



BRILL

---

Geopolitical Aspects of the Abkhazian Statehood: Some Results and Perspectives

Author(s): Viacheslav Chirikba

Source: *Iran & the Caucasus*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (2004), pp. 341-349

Published by: Brill

---



JSTOR

*Brill* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Iran & the Caucasus*

GEOPOLITICAL ASPECTS OF THE ABKHAZIAN STATEHOOD:  
SOME RESULTS AND PERSPECTIVES

VIACHESLAV CHIRIKBA

Leiden University

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in December 1991 along with 15 former union republics, which have been recognized by the United Nations and other states, at nearly the same time several other states were formed, which separated from the former union republics and which have since been effectively independent. These states at the time of the disintegration of the Soviet Union did not possess the status of union republics and consequently did not receive any diplomatic recognition from Russia or other states around the world. Thus, at the beginning of the 1990's, the unrecognized states Taiwan and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus were joined by South Ossetia, Transdnestria, Nagorno Karabakh and Abkhazia. My paper is devoted to the analysis of the geopolitical situation and some perspectives for the development concerning one of these states, the Republic of Abkhazia.

First of all, I would like to touch upon the terminology, which has some currency in reference to unrecognized states. They are often called, especially in the media, "self-proclaimed states". It is necessary to emphasize that this term is not simply inexact or incorrect, but is quite absurd, as any state is "self-proclaimed". It would be strange, if states did not proclaim themselves but were proclaimed by someone else. Even less felicitous, to my view, is the sometimes used term "quasi-state". Take, for instance, Abkhazia, which possesses all the attributes of a state (territory, distinct borders, a permanent population, authorities exercising control over the territory of the state, the ability to enter into international relations, the absence of foreign control, etc.), minus recognition, which, from the point of view of the Declarative Theory, is relevant for its qualification as a state. By both territory and population Abkhazia is approximately equal to Cyprus, and it is bigger than Malta, both of which are recognized states and the members of the European Union and the United Nations. Moreover, even some recognized states could envy the political stability (at least, until

recently), internal coherence and economic potential of Abkhazia. The fact is that unrecognized states can possess a stable political system and sometimes even prosper economically. Another, and a more obvious example is the unrecognized Taiwan, which is one of the economically most advanced countries of the world.

What, then, renders the state of Abkhazia a “quasi-state”? Only the absence of recognition? But the presence or the absence of external recognition can neither create nor nullify a state, which exists irrespective of these factors. Many currently existing states were also unrecognized a certain time ago, but they were nevertheless quite real states. Therefore, I would rather regard the term “quasi-state” as fraught with subjective connotations. The sometimes used term “separatist state” is also not wholly felicitous, as, again, any state is in essence separatist, as it tries to maintain its separateness from other states and normally does not want to become a part of another state. The terms “unrecognized state” or “de facto state” seem to be somewhat more neutral and appropriate in this respect.

The question arises as to what is the source of the legitimacy of a state—the fact of its diplomatic recognition by other states, or its recognition and support by its own people? In fact, if the people do not regard themselves as a part of a given state, or are even hostile to this state, no external recognition can create the declared state, which will be an artificial formation and which will collapse at the first opportunity. Examples of such artificial states put together only by pressure of external forces, or force of arms, are well-known in modern history. Therefore, diplomatic recognition, though it is important for the normal functioning of a state, cannot be considered as sufficient or even as the main principle determining the legitimacy of a state. I think, that it is the first factor, namely, the recognition, support and, if necessary, protection by the people of their own state, which is the basic determinant of its legitimacy. Thus, from the point of view of the situation in Abkhazia, its multi-ethnic people is the source of the sovereignty of the Republic of Abkhazia, and the latter is the form of their self-determination, confirmed by the referendum of 1999 and reaffirmed by the Act of the State Independence of Abkhazia.

What is the external political setting, which determines the place of Abkhazia in the current regional geopolitical context? Abkhazia is situated geographically between Georgia and the Russian Federation, and across the Black Sea it borders Turkey. During the Soviet times, Abkhazia was initially a Union Republic, then, rather soon, it was compelled to enter into confederation with Georgia (as a so-called

Treaty Republic), and after 1931, up to the time of the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, its status was downgraded to that of an Autonomous Republic within the structure of the Georgian SSR. After the war with Georgia in 1992-1993 and the separation from it, the main vector of the foreign policy and trade activities of Abkhazia became the Russian Federation. Abkhazia has declared that it would wish to establish associated relations with Russia, on the model of those existing between the USA and the Marshall islands (whose status is officially designated as "the constitutional government in free association with the USA"). This means, that while preserving its sovereignty and independence, Abkhazia will conclude with Russia currency, customs and foreign policy union.

