

The view from Abkhazia of South Ossetia ablaze

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The Abkhazian and South Ossetian perspectives on the fighting between Georgians and South Ossetians in August 2008 could not be heard above the noise generated around the geopolitical implications of the larger Russian–Georgian clash. The population of Abkhazia experienced the violence in South Ossetia as though it was occurring on their own territory. This confirmed their complete lack of trust in the Georgian government’s commitment to peaceful resolution of the conflicts. In addition, they were disappointed with what they regarded as the international community’s absence of criticism of Georgia’s actions and lack of concern for the safety and well-being of the South Ossetians. Russia’s recognition of South Ossetia’s and Abkhazia’s independence has taken the question of Georgia’s territorial integrity off the negotiation table indefinitely. It also has set back the formal peace process with both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. An essential way forward, toward establishing trust as a necessary foundation for progress in the political negotiations, would be for the US and other interested countries to engage with the people of Abkhazia and South Ossetia at all levels, demonstrating credible and consistent concern for the safety and well being of all the people affected by the conflict.

Keywords: conflict; culture; Abkhazia; South Ossetia

Introduction

Georgian–Abkhazian official relations since the end of the 1992–1993 war have offered little common ground for a mutually acceptable resolution. Long before the August 2008 military action in South Ossetia, the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict had become intractable. In October 1999, the post-war population of Abkhazia voted in a referendum for independence (Whitfield 2007). Until then, the parties discussed a variety of federative arrangements as possible terms of a settlement. At negotiations since the declaration of independence, Abkhazian authorities have refused to discuss with Georgians any settlement other than independence, while Georgia has consistently sought to maintain its territorial integrity. Since the accession to power of Eduard Shevardnadze in 1992, the US and other Western countries involved in the peace process have consistently supported Georgia’s territorial borders from the Soviet period,

When major fighting erupted in South Ossetia between South Ossetians and Georgians in August 2008, there had been no official talks between the two sides for two years (International Crisis Group 2007). Similarly, the gulf between the Georgian and Abkhazian sides had been widening, resulting in fundamentally different and mutually exclusive visions of future relations. Fear, stereotypes and little understanding of life on the other side dominated popular discourse in both communities. The August 2008 events in South Ossetia simply cemented these trends, further persuading people in Abkhazia that the Georgian government was not negotiating in good faith. The Abkhazians had predicted that the Georgian government was willing to take military action in South Ossetia and Abkhazia to get its way, and now believed that Abkhazia would be the next target.

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The Abkhazians do not regard the South Ossetians as ethnic cousins because of differences in history and language (Ossetian is an Iranian based Indo-European language, whereas Abkhazian belongs to the North-West Caucasian language group). There is also a considerable physical distance between them. Yet, both have a sense of affinity that comes from similarities in culture and in terms of their relationship to Georgians. Most relevant to their conflicts is that, first, they both see themselves as victims of Georgian nationalism and regard the Georgian political elite as aggressors, shown by the Georgians' violent resistance to Abkhazian and South Ossetian demands for independence. Second, they both consider their struggles against the Georgians as a right of self-determination. Third, the people of both entities have chosen to take Russian citizenship primarily to obtain a passport that allows them to travel outside their territories. They refuse to take Georgian passports, and the Georgian government has prevented the issuing of UN travel documents (Allin 2008, Khashig 2008a). In total, 80–90% of the people in Abkhazia and the vast majority in South Ossetia have Russian citizenship, which Russia claims makes it duty bound to protect its citizens by military means if necessary (Allin 2008).

What distinguishes each conflict from the other is that, first, the Abkhazians are unequivocal in their desire for independence from Russia and Georgia. It is not entirely clear whether most South Ossetians want to become an independent country or to join with North Ossetia and become part of Russia. Second, until the resumption of armed conflict between South Ossetians and Georgians in the fall of 2004, the South Ossetians, unlike Abkhazians, travelled into 'Georgia proper' and engaged extensively in trade with Georgians. This suggested to some that the South Ossetians might be more willing to be part of Georgia as a natural economic unit. Third, South Ossetians are open to reuniting with North Ossetia, but no such sentiment exists among the Abkhazians regarding their ethnic cousins, such as the Kabardians, Adyghe and Abazinians in the Russian controlled North Caucasus.¹

