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The dynamics of electoral politics in Abkhazia

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ABSTRACT

Presidential and parliamentary elections in Abkhazia are pluralistic and competitive. They have led to the transfer of power from government to opposition forces. This in itself is a remarkable fact in the post-Soviet context, where the outcome of elections very often is determined in advance by the ruling elite. The article explains how and why this form of electoral democracy could occur in Abkhazia, arguably the most ethnically heterogeneous of all post-Soviet de facto states. Drawing on a wide variety of primary sources and data from within Abkhazia, particularly interviews with key players, the author describes the remarkable willingness of the main political actors to compromise and assesses to what extent Abkhazia's democratic credentials are sustainable

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1. Introduction

Unlike many of the successor states of the USSR, Abkhazia¹ has already witnessed a post-election transfer of power from government to opposition. While the post-Soviet space contains many states that fix elections, which simply flatter the incumbent or confirm an anointed political heir (Wilson, 2005), recent Abkhazian presidential and parliamentary elections have been noteworthy for the fact that voters and analysts could not with certainty predict the outcome. Remarkably – considering the importance of Abkhazia as a zone of conflict and a fault-line separating Russian and US spheres of influence in the Caucasus – almost nothing has been written about how this de facto state organises its domestic politics and, in particular, how it conducts elections. This paucity of election-related assessments is exacerbated by the fact the international organisations normally entrusted with the task of evaluating elections in the post-Soviet space, such as ODIHR, have refused to monitor the electoral process in Abkhazia, despite repeated requests from the Sukhum(i)-based Central Election Commission (Tabagua, 2011). For many, particularly the Georgian government and its supporters, Abkhazia is merely a pawn of Russia and it is frequently maintained that nothing takes place in the region without the approval of the Kremlin (Rakviashvili, 2010; Subeliani, 2010). To examine the domestic politics of Abkhazia would, under this view, merely confer legitimacy on the illegitimate.

In the small but increasing literature on de facto states (Pegg, 1999; Lynch, 2002, 2004; Mihalkanin, 2004) Abkhazia is usually examined exclusively in the realm of conflictology, international relations or geopolitics. Assessments or analyses of elections in Abkhazia and the work of the state parliament, the National Assembly of Abkhazia, are virtually non-existent. The works that have examined aspects of domestic affairs within Abkhazia have not focussed on electoral politics but rather the economy (Popescu, 2006), minorities (Berge, 2010; Kølsto and Blakkisrud, 2011), inter-ethnic relations (Trier et al., 2010), nation-building (Kølsto and Blakkisrud, 2008), civil society (Popescu, 2006) or they survey popular attitudes within Abkhazia

¹ The terms “president”, “parliament”, “assembly”, “state” are used throughout the text as they are the terms used within contemporary Abkhazia. Their usage also helps avoid cluttering the text with constant references to terms such as “de facto” before each mention of a person/title/institution within Abkhazia.

(O'Loughlin, et al., 2010). Even those few articles that have looked at the state-building process in Abkhazia (Kølsto and Blakkisrud, 2008; Caspersen, 2011) have eschewed a detailed examination of electoral politics.

This article attempts to rectify this anomaly in the literature on Abkhazia and de facto states generally by providing a comprehensive introduction to the dynamics of electoral politics within this partially recognised post-Soviet state. Much of the analysis that follows has been framed by scores of interviews conducted within Abkhazia with MPs, parliamentary office holders (speakers of parliament and deputy speakers), presidential candidates, prime ministers and cabinet members, election officials and NGO's leaders. These interviews have been conducted over the course of a decade (2001–2011) and are complemented with election data supplied by Abkhazia's Central Election Commission and the independent League of Voters. Details of parliamentary candidates were supplied by the National Assembly of Abkhazia and relevant legislation – for example, Laws on the elections of the President, local elections, political parties, the national assembly—were supplied by different state institutions in Abkhazia. Most of the treatment of the recent presidential election in Abkhazia (August 2011) is based on interviews and conversations with key actors during the campaign, including the three presidential candidates and their campaign managers. It has also benefited from following all three campaign teams as they conducted public meetings in different parts of Abkhazia.

The structure of the paper will proceed as follows. The first section provides a comprehensive overview of Abkhazia's political system, examining its presidential system, its national assembly and the parties and individuals elected to the legislature. A brief section is then provided to introduce the issue of how elections are conducted in Abkhazia before exploring in detail relevant case studies. These include the most recent parliamentary elections (2007) and the last three presidential elections (2004, 2009, 2011). Such an overview will assist in establishing the extent to which Abkhazia's democratic credentials are sustainable. Utilising a wide variety of primary sources and data from within Abkhazia, particularly interviews with key players, this article concludes that Abkhazia has achieved a greater level of democratic practice than many other post-Soviet systems including the other unrecognised or partially recognised states.