The majority of the population of Abkhazia has accepted Russian citizenship; the only legal currency in Abkhazia is the Russian rouble. Does this, however, mean that Russia has already effectively annexed Abkhazia? There are certainly no grounds for such an assertion. The existence of a common currency can indicate a close interrelation of the economies of the respective states but not necessarily a one-state situation—compare, for example, the situation with the euro across the territories of a number of countries within the European Union. Moreover, Russia, by the words of its authorities, has consistently declared its support for the territorial integrity of Georgia.

Probably, it is impossible to speak about a common approach of the Russian political elite to the problem of Abkhazia. Some of its representatives see no tragedy either in a forceful reintegration of Abkhazia within Georgia or in the strengthening of the USA and NATO positions in the Caucasus. Others consider the existence of Abkhazia in its opposition to Georgia as a geopolitical gift to Russia and perceive the accelerating loss of Russian holdings within the Caucasus extremely negatively. Nevertheless, it is quite obvious that at the present moment Russia is satisfied with the status quo and is not planning the organization of any breakthroughs either by establishing closer interstate relations with Abkhazia, for which Russia politically, taking into account the current international situation, is not yet ready, or by way of radically helping Georgia to restore its control over Abkhazia, which represents an even bigger challenge. The latter absolutely contradicts the strategic interests of Russia, as it will automatically lead to the decrease in Russian political and military influence on the situation in Transcaucasia and, on the contrary, to the increase of the USA and NATO roles in this region. Apart from other consequences, the strengthening of American positions in the South-

ern Caucasus is fraught with the danger of erosion of Russia's positions in the Northern Caucasus. Besides, any military support to Georgia will inevitably cause a destabilization in the Northern Caucasus (inhabited by peoples ethnically related to the Abkhazians), which Moscow would see as a danger. At last, neither the Abkhazian people nor the Abkhazian authorities would agree to forceful reintegration with Georgia and would take all measures to counteract such a sequence of events. The acceptance by the Abkhazian population of both Abkhazian and Russian citizenship renders any military participation of Russia on the side of Georgia even more improbable, as in this case Russia should be fighting technically with its own citizens and driving them into another state.

On the whole, one has to admit that Russia does not have much room for significant political manoeuvres from the point of view of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. Therefore, it is conceivable to expect the further Russian participation as intermediary in negotiations between Abkhazia and Georgia and as the supplier of the basic contingent of the peace-keeping force.

It is possible to assume that America too, as much as Russia, is content with the status quo in relations between Georgia and Abkhazia, as a direct military conflict in Abkhazia would inevitably cause a clash of the US and Russian interests and break a newly acquired, if only in words, partnership in the struggle against international terrorism. It seems that for the American advisers in Tbilisi the main task is now to restrain any hasty actions of the Georgian leadership. The American advisers to the Georgian president would hardly find it reasonable to recommend a new military campaign in Abkhazia. However, the USA can be expected to render all-round political, military, and economic support to Saakashvili's regime.

The country which is neighbour to both Georgia and Abkhazia—Turkey—is also not interested in a new conflict in Abkhazia. Officially supporting the territorial integrity of Georgia, Turkey at the same time would prefer to see a peaceful resolution to the Abkhazian problem, in order, first, not to endanger projects like the Baku-Ceyhan pipeline, which is crucially important for its economy, and, second, to avoid destabilization in within the country itself, which hosts both a significant and quite active Abkhazian and North Caucasian diasporas, supporting Abkhazia, as well as a Georgian Muslim community. On the other hand, it is possible to assume that the economic and military-political presence of Turkey in the Southern Caucasus will be broadened, and that the union of Georgia, the USA and Turkey will become even

stronger on the basis of the common goal of pushing Russia out of this region, strategically and economically important both for the USA and Turkey.

The unexpected ascension to power in Georgia of Michael Saakashvili, who wants to figure in history as the unifier of all Georgia, has dramatically changed the situation in this post-Soviet republic. Having driven from his post Edward Shevardnadze, who turned out to be not that cunning after all, Saakashvili immediately charged at Adzharia and in a relatively short term brought this so far quite autonomous republic under his full control. Several factors played a role in the collapse of the regime of the Adzharian ruler Aslan Abashidze: the unwillingness of the Adzharian leader to cause another civil war in Georgia, the behaviour of local elites, and, crucially, the total absence of any external patrons for Abashidze and for Adzharia as a whole. Both Russia, and Turkey have decided not to adhere to the Kars treaty (concluded on October 13, 1921), according to which they acted as co-guarantors of the autonomy of Adzharia, and have accepted in this case the side of the stronger. For Aslan Abashidze, abandoned both by his own elite, and by Russia and Turkey, there was nothing left but to submit his resignation and leave for Moscow. The unconditional surrender of Adzharia by Moscow once again convinced the unrecognized post-Soviet states of the necessity to strengthen in every possible way their defence capacities and mutual solidarity in case there should be any attempt to export coups d'état, under the elegant title of "rose revolutions", to their own territories, according to the Adzharian scenario.

