

Abkhazia: ten years on

By Rachel Clogg, Conciliation Resources, 2001

The Context

Abkhazia, or Apsny as the Abkhaz call it, is situated on the Black Sea coast, in the north west corner of the South Caucasus. It is both geographically small and small in population: covering a territory less than the size of Scotland, its population was last recorded in the Soviet census of 1989 at just over 525,000, and has reduced significantly since then, though estimates of the current population vary. Once regarded as the 'Soviet Riviera', this region bears little resemblance to the relatively prosperous resort area and supplier of luxury products to the Soviet market it once was.

Ten years since the break-up of the Soviet Union, Abkhazia's political status remains unresolved: formerly an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the titular Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, it is now, following thirteen-months of armed conflict in 1992-3, de facto independent but unrecognised by the international community. Until recently, only very restricted movement of people and trade was possible across the border with the Russian Federation, since Russia introduced restrictions in 1994, and in 1996 implemented the CIS decision to introduce economic sanctions against Abkhazia. In response to worsening relations between Russia and Georgia over Chechnya, restrictions at the border were lifted somewhat in 1999, and today are less of an impediment to trade. Nevertheless, years of blockade served to exacerbate the precarious economic situation and the almost total collapse of infrastructure in Abkhazia, and contributed to increasing social tensions: with little access to information, severely restricted opportunities for work, and an insecure future, it is little wonder that the outflow of population from Abkhazia continues. The majority of pre-war inhabitants remain displaced: most of these are Georgians and Mingrelians who fled fearing recrimination at the end of the war.¹ Others include Russians, Armenians, Greeks, and Abkhaz, who have either moved away, or who migrate temporarily (mostly to the Russian Federation) in search of work, and the means to support family members who are left behind.

Despite the formal signing of a ceasefire by both sides in 1994, the situation remains fragile: sporadic clashes are mostly confined to the environs of the Inguri river, which demarcates the cease-fire line

between de facto Abkhazia and Georgia where a CIS peacekeeping force is stationed, under the observation of a small United Nations Military Observer Mission (UNOMIG). At times, most notably in May 1998, these clashes have threatened to lead to a resumption of hostilities. Negotiations continue, both on a bilateral level, and with mediation by the Russian Federation and the United Nations, and latterly also the involvement of the OSCE, and there have been some periods of constructive dialogue. As yet, however, no substantive progress has been made in reaching a political settlement, and the conflict is arguably becoming more entrenched.

There are evident vested interests within the political and economic elites of both Georgia and Abkhazia that find the status quo of this intractable conflict to their advantage. As is often the case, conflict, and the ensuing lack of law enforcement and systems of regulation, are proving to be lucrative for some. In addition, the complexity of the geopolitics surrounding the region makes it hard to predict positive developments in the direction of a resolution of the conflict. Much has already been written about US and European Union interests in a stable Caucasus, both in terms of a political buffer zone with Russia, and in terms of oil transit routes and transport corridors. Likewise, the neighbouring states of Turkey, Iran and Russia have their own interests. While its support of the Abkhaz during the war has often been exaggerated, it is indisputable that Russia's role is of particular significance: it is exerting its influence in Abkhazia as leverage over a 'near-abroad' perceived to be of vital strategic importance. Over the last year there has been a serious worsening of relations between Georgia and Russia, most visibly over Russian accusations that Georgia has been harbouring Chechen rebel fighters among the many refugees who have crossed the border. Subsequent restrictions in the Russian supply of gas to Georgia, and the imposition of visa requirements on Georgian citizens wishing to enter Russia have not been applied to de facto independent Abkhazia. This, coupled with Russia reneging on an agreement to withdraw from its military base in Gudauta in Abkhazia, has been received in Georgia as provocation.

Above all, though, negotiations have remained at a standstill because there is little common ground between the parties for a resolution of the two key issues of political status and the return of displaced persons. These issues lie at the root of the conflict, and are intimately linked to one another. The Abkhaz have reached a point where they are willing only to accept sovereignty in the form of a confederation with Georgia in which Abkhazia would be an equal partner, with the right to opt out and attain formal recognition as an independent state.

For Georgia, talk of Abkhaz sovereignty is out of the question. Instead, Georgia is prepared to accept Abkhaz autonomy within an asymmetric federation, which would leave no option for secession. At the same time, Georgia has stipulated that any resolution of the status issue should be conditional upon the safe return of people displaced by the conflict. The Abkhaz, on the other hand, demand that the political and legal status of Abkhazia be determined prior to any return of the displaced, and that security guarantees should be the first step in any discussion of the eventual return of large numbers of the pre-war population. As yet, there has been little evidence of sufficient sustained political will on either side seriously to engage in negotiation with a view to identifying potential areas of compromise as far as these fundamental positions are concerned.