What is missing from most international and Georgian sources about the August 2008 events is any real discussion about what keeps the South Ossetians and Abkhazians from agreeing to be part of Georgia. If this question is raised, the answer usually focuses on Russia as the primary obstacle, as though the Abkhazians or South Ossetians have no opinion of their own, or are mere pawns of the Russians (Gleason 2008). This unwillingness to consider seriously the viewpoint of the 'pawns', and insistence on pursuing a peace process without a commitment to confidence-building measures that take into account the grievances of the Abkhazians and South Ossetians against the Georgian government, is a significant reason why peace negotiations have not made progress. This article shows how the fighting between Georgians and South Ossetians not only set back the peace process with the South Ossetians, but also had the same negative impact on Georgian–Abkhazian relations. The article highlights a perspective that has not been heard due to the global and geopolitical implications of the Russian–Georgian conflict in August and September 2008.

My observations of the perceptions of the conflict are based on studying the Abkhazian–Georgian peace process since 1994, and on experience facilitating Abkhazian–Georgian non-governmental dialogues. The focus of this work has been on the Abkhazian–Georgian conflict, based on my long-term expertise in Abkhazia, dating back to the late 1970s, but no equivalent track record in South Ossetia.² I have also been involved in non-governmental dialogues in which South Ossetians participated. Most recently, in December 2008, I co-facilitated a dialogue between Georgians and South Ossetians through George Mason University's Institute for Conflict Analysis and Resolution with funding by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The discussions in this dialogue about the August events have made it possible to identify common perceptions of these territorial conflicts and paths to peace shared by both Abkhazians and South Ossetians. Written sources about the conflicts have also provided insights, including published articles by US, Western and Abkhazian authors who present the perspectives of the Abkhazians they have interviewed.

The article offers a description of how the people of Abkhazia experienced the conflict that unfolded in August 2008, and an explanation of their reaction to fighting in South Ossetia as though the violence was occurring on their own territory. The article presents the ways in which Abkhazians assess the different roles that Georgia, the US, Europe and Russia played in the conflict. It concludes with an examination of the consequences of the South Ossetian conflict for Abkhazia and implications for future engagement of Western countries and Georgia in the peace process with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Abkhazia experiencing South Ossetia in flames

On the morning of 8 August 2008, when the news broke in Abkhazia that the previous night Georgian forces had shelled Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, many began packing suitcases and planning their departure. Some of them left for Russia immediately. Tensions had been building since the spring in Abkhazia over the shooting down of Georgian military drones. The people of Abkhazia, in a state of alarm for several months, were convinced that Georgian forces would soon turn in their direction. Inal Khashig (2008a), the editor of an Abkhazian newspaper, reflecting the perspectives of Abkhazian civil society, recalled:

For the last two years at least, since Georgian troops entered the upper reaches of Abkhazia's Kodori gorge, the shadow of a new war has been hanging over the region like the sword of Damocles. Experts tried to guess who Georgia would attack first – South Ossetia or Abkhazia? In April of this year [2008 – PG], only prompt action by Russia, which moved quickly to increase its peace-keeping contingent in the zone of the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict, saved Abkhazia from an attempt at military revenge from Georgia.

Soon after fighting broke out in South Ossetia on 8 August, the portrayal by Abkhazian state TV of the fighting between Georgians and South Ossetians was emotional and one-sided, according to Nick Lazaredes, a Western TV producer reporting from Abkhazia in mid August. The director of Abkhaz TV, Guram Akuab, told Lazaredes (2008) what he had seen in South Ossetia during the fighting between Georgians and South Ossetians. According to Lazaredes, it was an example of the type of reporting carried out in Abkhazia. Akuab declared:

I interviewed a family who had lost their daughter, a sniper killed the 14-year-old girl, she died in her mother's arms. For a long time she was carrying her daughter's body in her arms, suddenly she felt she had ran out of strength, so she abandoned her child in the forest, in the wilderness and kept running with her three other children . . . I could never imagine that today, in the 21st century, somebody could get away with opening fire on a sleeping town. Opening fire on the people who were asleep . . . Dozens, hundreds of people died at night in their sleep, not knowing what had happened.

Former residents of Abkhazia who had remained in Russia after the 1992–1993 war and were visiting for the summer, left Abkhazia immediately when they heard about the military developments in South Ossetia. The panic increased among residents of Abkhazia when they saw the vacationing Russian military families leave abruptly. They assumed that these families had information from the Russian military about an impending Georgian invasion. Abkhazians who had not left Abkhazia during the first war with the Georgians prepared to flee. An Abkhazian colleague told me that her mother, who had insisted on remaining in Sukhumi throughout the 1990s war, said this time she would definitely leave, that she could not cope one more time under Georgian occupation.