2. A brief historic overview

The collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917 facilitated the emergence of the short-lived Democratic Republic of Georgia, which incorporated a truculent Abkhaz population that, in 1919, was granted autonomy within the new state. When the Red Army invasion obliterated Georgian independence both Georgia and Abkhazia were made Soviet Socialist Republics within the USSR. Amendments later in 1921 and in 1925 diluted Abkhazia's status until, in 1931, it was reduced to an autonomous republic within Georgia. A 'Georgianisation' policy was vigorously implemented during the 1930s and 1940s accompanied by substantial migration to the region, which risked the Abkhaz being overwhelmed by other nationalities. The last Soviet census in 1989 indicated that the Abkhaz constituted only 17.8% (93,267) of Abkhazia's 525,061 residents. Though conditions largely improved for the Abkhaz after the death of Stalin and Beria's execution (both ethnic Georgians) in 1953 there were popular demands for secession from Georgia in 1957, 1964, 1967, 1978 and 1989. As Soviet power declined, and Georgian nationalists sought independence, the Abkhaz tried first to remain within the USSR before opting for independence. The bitter Georgian–Abkhaz war of 1992–1993 claimed about 10,000 lives and victory for the Abkhaz caused approximately 250,000 ethnic Georgians, many of them Mingrelians, to flee Abkhazia. A ceasefire, which gave Russia a central role in the region, remained largely intact until 2008.

Securing international recognition for its status has always been a challenge for the Abkhaz regime (Shamba, 2001, 2009; Gvindzhiya, 2011). Relations were established with individual parts of the Russian Federation in the north Caucasus and throughout the presidency of Vladimir Putin there was a discernible rise in Kremlin support for Abkhazia, particularly as the Georgian government, led by President Saakashvili, augmented efforts to join NATO while embarking on a number of initiatives aimed at thawing the hitherto "frozen conflicts". The recognition of Kosovo in February 2008 along with a decision at NATO's Bucharest summit two months later that Georgia would one day become a member of the military alliance were key events in putting Georgia and Russia on a collision course in 2008 (Asmus, 2010) The brief war that erupted in August of that year involving primarily Russian and Georgian military forces resulted in Abkhazia, along with South Ossetia, being recognised as independent states by the Russian Federation, with Kremlin allies Nicaragua and Venezuela quickly following suit. In more recent times Abkhazia has been additionally recognised by three tiny states, all located in the South Pacific Ocean: Nauru, population 15,000; Vanuatu, population 224,000; and Tuvalu, population 10,500 (Gvindzhiya, 2011; Chirikba, 2011).

3. The political system of Abkhazia: the president

The constitutional structure in Abkhazia is indisputably presidential and yet, while power is concentrated in the hands of the incumbent, the last decade has witnessed successive peaceful elections in which the outcome was uncertain and the result was respected by the defeated candidates. Moreover it has been possible to have power transferred between government and opposition. The fact that this has occurred in a relatively inauspicious geopolitical setting makes Abkhazia something of an oddity among post-Soviet states.

The president is elected for a maximum of two consecutive 5 year terms (Article 49 of Constitution). S/he must also be a citizen of Abkhazia and between 35 and 65 years of age. The upward age limit, noteworthy amongst a people famed for their longevity, inhibits an incumbent entertaining notions of becoming a president for life. A cabinet of ministers, including a prime minister, is chosen by and is responsible to the president (Constitution of Abkhazia Article 56). There is also a position of vice president, established in 1995, but the powers of this position are largely confined to deputising for the president. The

superfluous character of the position was amply demonstrated by the fact that it remained unfilled for almost nine months after Raul Khadjimba resigned from the vice presidency on 28 May 2009.

The most controversial aspect of the office of the presidency, if not within Abkhazia then when measuring the democratic credentials of the polity, is the constitutional requirement that prospective candidates must be of Abkhaz ethnicity (Constitution of Abkhazia, Article 49, *National Assembly of Abkhazia*, 2009, Article 1).

The parallel constitutional requirement that the president must be a fluent speaker of the state language (Abkhaz) would, alone, have had much the same effect since very few non-ethnic Abkhaz have managed to master Abkhaz, a remarkably difficult language with 62 Letters in its alphabet. Russian has long been the lingua franca and while efforts have been made to spread Abkhaz, competency in the language remains almost exclusively the preserve of the ethnic Abkhaz (Papba, 2006; Kuvichko, 2009; Chirikba, 2011).

Requirements that candidates must be proficient in a particular language are comparatively rare. It is assumed that in most countries where a single language is used as a medium of official communication that no candidate would be nominated, let alone elected, who could not communicate in the language spoken by the majority. In some post-Soviet states, though notably not those that can claim to be consolidated democracies, competency in the language of the titular ethnic group is a prerequisite to run for presidential office.² However, these states, which are to varying degrees substantially Russified, do not exclude candidates on the basis of ethnicity.

Prospective candidates for the position of Abkhazia's vice president are subjected to the same conditions except those relating to nationality and language (*National Assembly of Abkhazia*, 2009, Article 1). Although this creates an opportunity for an ethnic dream team with an Abkhaz at the helm and a representative of another ethnic group playing a supporting role the vice presidency has never been utilised to achieve this balance with all four incumbents – Valery Arshba, Raul Khadjimba, Alexander Ankvab and Mikhail Logua – coming from the ethnic Abkhaz community.

