base at Gudauta (agreed a few weeks before the survey in March 2010) are strongly divergent, as is evident in Figure 8a. Abkhaz, Armenians, and Russians all approve of the base agreement, with ratios in the 80 percent range; Georgian/Mingrelian approval stands at 20 percent. As in the other sensitive questions, the ratio of "hard to say" and "refuse to answer" is important: for Georgians/Mingrelians, these are high, at 18 percent, but the combined opposition (or lack of support) of this group is strong, at 48 percent. An obvious interpretation of the base agreement is that it solidifies the Abkhazian–Russian alliance and ensures the long-term presence of Russia in the republic. President Bagapsh's statement of non-alignment, and other statements that Abkhazia wants to pursue a "multi-vector" foreign policy, may be the product of genuine aspiration, but the practical geopolitics of the matter, as he knows only too well, is that Abkhazia is very much aligned. Abkhazia's non-Georgian citizens appear to accept the military terms of this geopolitical positionality.

But what of the larger political, economic, and social terms? The evident asymmetrical nature of the Abkhazian–Russian relationship and past historical oppression have generated, as noted earlier, speculation about ethnic Abkhaz fears of domination by Russia. To test the degree to which Abkhazians aspired to an independent path or to potential unity with Russia, we posed three future geopolitical options for respondents and asked which one they favored: independence, integration with Russia, or integration with Georgia. We debated whether to include more complex political arrangements such as autonomy, condominium status, or shared governance but chose to focus on the simplest and most obvious choices in the current geopolitical environment. Asking respondents to reply to a hypothetical option is difficult enough and we wanted the choices to be as clear and concise as possible.

Significant differences on the future of Abkhazia appeared between the three groups (Abkhaz, Armenians, and Russians) that heretofore had shown similar values on other questions. While the Abkhaz support independence strongly (79 percent), Armenians are split on this decision, with 51 percent preferring to be part of the Russian Federation and 44 percent

A. Support and opposition for new Russian military base in Abkhazia



B. Support for different possible political futures of Abkhazia

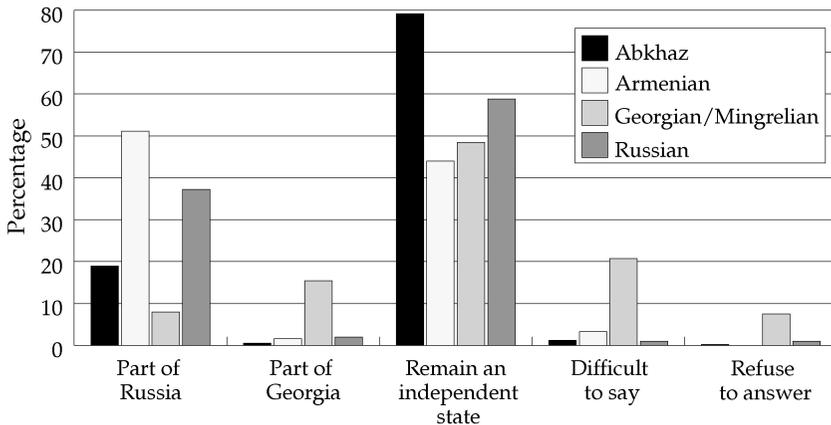


Fig. 8. Indices of Abkhazia’s future status and relations.

preferring independence. Similarly, Russians are also split, with 58 percent opting for independence and 38 percent for integration with Russia. As we noted earlier, Armenians and Russians are satisfied with their economic status in Abkhazia, though less convinced about their full political rights. Ethnic Abkhaz tend to see the state as their natural right through their titular status, their hard-fought and costly separation from Georgia, and their efforts to build a new country. To render it as a part of Russia would forfeit these achievements, and only a tiny minority of Abkhaz (19 percent) see this as desirable. Georgians/Mingrelians also are split on this question, with a plurality (48 percent) preferring independence (28 percent offered