An official from an international organization in Sukhumi during this period in a personal email echoed information I was receiving from Abkhazian colleagues, that the population felt as though the military events in South Ossetia were actually happening in Abkhazia. One reason was the sense of shared victimhood, noted above. The events in South Ossetia and the fear of becoming the next target triggered a wartime psychological trauma experienced

during all or part of the Georgia–Abkhazia war of the early 1990s. Arda Inal-Ipa (personal communication, 11 December 2008), one of Abkhazia’s few clinical psychologists and a leader of the non-governmental movement, told me that the number of patients she treated in August and September 2008 was far greater than usual – at least one or two a day throughout August and September. Normally three to four patients a month seek her consultation. Not only were people coming to see her for post-traumatic stress symptoms, but for other types of anxiety-related symptoms that were not directly related to war trauma, but could have been indirectly triggered by the fear that the events in South Ossetia had generated among the population.

Why would the Abkhazians react so negatively to the prospect of reintegration into a Georgian state that has been portrayed in the West as a ‘beacon of liberty’ (Booth 2005), and deserving of serious consideration for membership in the European Union and NATO (Garb and Kaufmann 2007)? It is primarily because there is an enduring perception throughout the population of Abkhazia that the Georgians conducted the war of 1992–1993 with genocidal intent. Viacheslav Chirikba (2008), a non-governmental activist in Abkhazia and advisor on foreign policy to the Abkhazian government, offers an assessment of the war that represents a consensus I hear in Abkhazia:

During the war of 1992–1993, Georgians killed four percent of the entire Abkhazian population and destroyed the small republic’s national archives, museums, monuments of culture, and socio-economic infrastructure. The commander of the Georgian forces in Abkhazia, Colonel G. Karkarashvili, in a televised address on the Abkhaz TV warned that he was ready to sacrifice the lives of 100,000 Georgians in order to exterminate the entire Abkhazian nation of 93,000. Georgy Khaindrava, the civilian administrator of territories of Abkhazia under Georgian occupation, stated in an interview with *Le Monde Diplomatique* in April 2003 [the correct year of publication was 1993 – PG] that the Georgians were perfectly capable of destroying the genetic stock of the Abkhazian nation by killing 15,000 of their youths. For the small Abkhazian nation, all this was their “Holocaust”, the attempt of a “final solution” of the Abkhazian problem. By its genocidal policies in Abkhazia in 1931–1954 and 1992–1993, Georgia lost any moral and legal right to rule Abkhazia and to exploit its natural riches. Abkhazia will never again be a part of the Georgian state.

Georgians and others may disagree with Abkhazian perceptions of the genocidal attempt of Georgia’s policies in 1931–1954 and 1992–1993, but this does not change the perceptions held unanimously by Abkhazians and most of the non-Georgian minorities in Abkhazia. Chirikba (2008) connects the Abkhazian experience with Georgian forces in the early 1990s to those of South Ossetia in 2008, and asserts that:

If Saakashvili’s war on South Ossetia had been successful and if he’d won, there is no doubt that the territory of South Ossetia would have been cleansed of its indigenous Ossetian population . . . and, whatever the Russian motives, Russia prevented this from happening.

An important indication of how Abkhazians saw the connection between their 1992–1993 war with Georgia and the armed conflict between South Ossetians and Georgians in August 2008, was the announcement on 14 August, the anniversary of what the Abkhazians regard as the Georgian military invasion of Abkhazia in 1992, as a day of mourning for the victims of the war in South Ossetia. (Khashig 2008b).

Perceptions of Georgian, Western and Russian roles in the August 2008 events

Many Western observers claim that Russia’s increasing influence in South Ossetia and Abkhazia turned the Abkhazia and South Ossetia conflicts into Russia–Georgia disputes (Nichol 2008). Nichol (2008) wrote that ‘in a briefing on August 19 and in testimony on September 10’, Matthew Bryza, Deputy Secretary of State ‘appeared to argue that the outbreak of fighting in Georgia’s breakaway South Ossetia region on the night of August 7–8 was preplanned and provoked by Russia’ (pp. 27–28). Similarly, Georgian analysts maintain that there was not a

Georgia–South Ossetia war in August, rather it was a war between Russia and Georgia. Abkhazian and South Ossetian peace activists disagree strongly with this opinion.