All three candidates in the 2011 presidential race supported the current constitutional requirement excluding non-Abkhaz nationalities. Ankvab (2011) claimed that there were many countries with similar provisions but was unable to name them when pressed. Sergei Shamba and Raul Khadjimba, while defending the constitutional status quo, have spoken vaguely of a change in the future to open the presidency to all citizens but have been short on specific timelines (Shamba, 2009, 2011; Khadjimba, 2006). Interviews with representatives of non-Abkhaz communities suggest that there has not been to date a demand for a change to the constitutional prohibition. These representatives argue that Abkhazia is, ultimately, the land of the Abkhaz and that other nationalities – of which Armenians, Russians, and Georgians are collectively the most significant – have states that embody their ethnicity. They also regularly highlight the difficult historical journey of the Abkhaz, marked by wars and deportations, combined with their precarious demographic position, which has made them an ethnicity threatened for many years by absorption or even extinction. Historical justice, the argument concludes, that an Abkhaz should rule Abkhazia. As put by the leader of the Armenian community in Sukhum(i):

In reality there is no chance for the representative of other nations to win presidential elections. He would not be accepted not only by Abkhaz people, but by other nations. Even if it was not written in the constitution it would be like this (Kerselyan, 2006).

Many representatives and commentators concede that in the longer term this dispensation will be difficult to maintain (Gvindzhiya, 2011). As a new generation reach political maturity they will most likely be less understanding of why it necessary to exclude a majority of the population from executive office. Unburdened by memories of war or less imbued with Soviet-era policies on the political supremacy of titular nationalities these citizens are likely to question their own exclusion and that of their peers on the basis of ethnicity. Moreover, with the Russian security guarantee removing the prospect of renewed war with Georgia in the foreseeable future the siege mentality that previously bolstered the idea that the Abkhaz were under constant threat as a nation may be eroded over time.

4. The political system of Abkhazia: political parties and the role of the national assembly

The People's Assembly of the Republic of Abkhazia is a 35 seat legislature. There have been three parliaments (1996–2002, 2002–2007, 2007–2012) since the dissolution of the Abkhazia's Supreme Soviet. With power largely in the hands of the president and his close allies, the National Assembly has often fallen victim to a tendency in Abkhazia to take grievances or concerns to the very top (presidential administration) rather than first trying other potential avenues of redress (local government, parliament). As a result, the National Assembly has sometimes been accused of being out of touch with its electorate, and this may help explain the high turnover of deputies (Akaba, 2007). Government ministers are drawn not from parliament but are, rather, appointed by the president and form part of his administrative team. The national assembly is subordinate to the executive and depends on executive good will to have its laws enforced. Consequently, there have been calls for more effective mechanisms for interaction between the voters and their parliamentary representatives (Akaba, 2007).

² For example Article 90 of the Constitution of Uzbekistan, Article 43 of the Constitution of Kyrgyzstan, and Article 65 of the Constitution of Tajikistan restrict prospective presidential office holders to those fluent in Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Tajik respectively. In Kazakhstan, Article 14 of the current (1995) and Article 114 of the first (1992) constitution prescribe a similar criterion in relation to the Kazakh language.

The work of the National Assembly is not widely advertised and it is not considered the locus of power. There are two parliamentary sessions, one in the spring, and a shorter one in the autumn. The sessions are generally held once a month though sometimes the assembly, which has a total of 11 committees, can meet up to 3–4 times a month if required. The style of discourse is consensual and non-confrontational; even the seating arrangements reflect the lack of adversarial politics with meetings taking place in a spacious hall with seats around a large table with no obvious division of parties. Though the deliberations of parliament are not widely disseminated the speaker of the National Assembly is against the idea of televising debates for fear that the presence of TV cameras might encourage grand-standing and upset the consensual character of the chamber (Ashuba, 2009).

As a result of the 2007 elections, a governing coalition dominated by United Abkhazia and supported by *Aitaira* (Revival) and *Amtsakhara* (Signal Lights) was established, which represented 28 of the 35 deputies in the National Assembly. The seven seats won by the other parties, which now collectively constitute a parliamentary opposition, were taken by representatives of the Forum of Abkhaz People's Unity, the Communist Party of Abkhazia, and the Russian Citizens Union. Political parties, however, do not represent societal cleavages and there are no ideological differences between government and opposition (Damenia, 2009). The single-constituency majoritarian electoral system reinforces tendencies to emphasise personality over party (Samanba, 2009). While there is a consensus that political parties are still in their embryonic stages of development, there is no convergence of views as to how the party system will evolve. To move parties away from being personality fan clubs and towards organisations representing societal cleavages, much of the debate within the Abkhaz political elite has focussed on the electoral system.

As president, Sergei Bagapsh had spoken publicly in favour of a mixed proportional-majority system but lamented that 'for this we must have normal parties, not the "ephemeral", created on the eve of the presidential or parliamentary elections'. While expressing the hope that influential parties would be established he conceded that 'in the meantime, elections will be held by the majority system, as required by the law on parliamentary elections' (Bagapsh, 2006).³ This however is a circular argument with the president waiting for mature parties to emerge before a list system is introduced while the very emergence of parties of this quality may depend on the introduction of a proportional system that emphasises parties over personalities. The speaker of parliament, Nugzar Ashuba, has also admitted that the party system inhibits the development of strong political parties and promised a shift from elections in single-member constituencies to a proportional-majority system (Ashuba, 2009; Apsnypress, 2 February 2007).

5. Elections in Abkhazia

There have been three presidents of post-Soviet Abkhazia and three competitive presidential elections. No incumbent has sought to amend the constitution to extend their time in office and the 2004–2005 elections, while viewed by many in Abkhazia as a dangerous period of instability, resulted in a peaceful transfer of power from the governing elite, centred on President Ardzinba, his anointed successor Raul Khadjimba and their supporters, to a challenging coalition favouring the candidature of Sergei Bagapsh.