The Soviet legacy

Underlying the positions are dynamics that stem from mutually contested views with regard to the legacy of the Soviet period, and fears for the preservation of language and cultural identity. The Georgian experience of the Soviet period was one of resistance to the imperial centre: Georgia resented attempts to increase the use of the Russian language in the republic, and maintained a relatively high degree of independence from Moscow, particularly in the later years of the Union. The Georgian independence movement expressed anti-Russian sentiment in no uncertain terms, and the Abkhaz, perceived by the Georgians to be close to Moscow, were seen by some as a 'potential fifth column allied with Muscovite colonialism'.² Some of the more vociferous exponents of Georgian nationalism went so far as to argue that the Abkhaz were relative newcomers to their territory, and to cast aspersions on the very existence of an Abkhaz language. While many would not have shared such views, it was noticeable in the late 1980s and early 1990s that few of the more liberal Georgian intelligentsia spoke out against the nationalist line, or expressed their recognition of Abkhaz concerns, a fact that seriously affected relations between the two cultural communities. The dominant tone of the Georgian independence movement promoted an independent unitary Georgian state with little room for the substantial minority populations that fell inside its boundaries. These boundaries were promptly endorsed by the international community when Georgia was recognised as an independent country within its former republican boundaries in 1992.

This goes some way to explaining the emphasis put by many Georgians at present on Russia as the key player in the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict, and the argument that the Abkhaz are pawns (willing or not) in the

Russian neo-imperialist game. The nationalist rhetoric has on the whole become less vehement. Nonetheless, there are still very powerful emotions involved in the idea of Abkhaz separatism, a scenario seen as tantamount to an attack by Russia on an already weak Georgian state.

Contemporary politics in Abkhazia are underscored by a concern for the survival of the Abkhaz people, their language and culture. The Abkhaz, like many other peoples of the former Soviet Union, are in the process of redefining their identity, and reassessing their history. They are dealing with a complex, and by no means unambiguous legacy from the Soviet period. As with others of the 'Small Peoples' of the Soviet Union, there were periods in which Abkhaz language and culture were promoted, and the literary history of Abkhazia in particular is intricately bound to the Soviet period. Yet the Abkhaz also have cause to resent a Soviet (and mostly Russian) centre that was manipulative of local identity. The Abkhaz perceive themselves to have been victims of a two-fold oppression by Tbilisi and Moscow: domination by the local titular nationality (Georgia) forced them into a position of relative collusion with the Soviet centre, with its russifying tendencies. The escalation of tensions between Georgians and Abkhaz in the 1980s, the outbreak of war with Georgia, and the experiences of the post-war years have all served to intensify Abkhaz fears, exacerbated by the Stalin period, of a concerted policy by the Georgians to assimilate them.

The question of demography is fundamental: Beria's resettlement programme in the 1940s dramatically altered the demographic balance, and a slow process of Georgian and Mingrelian in-migration, which continued post-Stalin, tipped the balance still further. As a result, Abkhaz numbered only 17.8% of the population of their titular ASSR in the last Soviet census of 1989, a fact drawn on by some Georgians in the post-Soviet struggle for power to discredit Abkhaz claims to autonomy. Closely linked to this was perceived economic discrimination against the Abkhaz population by the Georgian titular elite. Of arguably greater significance now, though, are Abkhaz memories of cultural oppression. In 1937 a commission led by the Georgian Party Secretary sanctioned the replacement of the Abkhaz script by one based on Georgian characters, the third script change since 1921. Soon after, in 1938, The Georgian Language for Abkhaz Schools was published to mark the introduction of compulsory Georgian language in schools. Under Akaki Mgeladze, Party Secretary in Sukhumi from 1944 to 1952, all schools where the language of instruction was Abkhaz were closed. Radio broadcasting and

publishing in Abkhaz was all but prohibited, and academic research on aspects of Abkhaz history and culture was restricted.