On 22 August, Arda Inal-Ipa forwarded me an email exchange between a South Ossetian and a Georgian, both non-governmental activists who had been engaged in peace-building activities for a decade. The two of them had been discussing the events of 7–8 August, and had diametrically opposite views of the role of Russia. In her message to me prefacing the correspondence, Inal-Ipa wrote that the exchange ‘shows how little understanding there is between the two sides’. In a conversation with her a few months later she lamented: ‘After all these years of dialogue Georgians still don’t really understand our grievances, still see the conflict as though it has little or nothing to do with Georgian actions’ (personal communication, 11 December 2008).

Liana Kvarchelia, a leader of Abkhazia’s strongest non-governmental organization and a long time participant in Georgian–Abkhazian dialogues, told Lazaredes (2008) that ‘there has been so much focus on Georgian–Russian relations and . . . so little focus on Georgian–Abkhazian relations’. She asked why was ‘nobody interested in why we don’t think it’s safe for us to live in a Georgian state’. Another prominent Abkhazian non-governmental activist and analyst, Tamaz Ketsba, commented: ‘By its actions in South Ossetia, Georgia showed that in reality it wants to see the resolution of both the Georgian–Ossetian and the Georgian–Abkhaz conflicts only by force’ (Khashig 2008b).

In Abkhazia the conviction is that the United States and other Western countries gave a green light to Georgia to use military force in South Ossetia, at least indirectly. Chirikba (2008) maintains that:

The USA, and some other countries, like Israel, Turkey and Ukraine, bear a great share of responsibility for the current crisis. They were arming Georgia to the teeth, knowing perfectly well that their huge arms supplies and training efforts can and will be used by Georgia against the population of Abkhazia and South Ossetia – there was no other rationale for Georgia to spend so much effort on massive military preparations. Specifically, the USA and Israel, through their military, logistical, and advisory assistance to Georgia can be regarded as participants in this conflict.

According to Major General Garry Kupalba of the Abkhazian military, US weapons found in Kodori in mid-August, during their operation to expel the Georgian military from the area, show that it was the intention of the US to help Georgians win back Abkhazia militarily:

Kodori was a foothold that was to be used in future military operations. From this territory Georgian troops were to infiltrate the rest of Abkhazia. They intended to seize Sukhumi airport . . . and to block . . . the Kodori River here, at the Kodori bridge thus splitting Abkhazia into two. (Lazaredes 2008)

Alternatively, Chirikba (2008) considers the claim that the US administration may have given a green light to the Georgian military directly. He writes:

As one piece of indirect evidence for this, I can refer to the talk between Assistant Deputy Secretary of State Matthew Bryza and the American Ambassador to Georgia John Tefft with Abkhazia’s Security Council Secretary Stanislav Lakoba and me, as presidential adviser on foreign policy, which took place in the Abkhazian capital Sukhum on 25 July 2008. Bryza said that the situation was very tense and that they were afraid that the ‘hot-headed boys’ in Tbilisi would do things, and that if there were no immediate talks, August would be hot.

According to an Abkhazian respondent who heard about this conversation, Bryza was also reported to have told the Abkhazian officials that they need not worry; it would not be hot in Abkhazia. The rumour about this conversation led people to believe that in late July the Americans knew that South Ossetia would be the target of Georgian military intervention. The Abkhazians are not alone in their speculation that Georgia had reason to believe their actions in South Ossetia would not be out of line with the wishes of their friends in the US. Anatol Lieven (2008) maintains that:

It can only have been belief in US support that inspired Saakashvili to launch Georgia's attack. If Washington had not created the impression that such support would be forthcoming in the event of war, there would have been no war, and the United States would have avoided a crisis that the world economy could ill afford, including US\$4.5 billion in emergency Western aid to Georgia, money that could have been better spent in helping Pakistan, for example – a country that truly is vital to US interests.

Former US Ambassador to Russia, Jack Matlock (2008), argues that it is probable that elements in the Bush administration might have encouraged Saakashvili to believe that the US would support an effort to take South Ossetia and Abkhazia by force.