no opinion through “hard to say” or “refuse to answer” responses). This high ratio in favor of independence is somewhat surprising but it can be explained by the unattractiveness of the other options. Despite some economic attractions, political integration with Russia was especially unappealing in 2010 because of the very hostile relations between Georgia and Russia and the poor treatment of ethnic Georgians in the Russian Federation in recent years. Integration with Georgia did not receive a lot of support. From a materialist perspective alone, this is surprising, given that more than half of Georgians/Mingrelians in the sample thought the economic situation was better there. Some residents of the Gal(i) district have been poorly treated by Georgian authorities insensitive to their need not to choose between two jurisdictions. Some Georgians, especially those beyond the Gal(i) *rayon*, are pragmatic and see the current situation as the least precarious. Support for independence could be viewed as a choice of the lesser evil of three poor options. Yet the majority of Georgian sentiment, it is worth remembering, is distributed amongst the choices other than independence for Abkhazia.

## CONCLUSION: DIVIDED AND CONTENTEDLY IRRECONCILABLE

The International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling on July 22, 2010 that the unilateral declaration of independence by Kosovo did not violate international law was predictably welcomed by *de facto* states. Parent states with restive regions took the stance that the ICJ ruling on Kosovo was unique. For the Abkhazian government, the ICJ ruling provides a further endorsement of its independence claim and, together with South Ossetia’s leadership, it welcomed the decision. In our November 10, 2009 meeting with President Sergey Bagapsh, when asked about the “Kosovo precedent,” he declared emphatically: “Thank God, it happened” (Bagapsh, 2009). For Abkhazia’s close ally, however, the ruling puts Russia in a difficult position since it opposed Kosovo’s declared independence and, of course, the Russian Federation also contains separatist regions. For these reasons, Russia continues to oppose Kosovo’s independence and rejects the ICJ ruling. Interestingly, recent public opinion in Russia is shifting towards less support for the *de facto* republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia two years after the Russian–Georgian war (Goble, 2010).

We indicated, at the outset, that there were three compelling reasons to examine attitudes in Abkhazia at this time. We believe the key results we have presented here shed important light on the broad contours of the internal legitimacy of the *de facto* Abkhazian state and society, on its strengths (broad acceptance and relative well-being by the different non-Georgian populations), weaknesses (evidence of perception by some non-ethnic Abkhaz that the state is an ethnocracy), and limits (the marginality and excluded position of most of Abkhazia’s Georgians). They reveal some measure of the complexities within Abkhazia, complexities that should check the persistent geopoliticization of Abkhazia as a mere pawn

or puppet regime. Finally, we believe that the survey results provide some important empirical evidence that could inform the policy debates that currently occupy politicians in the region and beyond.

One scenario that is popular among some geopolitical commentators is the idea that the Gal(i) district should be separated from Abkhazia and "returned" to Georgia for its acceptance of Abkhazian independence (D. Trenin in *Moscow Times*, August 9, 2010, [www.themoscowtimes.com/print/opinion/article/how-to-make-peace-with-georgia/411927](http://www.themoscowtimes.com/print/opinion/article/how-to-make-peace-with-georgia/411927)). Our results underscore what was already well known to area analysts: the Gal(i) is a distinct space within Abkhazia, one that exhibits the high human costs of the persistent Abkhazian–Georgian conflict. On key political questions, the Georgian/Mingrelian minority shows both strong reluctance to express potentially controversial opinions and somewhat weak support for positions their fellow Abkhazian groups hold. As the majority (Abkhaz, Russians, and Armenians) in the *de facto* republic pursues the goal of recognition of their political independence and the achievement of economic security, an important minority still remains inside the territory but outside the current Abkhazian state project. That a cartographic adjustment is possible, or, more importantly, a long-term basis of a "solution" for the human security needs of Gal(i) residents, is highly questionable.

Our results also underscore that, after almost 20 years of separation from Georgia, the majority of Abkhazians are feeling optimistic about their future and positive about their partially recognized independent status. Non-Georgian Abkhazians are contentedly irreconcilable to the Georgian state, and to the prospect of large-scale displaced Georgian returns as part of any agreement on Abkhazian state status. To the Abkhaz political elite, which has managed to establish competitive and dynamic elections and reasonable internal legitimacy, their republic is secure, free, and working to achieve its rightful place in the international community of states.

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