Inspired by his sensationally easy success in Adzharia, Saakashvili immediately declared that Abkhazia would be next. His politically more experienced colleagues hastened to disavow this statement, and in the negotiations of May 7-8, 2004 with the Russian government the Georgian Foreign Minister Salome Zurbishvili emphasized that "the Adzharian and Abkhazian questions are in no way interrelated". Then Saakashvili himself was compelled to declare the necessity of a more restrained approach to the settlement of the Abkhazian question. "This will take not less than two years," he declared. "We should start negotiations to come to some kind of an agreement on federation, as well as to make them see economic incentives".

This restraint seems to be rather tactical and, perhaps, temporary, although the Georgian leaders are fully aware that, without good relations with Russia, the restoration of the Georgian control over South Ossetia and Abkhazia is simply impossible. Unlike Shevardnadze, who

relied only on the USA in reaching a settlement of the problem of Abkhazia, the new Georgian president realizes that the keys to Ossetia and Abkhazia are not in Washington, but in Moscow. Therefore, one would guess that all efforts will be thrown into reconciliation with Russia and on providing concessions on a number of questions worrying Russia, such as the termination of support for Maskhadov's Chechnya, small concessions on the question of military bases, and some others. A curtesy towards Russia can also be detected in the appointment of the Russian oligarch Kakha Bendukidze to the post of Economics Minister of Georgia.

One would think about the following priorities in the further activities of the new Georgian leadership:

1. *The removal of tension in relations between Georgia and Russia, especially in regard to Chechnya, which is the most troublesome for Russia, and at the same time achieving a complete withdrawal of the Russian military bases from the territory of Georgia, which is necessary for its membership of NATO.*
2. *The accelerated building of armed forces with the attraction for this purpose of military and financial resources from the West, principally the USA and the NATO countries. Thus, after the meeting with the United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, Michael Saakashvili declared: "Unless the Georgian army becomes a mighty force, no UN will help us in Abkhazia".*
3. *The imposition/tightening of significant political, economic and, quite probably, military pressure on South Ossetia and Abkhazia, including blockades, increase in tension and a concentration of armed forces near the borders, a smear campaign against these republics by accusing them of the transit of drugs, smuggling and other sins.*

It is possible that, parallelly with this, Georgia would even try to apply towards South Ossetia and Abkhazia a policy of carrot, though it is not quite clear how a poor country, shaken by periodic coups can attract Abkhazia, which itself possesses a significant economic potential. Adzharia, after all, was a too easy victory, and the ethnic situation in South Ossetia and, in particular, in Abkhazia, does not leave any illusions as to the presence or the creation of a fifth column, on which it would be possible to lean in the organization of future "revolutions".

Despite the temptation quickly to bring Abkhazia under control, it seems unlikely that within the next five years Georgia will be ready, either militarily or financially, to unleash a new full-scale conflict. The serious deterrent is, undoubtedly, the existence in Abkhazia of quite efficient and highly motivated armed forces, which would render the task of military conquest of the republic a hard problem even for a

more powerful army than the present army of Georgia. Besides, the majority of the population of Abkhazia are technically Russian citizens, which essentially differs from the situation at the time of the Georgian-Abkhazian war of 1992-1993. Russia will immediately be faced with the necessity to intervene directly in this conflict in order to protect the lives of its citizens. Certain deterrents are also the readiness of the forces in the Northern Caucasus, which are friendly to Abkhazia, to act on its side in case of any new conflict, as well as a predictably sharp negative reaction to such conflict and probable actions on the part of the Russian political elite, which realizes that the loss of Abkhazia will directly threaten the positions of Russia not only in the Southern but also the Northern Caucasus. These factors cannot be ignored by the strategists in Tbilisi and should not be ignored by their American advisers.

It is obvious that the immediate target for Georgia is not Abkhazia but South Ossetia, which is considered in effect as an easier task. Thus, according to media reports, the President of Georgia hinted that the reunification with South Ossetia would probably be easier than that with Abkhazia. "With Ossetia the question will be solved faster, than with it [Abkhazia],"—said Saakashvili.