Abkhazians and South Ossetians not only blame Western countries for stimulating the conflict, but also accuse them of not caring about their fate. A British woman with Abkhazian relatives vents on AbkhazWorld.com, writing:

I have no words to express my frustration and vehement anger at the West not only for cold heartedly turning a blind eye to Georgia's aggression and laying the blame on Russia alone, but in fact for creating the possibility for Georgia to behave this way in the first place. (Amza-Natia Hewitt 2008)

An Abkhazian academic, Oleg Damera, puts it this way:

After the West did not react for several days to the Georgian artillery levelling of Tskhinval, it became completely obvious to us that nobody needs either the Abkhaz or the Ossetians ... No one except Russia is planning to defend us. (Khashig 2008b)

Abkhazians are frustrated that the West does not recognize any democratic development in Abkhazia that might combat their image as a society unworthy of Western support. Non-governmental leader, Liana Kvarchelia (2008) expresses the sentiments of the community of civil society leaders in Abkhazia. The West, Kvarchelia complains, does not recognize the strides Abkhazians have made toward building a democratic society. She points out that 'there is a lot of frustration here that nobody really cares about our struggle to build a civilized democratic state'. The Abkhazian civil society community is proud of having stood up to Putin's government and the pro-Russian elites in Abkhazia during their presidential election in October 2004, when the pro-Russian party and its supporters in Moscow did not want to accept the defeat of their preferred candidate, Raul Khajimba. Abkhazia's tiny civil society stood by the voters who wanted a new leader, Sergey Bagapsh, who was subsequently elected.

Not all Western officials are viewed in Abkhazia as uncaring and unsympathetic towards the problems faced in Abkhazia. Abkhazian colleagues reported to me that after the announcement of Russia's recognition of Abkhazia, a high level European official in Abkhazia at the time informally congratulated Abkhaz officials and non-governmental activists. Similarly, colleagues in Georgia told me that an important Western official in Tbilisi informed a group of Georgian students that it was not realistic to force a reluctant population to live in one state if they did not want to. He recommended that the Georgian government attract the breakaway territories, not repel them with military action. This is not atypical of views expressed off the record by EU representatives who work in the region and travel back and forth between Tbilisi and Sukhumi hearing all sides of the conflict. It reflects some difference of opinion among European officials. Abkhazian journalist, Inal Khashig (2008a) claims that 'now and then high-ranking European politicians did seem to realize that the optimal and least painful option for regulating the conflict would be to legalize the status quo, that is to recognize the statehood of Abkhazia'.

This is one reason that Abkhazians still see the European Union as a potentially positive actor in the region, although their expectations are low. An unnamed senior Abkhazian official told Neal Ascherson (2008) about a conversation he had with EU officials visiting before the August events:

I said: we could play a role in the EU's Black Sea Neighbourhood Programme. You can't recognize us at this point, but why not establish direct contacts at the level of education, sport, youth policy, the environment? We spoke for hours, and it seemed hopeful, but nothing happened. Back in Brussels, they were inflexible. All we got was a proposal to set up an EU information centre here – but only as a branch of the Tbilisi centre in Georgia. Why not a Sukhum centre answering directly to Brussels? The EU could so easily take a small step towards us – for instance, helping us to replace and restore our national archives.

Abkhazians, understanding the West would not stop what they considered to be Georgian aggression against South Ossetia, and fearing they would be Georgia's next target, welcomed the appearance of 9000 Russian troops in Abkhazia on 10 August (Khashig 2008b). The arrival of the Russian forces halted plans of many residents to evacuate. People in Abkhazia regarded Russian troops as the guarantor of peace, at least for a while. Ascheron (2008) recalled what one woman explained to him:

We were all thinking: we are next. So you have to understand the passionate relief we felt when the Russians intervened. To see Russian warships appearing off Sukhum and hear Russian aircraft arriving with troops – that was irresistible. Sure, we all know very well that Russia cares nothing for small countries and was acting only in its own interest. But at that moment we were so grateful.

Consequences of the South Ossetian conflict from the Abkhazian perspective

Despite the anxiety over the war in South Ossetia and in the Kodori Gorge in Abkhazia, Abkhazians believe they have made important territorial and political gains. First, Abkhazians have acquired territory and security. Russia sent its forces to South Ossetia and Abkhazia, not only defending the Abkhazians against a Georgian attack, but also enabling Abkhazians to reunite Abkhazia. The security provided by Russian forces gave Abkhazians the opportunity to expel Georgian forces from the Upper Kodori Gorge. The Tbilisi government had renamed it Upper Abkhazia after winning control of this area two years earlier from a Georgian illegal militia. The Abkhazians also gained a strip of land along the Abkhazian side of the Inguri River, land that had earlier belonged to the Georgians (Smyr 2008). In a piece filed by Elizabeth Owens (2008), she reported Sergei Dzhonua, the Abkhazian government's representative in the Upper Kodori, as saying that not only did the Abkhazians win territory from the Georgians, but also a stockpile of weapons that would last, in his view, for three to four years. This information cannot be verified, but the Abkhazians regard it as true. Owens quotes Dzhonua, saying with a smile: 'The Abkhaz army didn't have American weapons before. And now we've got American machine guns, American automatic rifles, all of that weaponry that the US transferred has been left there.' Owens went on to say: 'Dzhonua scoffed at Tbilisi's assertions that Georgian forces stationed in the Upper Kodori Gorge had been acting in a law-enforcement capacity, rather than as regular soldiers.' 'Police', he told her 'don't need bunkers, grenade launchers [and] howitzer batteries. Do your police in America need this? Everything that was needed to start a war, it was all there' (Owens 2008).