In the following, I will focus on the presidential elections of 2004/2005 and 2011 along with the parliamentary election of 2007 while also making brief reference to the 2009 presidential contest. The presidential elections of 2004/2005 and 2011 are seminal elections. The 2004 vote, which followed the retirement of Abkhazia's two-term first president Vladimir Ardzinba, constituted Abkhazia's first contested presidential election. The fact that it resulted in defeat for Ardzinba's anointed successor and clearly the Kremlin's favourite, Raul Khadjimba, initially created a period of instability but this was overcome with a peaceful transfer of power from government to opposition, a rare achievement in post-Soviet politics east of Kyiv. While there was evidence that support for Ardzinba's successor, Sergei Bagapsh, was ebbing during his first term (U.S. Embassy in Tbilisi, 2009). Russia's recognition of Abkhazia's independence in August 2008 boosted Bagapsh's re-election prospects so that he enjoyed a relatively comfortable victory in the 2009 presidential contest. Bagapsh's unexpected death in May 2011 again created a situation, as in 2004, where there was no successor who commanded sufficient support to guarantee electoral success. Accordingly, the 2011 presidential race was noteworthy for having no obvious frontrunner, again, a rare feat in a region where elections are often theatrical affairs with maximum effort exerted to create the illusion of a free, fair and open contest while denying the substance.

6. Presidential election campaign 2004: Abkhazia's "colour revolution"?

The election campaign of 2004 bore some of the hallmarks of the colour revolution phenomenon that affected several post-Soviet states during this time (Ó Beacháin and Polese, 2010, 2011). Disputed elections galvanised large sections of the population to defend the vote for their favoured candidate.

Even had Ardzinba wished to somehow circumvent the two-term limit stipulated in Abkhazia's constitution his poor health and the potential opposition from civil society made an election with new candidates inevitable. Ardzinba had made

³ A few months later Bagapsh went on record as saying that the next parliamentary elections, due in 2012, should be conducted using the mixed proportional-majority system (Apsnypress, 2007b). This, at time of writing (August 2011) is very unlikely to be implemented in the case of the 2012 elections.

known his preference for Raul Khadjimba to whom much power had been effectively devolved as Ardzinba's illness necessitated frequent absences and inability to direct affairs. Some suspected that Khadjimba had been chosen not for his strengths but for his perceived pliability and that the Ardzinba clan hoped to preserve their power by installing Khadjimba and denying power to his more truculent opponents.⁴ Khadjimba, a former KGB agent who had directed the Abkhaz security services for all of the 1990s, was also the Kremlin's favourite and Moscow did little to conceal that it would look most favourably on a Khadjimba presidency (Kuvichko, 2006).

The main obstacle to the campaign to install Khadjimba came from the candidacy of Sergei Bagapsh, representing the interests of the United Abkhazia party and also the veterans' organisation, *Amtsakhara*. With an ethnic Georgian wife, Bagapsh was known to be the favourite in the Gali region where the vast majority of the population was Mingrelians (though many were unable to vote). Another potential rival, the candidate for *Aitaira*, Alexander Ankvab, was excluded as a result of language and residency issues and, consequently, aligned himself with the Bagapsh campaign.⁵

The elections held on 3 October 2004 gave Bagapsh 50.08% of the vote and Khadjimba 35.61% on a 62.9% turnout. After contradictory pronouncements by the Central Election Commission (CEC), the Supreme Court confirmed Bagapsh's victory only to reverse its decision later that night and then, again, declare in favour of Bagapsh. Large crowds mobilised in support of both candidates (up to 10,000 for Bagapsh) in Sukhum(i) centre. Bagapsh supporters captured the local TV station, while Khadjimba's supporters invaded the National Assembly building. As a result the legislature met in the home of the parliamentary speaker throughout the crisis (Ashuba, 2009). On the 5 December 2004, a compromise was brokered whereby Bagapsh and Khadjimba agreed to hold new elections running on a joint ticket, with Khadjimba as vice presidential candidate. This arrangement was endorsed by 91.54% (69,328 votes) on 12 January 2005 with a 58.65% turnout obviating the need for a second round. The election had been a debacle for the Central Election Commission. Six members of the CEC, including Chair Sergei Smyr, resigned and Batal Tabagua was put at the helm. The Abkhaz political elite and the supporters of opposing candidates were able to negotiate a comprehensive and effective solution to a disputed election that had the potential to lead to large-scale disturbances. Rather than viewing the conflicting protests arising from the 2004 election as evidence of democratisation or a vibrant civil society almost all of those surveyed from Abkhazia's political elite and intelligentsia, irrespective of party or individual allegiances, see it as a dark episode in Abkhazia's history when the country came perilously close to civil conflict. The power-sharing compromise was considered a small price to pay for political stability. Bagapsh's supporters argue that while it was unnecessary to hold a second round of elections as the first round had provided a clear mandate, a second round was conducted to 'defuse tension within the society of Abkhazia' (Ovsepyan, 2009) and to soften the blow for Khadjimba and his supporters by giving him a senior role in the administration. As the deputy speaker of the National Assembly put it: 'I think that Mr. Bagapsh won the first round but the situation was so tense and that's why a new election was conducted, to avoid new collisions and civil wars. Mr. Bagapsh and his supporters decided to hold talks and to sign an agreement with the other side. He sacrificed first round of elections so as to calm down society' (Agrba, 2009).