Thus, it is most likely that at the present time there is no direct threat of a mass military invasion by Georgia to Abkhazia along the whole of its perimeter. However, rather probable is a significant escalation of military, political and economic pressure on Abkhazia (attempts at disrupting the tourist-trade, important for the economy of Abkhazia, the sea-blockade of Abkhazia aimed at preventing its naval trade communications with the external world, a smear campaign, etc.). Military provocations are most probable in the Kodori gorge and in the Gal area of Abkhazia. Assessing the perspectives for the general development of the situation around Abkhazia, one can presume that the political actions of Georgia, behind which looms its main patron and sponsor, the USA, will most probably acquire a more offensive character, and Russia, most likely, will be compelled to adopt an ever more defensive position. Thus, even against a background of some initial warming of relations between Moscow and Tbilisi, rather symptomatic was the recent statement of the Minister of Defence of Georgia, Giorgi Baramidze, at a meeting in Brussels with the heads of the NATO that Georgia was ready to give its territory for the deployment of NATO armies, and that the NATO office in the countries of the Southern Caucasus will be situated in the building of the Ministry of Defence of Georgia (Rosbalt, 18-06-2004). Somewhat earlier, in



April, the German Minister for Foreign Affairs, Joschka Fischer, promised German help in the prompt entry of Georgia into NATO (Apsny.ru, 18-06-2004). The year of 2007 is even being mentioned as a possible date for the membership of Georgia into the alliance.

However, the unsolved territorial problems in Georgia render its membership of NATO rather problematic, as a new conflict between Tbilisi and Sukhum or Tskhinval could bring NATO and Russia to a direct confrontation. Appreciation of this factor means that the European countries will hardly agree to the Georgian membership of NATO while it still has unresolved territorial problems. As the existence of the Republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which are beyond any control of Tbilisi, represents a major barrier on the path of the Georgian membership of NATO, it is possible to expect in this connection the increased American pressure on Moscow, aimed at Russia compelling the authorities of the unrecognized states to become more compliant and agree on the reintegration with the former metropolis. Thus, recently the chairman of the committee on internal security of the US Congress, Christopher Cox, declared that Russia should insist that separatists in Georgia and Moldova conclude agreements with the authorities of these countries, otherwise this can complicate relations between Moscow and the USA.

In a short period, the ascension to power in Georgia of a new energetic and US-orientated leader brings about significant corrections to the established balance of power in the region, threatens the existing status quo, and represents serious challenges and threats not only for Abkhazia, but also for Russia.

What of Abkhazia then? In fact, the next few years could become the time of its most serious trial both as to its internal stability (a harsh power struggle connected with the change of leadership) and its ability to resist new external challenges, whereby a new military assault of Georgia remains the most serious peril.

The main positive result of the post-war development of Abkhazia, despite the extremely adverse external background (blockades, its unrecognized status, military provocations and threats from Georgia) and the adverse internal background (war-time destruction, absence of large-scale investments to rehabilitate the destroyed economy) is that Abkhazia has managed to establish itself as a politically stable and economically viable state. It has an elected parliament, a functioning government, gradually developing foreign economic and political relations. Its economic growth, though so far rather modest, as well as some increase in the well-being of the population, are obvious to any

observer. There are no doubts that if/when the military threat from Georgia disappears and the Russian-Georgian economic embargo is lifted, Abkhazia will be able to restore its economic potential within a reasonably short period of time and will again become a prosperous state.

On the other hand, the absence of external recognition, undoubtedly, renders the independence of Abkhazia rather fragile. The policy of Russia, which still plays quite an important role in the settlement of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, is prone at times to zigzags, which complicates any long-term forecasts. Russian policy in this region, in its turn, is influenced by both internal factors (economic, political, military and their combination), and to a significant degree by pressure from the western patrons of Georgia, primarily the USA.

Like any unrecognized state, Abkhazia faces many challenges, and one can assume that the next five years will be rather intense. In these conditions Abkhazia should work in the following directions:

1. *To undertake decisive steps to raise the economy and significantly to increase living standards of the population on the basis of the attraction of foreign investment, privatization, the stimulation of small and medium-sized business;*
2. *To strengthen the republic's defence-capabilities and maintain them at a maximally high level;*
3. *To develop democratic institutions, political pluralism, strict observance of human rights and freedoms;*
4. *To develop political, economic, trading, cultural and other ties with the Russian Federation and its republics, regions and areas, as well as with other countries of the world;*
5. *To achieve the conclusion of a peace-pact with Georgia, with international guarantees for the non-use of military force.*

To survive as a state and as a nation, Abkhazia should achieve international guarantees for its safety, which can be brought about only by international recognition. Abkhazia should prove to the world that it represents a peaceful and democratic state based on the rule of law and on respect for human rights, a country whose independence does not threaten any other state, but, on the contrary, one which can become a force for stability and cooperation in the region, so sorely needed, as recent events in the Caucasus have demonstrated.