Second, Russia recognized Abkhazia's independence. Immediate security was vital, but Russian diplomatic recognition of Abkhazia was a highly symbolic victory. Russia's recognition came as a surprise to most Abkhazians. Lazaredes (2008), who was in Abkhazia when the news of recognition was announced, wrote:

When Russian president Dmitry Medvedev formally recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states on August 26, it caught the republic completely by surprise. After 15 years of suspense, no one, not even senior officials, believed Russia would actually take this step. Just after three in the morning, as Medvedev finished announcing the news in a televised address, the first salvos of automatic gunfire began to sound over Abkhazia as the celebrations began.

Smyr (2008) described the spontaneous jubilation:

In under ten minutes, the streets of the Abkhaz capital Sukhum were full of people. Cars bearing the national flag of Abkhazia zoomed along the streets hooting their horns, the sound mingling with gunshots and shouts of delight. It seemed as though the entire population had come out to mark the occasion. President Sergei Bagapsh and the rest of the Abkhaz leadership came out to join the celebrations on Sukhum's central square, in front of the old parliament building, still in ruins from the 1992–1993 war.

The fact that no other country but Nicaragua, as of this writing, has followed Russia in recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia, fuels accusations by the Abkhazians and Ossetians of double standards in the West. They ask why, if the US and many other Western countries recognized Kosovo's independence in February 2008, they could not do the same for Abkhazia in September 2008. Abkhazians continually ask: 'Why are the South Ossetians and Abkhazians, who are trying to escape from the Georgian bully and who already have viable statehoods for more than 15 years, denied the same right to recognition as was allowed for Kosovo Albanians' (Chirikba 2008). They do not accept the argument that Kosovo is a completely different case, that in contrast to Abkhazia it was ready for independence. Abkhazians claim they are even more deserving of independent status than Kosovo, a position articulated by Sergei Shamba (2008), *de facto* foreign minister of Abkhazia:

We can now discern a direct analogy between Kosovo and Abkhazia, even though Abkhazia has much greater legal, historical, and moral reasons for having its independence recognized than Kosovo does ... We live on our native land. We ourselves obtained our independence without any foreign military aid, in contrast to Kosovo. The Abkhazians ourselves drove out the Georgian aggressors from our territory. In contrast to Kosovo we have developed all structures of state and government authority, developed civil society, a multiparty political system, an independent mass media, and non-governmental funds and organizations. During the last twenty years we have had presidential and parliamentary elections.

Third, Abkhazians perceive a major political gain, because as a result of Russia's recognition of these disputed territories, the issue of Georgia's territorial integrity is finally, practically speaking, off the negotiation table. Territorial integrity was not mentioned in UN Resolution 1866 passed in mid-February 2009, extending the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) for another four months. Russia's delegation maintains that this omission was a clear victory for the Abkhazians. Vitaly Churkin, Russia's ambassador to the UN commented that: 'The fundamental thing is there is no reference to territorial integrity of Georgia in this resolution and it would not have been possible to have it adopted had there been such a reference' (Corso 2009).

The already difficult negotiations have become even more complicated because the Russians and Abkhazians are putting forward new demands about format and use of terms now that Abkhazia has a new *de facto*, if not *de jure*, status. For example, commenting on the possibility of talks in Geneva with Georgian officials, Abkhazian President, Sergei Bagapsh, declared 'We never participated as the Georgian side at any meeting, even being non-recognized.³ And now, it is even more unreal' (Regnum News Agency 2008). This does not mean that the Abkhazian leadership will refuse to participate in talks. On the contrary, in an official statement posted on 16 February, Sergey Shamba called for renewing weekly meetings with Georgian government envoys in Gali, a predominantly ethnic Georgian region of Abkhazia. Shamba proposed that representatives from the UN, Russia and European Union participate. Shamba also made it clear that Abkhazia wants inclusion in such meetings as a full member, otherwise they will not participate at all (Corso 2009).