7. Presidential election campaign 2009

The 2009 presidential election witnessed a re-match between Bagapsh and Khadjimba. This was the first time that the new passport of the Republic of Abkhazia was used as the sole proof of identification at polling stations. A stamp on p. 17 of the passport, when issuing the ballot paper sought to eliminate possibility of double voting (Tabagua, 2009). The provision of passports for ethnic Georgians in Gali remained an issue (Agrba, 2009) and many had not received documents in advance of the election.

There was no repeat of the 2004 scenario with Sergei Bagapsh emerging as the clear victor with 61.16% (62,231 votes) compared to a mere 15.32% (15,584 votes) for Raul Khadjimba. The electorate had increased slightly to 138,447 of whom 73.4% (101,756) turned out to vote, a substantial increase on the 2004 and 2005 turnouts. The three other candidates secured almost a fifth of the vote⁶ while almost two thousand of the electorate (1.86%) voted against all candidates (Tabagua, 2009). The election result was accepted by Bagapsh's opponents though Butba (2011), who came fourth, later claimed that his vote had been underestimated.

The reasons for Bagapsh's decisive margin of victory on this occasion included the administrative resources at his disposal, an incumbency effect, whereby the electorate favoured a continuation of a satisfactory status quo, and Bagapsh's early designation as the clear favourite. Moreover, Khadjimba was unable to sufficiently distance himself from the government and thus present himself as an outsider given that he had spent most of the previous five years as Bagapsh's deputy and had only resigned from that position a few months before the election. Finally, Bagapsh undoubtedly benefited from Russia's recognition of Abkhazia during the previous year and the subsequent opening of diplomatic relations with Nicaragua and

⁴ This view was communicated to the author in private by several independent observers/analysts within Abkhazia.

⁵ Ankvab is in fact a native speaker of Abkhaz and his exclusion from the contest ostensibly stemmed from his refusal to take the Abkhaz language test, which he argued was unnecessary. However, attempts at also being made to exclude Ankvab on the basis that he did not fully meet the residency requirements for a presidential candidate. Abkhazia's Supreme Court found that the CEC had not proved the charges regarding residency but decided that Ankvab should have taken the Abkhaz language test (Khintba, 2011; Ankvab, 2011)

⁶ With 9.14% (9296 votes) Zaur Ardzinba, the long-time head of the Abkhazian state shipping company, edged ahead of Beslan Butba, the leader of the Party of Economic Development, and owner of a TV station and newspaper in Abkhazia (8.25%, 8395 votes). Vitaly Bganba's garnered meagre support (1.3% 1326 votes). Just over three thousand votes (2.98%) were deemed invalid (Tabagua, 2009)

Venezuela. After almost two decades of political isolation and insecurity, Bagapsh could now present himself as the president who had consolidated independence from Georgia, brought recognition from the Russian Federation and, as a result of Moscow's security guarantee, invulnerability from military attack.

8. Presidential election campaign 2011

As a result of Sergei Bagapsh's unexpected death on 30 May 2011,⁷ new elections set for the 26 August produced three candidates to succeed as President of Abkhazia – Prime Minister Sergei Shamba, Vice President Alexander Ankvab and former Vice President Raul Khadjimba. Despite being the oldest of the three candidates, Sergei Shamba presented himself as the choice of the youth and, by implication, the man of the future (Shamba Public meetings, Shamba TV Advertisements). Or as one supporter put it during a public meeting, Shamba was the man for the 21st century while his main opponent (Ankvab) was more suited for the 19th century [Notes from Public Meeting, Village in Gagra Province]. To bolster his claim ten of the twelve major youth organisations openly declared for Shamba (Shamba TV advertisement).

By stepping down from his position of Prime Minister (in contrast to Ankvab who retained his position of Vice President throughout the election campaign) Shamba tried to present himself as someone who would not use administrative resources to promote his candidature. It also allowed Shamba to cast himself as an outsider and appropriate the slogan of "change" – despite having exercised power within the Abkhaz administration for the best part of two decades. Accordingly, Shamba and his supporters emphasised his experience as foreign minister – a position he held for over a dozen years – and, more recently, as Prime Minister while at the same time distancing himself from the incumbent regime. Shamba made much of his intention to step down from the presidency after one term should he be elected. In fact, he could not do otherwise as a result of the constitutional prohibition on presidential candidates of 65 years and older – Shamba was born in 1951 (Constitution of Abkhazia, Article 49). Shamba's war record was continuously stressed and it was widely advertised that his campaign had been endorsed by veterans of the 1992–1993 war with Georgia. However, questions regarding Shamba's family (particularly his son) and financial affairs – though never articulated publicly – hampered Shamba's attempts to present himself as a tool to fight corruption and entrenched interests.