Fourth, independence, in the Abkhazian view, has created new opportunities for the return of Georgian refugees, neighbourly relations with Georgia, and the return of the Abkhazian diaspora. Abkhazian non-governmental activists who meet regularly for dialogue with their

counterparts in Georgia argue that Georgia stands to benefit from recognition of Abkhazia. Chirikba's (2008) maintains that the Georgians should be happy to be rid of the problem of Abkhazia:

By recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia surgically cut off the major problem for Georgia – the territorial one. Paradoxically as it might seem, this will bring the long-awaited stability to the region. Free of its disputed territories, which it was never able to re-conquer and control, Georgia can concentrate on its own internal problems, of which it has quite enough. Besides, Georgia still has areas compactly populated by ethnically and linguistically diverse minorities – Megrelians, Svans, Azeris and Armenians. The lessons of Abkhazia and South Ossetia should teach any government in Tbilisi that the problem of minorities represents a crucial political issue for such a multi-ethnic country as Georgia.

Amza-Natia Hewitt (2008), commenting about the future of an independent Abkhazia recognized by Georgia, has asserted that Georgians returning to an independent Abkhazia could live in peace: 'In all honesty, these people [those living in Abkhazia—PG] could even live together with the Georgians as they once did, but only with the assurance of no more Georgian initiated fighting.' The return of the Abkhazian diaspora is also predicted, as restrictions on entering Abkhazia are now lifted from the Russian side. According to Neal Ascherson (2008), an Abkhazian junior minister he spoke to in the fall of 2008, speculated that 'direct links with Turkey could persuade thousands of Turkish Abkhazians to return to the land of their fathers and repopulate the empty countryside'. Cemre Jade, an ethnic Adyghe-Abkhazian who has lived most of her life in Turkey, but currently works as a sociologist in Abkhazia, echoes this view. She claims that in the two years she has been living in Abkhazia, others like her who have immigrated to Abkhazia from the diaspora have doubled from around 200 to 400. She wrote: 'More and more are coming since recognition. Now people feel safer in Abkhazia' (Jade 2009). However, the numbers remain very small.

Fifth, Abkhazia can act as a buffer zone between Russia and Georgia. The role of a buffer zone is an appealing one to Abkhazians. Abkhazian President Sergei Bagapsh has said: 'We would rather become a buffer zone and keep intact our nation, our ethnicity, our language, our culture, our identity, just like any other country in this world.' Bagapsh insists in this interview that Abkhazia is not going to have any associated status with Russia. 'This is out of the question', he said, 'Russia has no claims or intention to take away anything' (Caucasus Knot 2008). At the same time, Abkhazians acknowledge the perils of being a buffer zone, sandwiched as they are between a hostile Russia and Georgia. When Neal Ascherson (2008) was in Abkhazia in the fall of 2008, he noted that Abkhazia's leaders were worried about Georgia's future and about sharing a border with a disintegrating Georgia. Abkhazians were concerned that Georgia might fall apart due to increasing conflicts with minorities and future actions against Georgia by Russia. Ascherson (2008) writes that: 'In spite of the recent past, they [Abkhazians – PG] still long for a close relationship with a stable, pacific, prosperous Georgia: two small Caucasian neighbours linked by a common interest in Europe, Turkey and the wider world.'

The question of Russian patronage

Abkhazians recognize the perils of sharing a border with Russia. While expressing gratitude for Russian recognition of Abkhazian independence and the assurance of tangible guarantees of security, they also talk about the downsides of Russia's support. Even when armed conflict was under way in South Ossetia and later in Georgia proper, while watching Russian tanks roll down Abkhazia's coastal highway, people confided that they had mixed feelings seeing so much Russian military hardware in their land. They have voiced concern about Abkhazia's agreement to allow Russian bases to remain in Abkhazia for 99 years, fearing complete

occupation and eventually an inability to tear themselves loose from Russia's grip. Speaking anonymously to me, colleagues have commented that 99 years is a very long time; that much can change in such a period. Citing an example of such dramatic change, one of them pointed out that it was 99 years ago that the Russian government considered the Abkhazians, who had emigrated to Turkey in the 1800s – in many cases under Tsarist pressure – as disloyal and therefore would not allow them to return to Abkhazia.

The concerns about Russian interests in Abkhazia are not limited to the military and political realms, but also include the economic one. Russian leaders have tried to get the Abkhazian government to replace key government figures with those more sympathetic to Russian business interests. Russians, with their enormous resources, can easily control the Abkhazian economy (Smyr 2008). An example of this simmering distrust was reported in the *Georgia Times* (2009), and has circulated throughout Abkhazia. In December 2008, Russia and Georgia signed a memorandum about reallocating electricity from the Inguri Power Plant that is on the Abkhazian side of the ceasefire line between Abkhazia and Georgia. Throughout the Soviet and post-Soviet period the plant has been jointly operated by the Abkhazians and Georgians; the dam is on the Georgian side and the plant is on the Abkhazian side. This new reallocation of electricity is not between the two neighbours, but between Russia and Georgia. Georgia has been co-operating with the Russian company Inter RAO UES in generating electricity in Georgia. According to Abkhazian sources, the Russian company struck this deal without consulting the Abkhazians, further increasing people's fears that the Russians have already decided that Abkhazia's resources *de facto* belong to Russia.

Implications and conclusions

What now? In the near future, looking at the situation from the outside it appears unlikely that more military ventures will be repeated. All of Georgia's attempts at military solutions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia have ended in failure. They have taken Georgia further away from its goals. Further isolation of the breakaway territories will not help repair relations. Georgia's unwillingness to allow Abkhazians and South Ossetians to travel with UN documents, and refusal to encourage any significant Western engagement in the breakaway territories, has isolated these numerically small nationalities from the global community and pushed them increasingly closer to Russia.

The most constructive approach by Georgia and its Western supporters would be to recognize that military action, together with economic and political isolation, have left the Abkhazian and South Ossetian healthcare and education systems, and their economies in shambles. This has only made people more resentful toward Georgia and its Western supporters. A fruitful policy would be for Georgia, the US and the West to engage with Abkhazians and South Ossetians at all levels, demonstrating credible and consistent concern for the safety and well-being of all the people affected by the conflict. Now, more than ever before, it is necessary to restore trust so that political negotiations, which further a resolution of the conflicts, can be productive.

Abkhazians are fairly certain that Russia does not want an independent Abkhazia that is recognized by any other country. Russia, they say, is happy that the rest of the world does not follow it in recognizing Abkhazia. This gives Russia exclusive rights to Abkhazia by default. It also prevents Georgia from having any influence over Abkhazia. What harm would it do to at least consider and discuss the pros and cons of Georgia recognizing Abkhazia? Perhaps Georgian recognition would be the best way to counteract this influence. Even pro-Russian Abkhazians support this idea as an effective way to prevent Abkhazia's complete occupation by Russia.

If Abkhazia's isolation continues, the people fear that eventually Russia will buy up and occupy Abkhazia like the former colony it once was. Abkhazians want to be a neutral buffer

zone between their two neighbours. They want to dilute their dependence on Russia, and engage with the US and Europe to overcome their international isolation. Everything else but this kind of positive engagement has been tried and failed. It is time to test a new approach, one that is more likely to bring the parties closer to each other, not push them further away.

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Notes

1. In the early 1990s, Abkhazia participated in the Confederation of Peoples of the Caucasus (CPC), an organization created during the breakup of the Soviet Union involving representatives from the North Caucasus republics and Abkhazia in the South Caucasus. Since the mid-1990s, Abkhazians have not shown much interest in the organization. I am unaware of any discussions between Abkhazians and related North Caucasus peoples to come together in a political union. Abkhazians are steadfast in their desire to create an independent country.
2. In 1979–1981, I worked in rural Abkhazia with a Soviet-American joint project studying the social and cultural factors promoting long life in the region. The project was initiated and co-directed by Sula Benet, author of *Abkhazians: The Long Living People of the Caucasus (Case studies in cultural anthropology)*, Hold Rinehart & Winston. Throughout the 1980s, I visited the region frequently participating in academic conferences and field research. After the 1994 ceasefire, I began a long-term action research project that continues to this day. The project involves bringing together Abkhazian and Georgian opinion shapers to participate regularly in academic conferences, focused on current issues in their respective societies and in the peace process. The project has numerous funders named in the acknowledgements and is conducted through the University of California, Irvine.
3. Bagapsh meant that the Abkhazian participants in peace talks with the Georgians never agreed to be part of a Georgian group at the negotiations.

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