The veteran presidential candidate, Raul Khadjimba, was contesting his third presidential race (his fourth if one includes the 2005 election when he ran as Bagapsh's running mate). Informed opinion suggested, however, that Khadjimba was reluctant to take to the field but eventually relented after much persuasion from his most zealous supporters. Accordingly, it was often more with an air of earnest duty than fiery enthusiasm that Khadjimba moved along the campaign trail (*Khadjimba Public Meetings, 2011*). It was a far cry from the heady days of the 2004 election campaign when Khadjimba was the anointed successor of outgoing president, Vladislav Ardzinba. Though dubbed with the electorally debilitating title of Moscow's favourite in 2004, Khadjimba had by the 2011 election been rebranded as the authentic voice of Abkhaz nationalism. His campaign team emphasised Khadjimba's willingness to challenge unfair agreements with Russia and not to 'bend the knee' (*Enig, 2011*). *Khadjimba (2011)* stressed that while accepting Russia as a valued partner there was no place for quickly negotiated deals that jeopardised Abkhazia's long term interests. Khadjimba's choice of running mate, Svetlana Jergenia, is also noteworthy. Some considered her candidature as a means of attracting supporters of her late husband, Abkhazia's first president, Vladislav Ardzinba. Others contended that the main resource she brought to Khadjimba's campaign was financial given that her son owned the main mobile phone company in Abkhazia and her family was widely acknowledged to be wealthy.

The candidature of Alexander Ankvab presented the electorate with a different package. Though 58, Ankvab looked pale, sickly, and significantly less healthy, energetic and strong than his more senior opponent, sixty year old Shamba. His message was one of stability and continuity, a firm hand to navigate Abkhazia through difficult times ahead, building on previous achievements but making no rosy projections or extravagant promises. Ankvab made a virtue of his minimalistic, incremental approach and took pride in his simple, personal and straight-talking style, eschewing the comparatively brash and aggressive style of the Shamba campaign.

As the campaign progressed Shamba and his supporters devised ever-more exotic tactics to advance their campaign. In an interview to a Russian newspaper, Shamba threatened revolution should he be dissatisfied with the election count. And during the last week of the campaign, Shamba's public meetings moved from merely stressing Shamba's strengths to emphasising the importance of having a president whose record was without blemishes that could be exploited by the enemies of Abkhazia (*Echo of the Caucasus, 2011*). In particular, Ankvab was charged with treasonous collaboration with the Georgians. The source of the charge was an unlikely one – Tengiz Kitovani, Georgia's defence minister during the early 1990s and the man held primarily responsible for igniting the Georgian–Abkhaz war by his military invasion of Abkhazia in 1992. Following an interview with the Russian newspaper *Moskovskaya Pravda*, Kitovani participated in a video, broadcast in central Sukhum(i), that claimed that the Georgian–Abkhaz war Ankvab was secretly cooperating with the Tbilisi authorities and providing them with intelligence (*Civil Georgia, 16 August 2011*). Ankvab offered a nuanced defence. If Shamba and his supporters believed sincerely that he had engaged in treacherous behaviour why, Ankvab asked, did they not raise it as an issue during all the years that they had served together in successive administrations. Between 2005 and 2010, Ankvab had

⁷ Bagapsh died as a result of complications arising from surgery conducted on his lung in a Moscow hospital. He had not been considered to be in mortal danger and had undertaken a trip to Turkey the previous month to meet representatives of the Abkhaz Diaspora. He had preferred medical treatment in Germany but had been unable to secure a visa (*Chirikba, 2011*).

served as Prime Minister while Shamba held the post of Foreign Minister and since 2010 the men had held the positions of vice president and prime minister respectively. Ankvab studiously avoided publicly blaming Shamba personally, preferring to level charges against his over-zealous supporters. This contributed to taking some of the heat out from what was a potentially incendiary charge.

Of the 148,556 people on the electoral list, 106,845 people voted on the 26 August, a turnout of 71.92%. Ankvab emerged victorious in the first round with 54.9% of the vote (58,657 ballots). Sergei Shamba was left trailing with 21.02% (22,456 ballots) just ahead of Raul Khadjimba who garnered 19.82% (21,177 votes). Just under 1.9% of the electorate (2023 people) voted against all candidates and 2.37% of ballots (2532) were deemed invalid (Central Election Commission). The big surprise was Shamba's poor performance relative to expectations (certainly those of his election team and the visual presence of his campaign) and the solid performance of Khadjimba who, having been written off throughout the campaign, came close to securing second place. The peaceful and transparent conduct of the election and the acceptance of the result by all parties further consolidated Abkhazia's evolving democracy though the election attracted only criticism from several international organisations such as the European Union and NATO, which claimed it would do nothing to advance conflict resolution efforts in the region.

9. Elections to the National Assembly of Abkhazia 2007

While the National Assembly is clearly subordinate to the executive arm of government in Abkhazia, elections for the legislature are hotly contested nonetheless. The Abkhazian authorities allocated 2.3 million rubles (approximately €75,000 at the time) for the last parliamentary elections (2007), which were conducted at 189 polling stations throughout Abkhazia. In two constituencies – Gagra constituency number 11 and Ochamchira constituency number 29 – there was only one candidate. In nine districts there were two candidates, in thirteen – three, in six, four, and five constituencies had five candidates.

With the exception of the Communist Party of Abkhazia, no political party or socio-political movement exercised the right to nominate candidates. However, the other major parties – United Abkhazia and the Forum of the National Unity of Abkhazia – made clear their preferences and though not registered as party candidates, political aspirants indicated who they would align with should they gain entry to the legislature. On Abkhazian television the Prosecutor General Safarbey Mikanba claimed that there had been attempts to bribe voters, the heads of village administrations, and school principals, in order to influence their votes and said his office had created a special unit to working closely with the police/Interior Ministry to monitor the situation and document facts. Reminding candidates of the 60,000 rubles (approximately €2000 at 2007 rates) spending limit, Mikanba said that in providing so-called “gifts” to constituents, in any form, a candidate must not exceed the value established by law, and that offenders would be punished (*Apsnypress*, 2007a).

The highly competitive character of the election is illustrated by the fact that a bare half of MPs was elected in the first round (18 out of 35) and of these only six were sitting MPs. A further four sitting MPs secured re-election in the second round and, thus, over 60% of incumbent legislators were unable to successfully defend their seats (see *Table 1*).

High turnover has also been a feature of some of the local elections, particularly in those contests that are most ardently fought for. Of the 26 deputies representing Sukhum(i) after the 2007 election, fifteen stood for re-election in 2011 but only five were successful.⁸

10. Ethnic and gender under-representation

As outlined above, access to the presidency is constitutionally limited to ethnic Abkhaz who are also fluent in the national language. No such barriers exist for members of the National Assembly and, yet, the legislature is thoroughly dominated by ethnic Abkhaz. The 2003 census carried out by the Abkhazian authorities suggested that ethnic Abkhaz had risen slightly since 1989 and that while still a minority within Abkhazia (with 94,597 people, constituting 44.1% of the population) the Abkhaz were by far the largest group in the state (see *Table 2*).

This, however, was unlikely to have been an accurate reflection of reality.⁹ Abkhaz numbers had been dented by the casualties of the 1992–1993 war, which effected them disproportionately, and by the emigration of many of its young people since breaking away from Georgia. The number of Armenians living in Abkhazia was, simultaneously, almost certainly underestimated and there is substantial anecdotal (in the absence of official statistics) evidence suggesting that they may be the largest group in Abkhazia. Georgians, similarly, were most likely underestimated for political reasons though their numbers are in flux due to constant migration and return.

Non-Abkhaz ethnic groups have been consistently under-represented in the National Assembly. Almost three quarters of legislators elected during the 2007 parliamentary elections were drawn from the Abkhaz community eclipsing parliamentarians of Armenian (9%), Russian (9%) and Georgian (6%) stock (see *Table 3*).

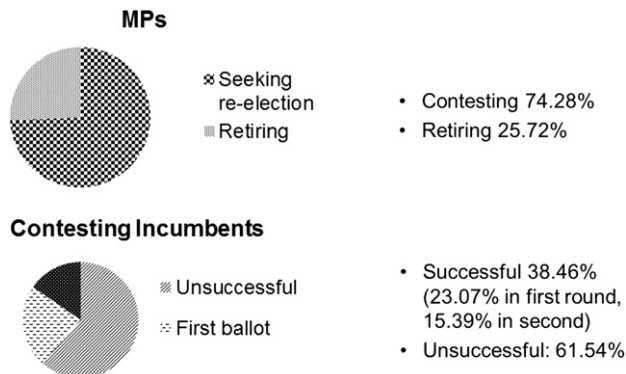
A single deputy, Soner Gogua, was described as being an ethnic Turk though his election is more accurately described as part of the Abkhazian authorities' campaign to attract members of the Abkhaz Diaspora, expelled in the later part of the 19th

⁸ Local elections present a mixed picture with high levels of competition in some regions, like the capital Sukhum(i), while in the largely Georgian populated region of Gali, no competition has been permitted.

⁹ A census was conducted by the Abkhazian authorities in February 2011 but, at time of writing (August 2011) the results have not been published.

Table 1

Percentage of MPs seeking re-election and percentage of successful incumbent MPs.



Source: Authors calculations based on data supplied by Central Election Commission of Abkhazia.

Table 2

Ethnicities in Abkhazia (Census of USSR 1989, Census of Abkhazia 2003).

	Georgians	Abkhaz	Armenians	Russians	Total
1989	45.7% (239,872)	17.8% (93,267)	14.6% (76,541)	14.3% (74,913)	525,061
2003	21.3% (45,953)	43.8% (94,606)	20.8% (44,870)	10.8% (23,420)	215,972

Source: Census of USSR 1989, Census of Abkhazia 2003.

century and mainly resident in Turkey, from “returning” to Abkhazia to boost population numbers (Logua, 2009; Mukba, 2009). Despite occasionally ambitious projections of how the Diaspora might impact on Abkhazia’s demographics and political dynamics, the numbers who have accepted inducements such as citizenship, housing, and covering the costs of a wedding feast, have been only in the few hundreds. Bereft of fluency in the Russian or Abkhaz languages, many find it difficult to find a place in Abkhazia and have either returned to Turkey or only visit Abkhazia occasionally (Mukba, 2009).

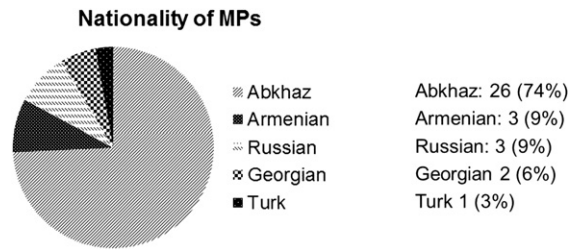
The overwhelming dominance of the ethnic Abkhaz, despite their numerical inferiority in Abkhazia, is not a clear result of voter choice but rather symptomatic of the nomination process whereby the vast majority of candidates is drawn from the titular group (see Table 4)

Officials representing the Abkhaz authorities are in general opposed to the idea of ethnic quotas, preferring instead the current series of informal, yet strictly observed, “gentlemen’s agreements”.¹⁰ There is a precedent for ethnic quotas disproportionately benefiting the Abkhaz though it stems from the unlikely source of the Georgian President Zviad Gamsakhurdia. Attempting to assuage the fears of the Abkhaz, Gamsakhurdia assented in 1991 to a legislature in Abkhazia that saw the largest portion of seats (28 out of 65) go to the Abkhaz despite numbering a mere 17.8% of the population, and exceeding representation afforded to the Georgians (26 seats) who constituted almost a majority (45.7%) of Abkhazia’s population. This short-lived experiment came to nought when the Abkhaz representatives aligned themselves with the deputies representing other nationalities (who were assigned 11 seats under this arrangement) and voted for separation from Georgia (Djinjolia, 2006).

Notwithstanding the significant positions held by women within Abkhazia’s civil society, they play a marginal role in mainstream electoral politics. There has never been a female candidate for the presidency and women constitute a small minority of parliamentary candidates. The 2007 parliamentary elections recorded a slight improvement with the number of women rising from two to three with the election of Irina Agrba, Amra Agrba and Rita Lolua. A third deputy speaker position was created specifically to provide Irina Agrba with the position and thus enhance female standing within parliament. The by-election victory of Emma Gamsonia in 2008 registered a historic high of 11.42% in terms of female representation in the national assembly. Despite a Law on Gender Equality enacted in 2009 and the activity of women in many spheres there has been a lack of women seeking political office (Pilia, 2009). The Chair of the Association of Women of Abkhazia, Natella Akaba, while acknowledging government resistance to quotas, argues that a temporary quota system for women might be considered (Akaba, 2011). Such a quota, however, would be unlikely to transform popular attitudes towards women’s participation in politics.

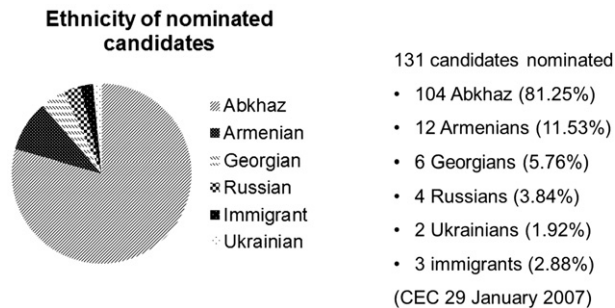
¹⁰ President Bagapsh’s request in 2007 for Vladimir Arshba, an ally of former Abkhaz leader Vladislav Ardzinba, to withdraw his candidacy in the ethnic Russian-dominated Sukhumi No.7 constituency, an attempt by Bagapsh to clear the way for the inclusion of national minority groups in the parliament.

Table 3
Ethnic composition of National Assembly of Abkhazia (2007 election).



Source: Authors calculations based on data supplied by Central Election Commission of Abkhazia and Apsnypress (State Press Service of Abkhazia).

Table 4
Ethnic composition of candidates contesting the 2007 election to the National Assembly of Abkhazia (Central Election Commission of Abkhazia, 29 January 2007).



Source: Authors calculations based on data supplied by Central Election Commission of Abkhazia and Apsnypress (State Press Service of Abkhazia).

11. Conclusions

In terms of democratic institutions and elections, Abkhazia compares favourably with similar separatist de facto states that emerged after the collapse of the USSR. The others have either mono-ethnic societies that have not witnessed a peaceful transfer of power from government to opposition (Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia) or have been until very recently one man fiefdoms (Transnistria). There is no doubt that its political history, multi-ethnic character, geographical location and long tradition of attracting tourists, which in turn has opened society to outside forces and influences to a greater extent, have all played a role in shaping Abkhazia's political culture.

Despite the loss of almost half of its pre-war population, Abkhazia today enjoys a competitive political system for most of its citizenry. Elections have permitted the peaceful transfer of power from government to opposition, in contrast to the practice of anointing a successor (Russia 2000, 2008, Armenia 2008), dynastic succession (Azerbaijan 2003) or revolution/coup d'état (Georgia 1992, 2003). Presidential and parliamentary elections are hotly contested and the candidates are genuinely opposed to each other, again in contrast to the façade opposition prevalent in many post-Soviet states (Wilson, 2005).

Considering the size of Abkhazia, there is quite diverse media and several independent news outlets. Television predominates as a source of information though this does not fundamentally alter the character of election campaigning, which is very personal, local, and informal. Political parties are neither consolidated nor institutionalised and might benefit from a change in the electoral system from the current majoritarian system of single-member constituencies to one based on party lists. Women are generally under-represented at all political levels but this is not noteworthy by the standards of the region or, indeed, in some well-established Western democracies. The major challenge to Abkhazia's democratic credentials remains its constitutional prohibition on presidential candidates drawn from ethnic communities other than those that are Abkhaz combined with the inability or unwillingness of the political elite to encourage more of the non-Abkhaz ethnic groups to participate in parliamentary politics. Neither of these facts is likely to change in the near future given the demographic vulnerability of the Abkhaz and their fear of being assimilated or overwhelmed by larger cultural forces.

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