Many of these policies were rescinded under Khrushchev, yet tensions continued between the two communities, particularly with the growth of popular nationalist movements in both Georgia and Abkhazia in the 1980s. Relations finally came to breaking point in 1992 with the outbreak of war, and the ensuing destruction of a considerable proportion of Abkhazia's cultural heritage. Gia Karkarashvili, Georgian Minister of Defence, compounded Abkhaz fears when he threatened in a television broadcast that 'the Abkhaz nation will be left without descendants'.³

The years following the war have only served to compound the Abkhaz perception of themselves as a people under threat. The blockade and a relative lack of international attention to their plight have contributed to a feeling of isolation and vulnerability. While the Abkhaz have had few opportunities to present their case on the international stage, Georgia appears to have had widespread support in its position from Europe, the United States and the UN. The Friends of Georgia, a self-appointed group of representatives from France, the UK, the USA, Germany and Russia was set up to aid the UN Secretary General in the peace process. Even after it adopted the more neutral appellation Friends of the Secretary-General on Georgia and began to have more direct contact with the Abkhaz authorities, however, it continues to support the territorial integrity of Georgia, and is perceived as far from impartial by the Abkhaz. International organisations have also been viewed with suspicion: plans for development aid have tended to be contingent on political settlement involving compromise on the part of the Abkhaz, and Abkhazia has received relatively little financial aid in comparison with Georgia (the third largest recipient of US aid in the world in per capita terms in recent years).⁴ The UN's reputation for impartiality was damaged in November 1994 when, in spite of its key role as a mediator of the negotiations process, Boutros Boutros Ghali, then Secretary-General, accepted an honorary degree from Tbilisi University together with honorary membership of a Georgian Research Institute for International Affairs. While the Security Council itself has declined Georgian entreaties to condemn the Abkhaz for the 'ethnic cleansing' of the Georgian population of Abkhazia during the war, it has, on occasion, referred to an OSCE resolution which interprets the population changes as a result of the war in this way. Western governments have been more explicit in their condemnation of Abkhaz 'ethnic cleansing'.⁵ In 1999, Georgia was accepted into the Council of Europe, albeit on the basis of a number of conditions. In the light of

such events, and the perception of a persistent external threat, it is hardly surprising that some commentators speak of a siege mentality developing among the Abkhaz. The questions surrounding identity are fundamental in shaping current attitudes: without adequate security guarantees, the Abkhaz are unlikely to accept the return of significant numbers of displaced Georgians and Mingrelians for fear of again becoming a minority within their homeland.

Where now?

The 'Abkhaz question' has in some respects shifted out of the political limelight in present day Georgia. Yet the lack of resolution remains an obstacle to economic and ultimately political development in Georgia, hindering Georgian attempts to woo large-scale investment and to forge closer ties with European institutions and the US. And among the displaced population, the lack of a resolution is acutely felt. Many are still living in temporary accommodation, neither assimilated to a life in Georgia nor with much hope of return. For the population of Abkhazia, too, the lack of a resolution profoundly affects everyday lives: people are living in an environment of continuing instability, with minimal prospects for economic development, poor health care provision, and a struggling education system. The Abkhaz, whose passports are not recognised, are subject to severe restrictions in terms of travel abroad. In the meantime, institutions are being created and elections held, as the process of state building continues. The focus is, hardly surprisingly, on encouraging the strengthening of an Abkhaz ethnic identity, with increasing emphasis on Abkhaz language supremacy. This development is potentially one that contradicts the promotion of a sense of civic identity among the population of Abkhazia, which is made up of various ethnic communities, among whom are Armenians and Russians. What is likely, though, is that until a political resolution is reached which safeguards the expression of Abkhaz identity, the active promotion of that identity will remain a priority.

It seems unlikely, for the time being at least, that there will be another escalation into full-scale armed conflict. It also seems unlikely that there will be much of a shift in the geo-political balance. Hopes have been expressed for an increased commitment from Western Europe, but given recent experiences in the Balkans, it is improbable that the West would commit to any involvement significant enough to provide security guarantees, or sufficiently long-term to facilitate real change in the region. Possible changes in the leadership and government in Georgia or Abkhazia may signal a shift in the negotiation process, though the basic dynamic is likely to persist: the Abkhaz insist on their

separateness, while the Georgians stress points of similarity and warn that increasing links between Abkhazia and Russia will lead to the assimilation of the Abkhaz to a Russian identity. And until efforts are made by both sides to prepare their respective populations for the degree of compromise necessary to create a lasting peace, any settlement made at the political level would in any case prove difficult to implement. Next year will see the tenth anniversary of the outbreak of war between Georgia and Abkhazia. Meanwhile an entire generation is growing up for whom the 'other side' exists little outside of the realm of their parents' memories.

1. The question of Mingrelian identity is a sensitive one: most, if not all, Mingrelians consider themselves to be Georgian. Many do, however, speak Mingrelian, a language related to but distinct from Georgian. [Back](#)
2. Stephen F. Jones, 'Revolutions in Revolutions within Revolution', in Gitelman, ed., *The Politics of Nationality* (1992), p. 77. [Back](#)
3. Karkarashvili, BBC Summary of World Broadcasts, 27 August 1992, and UNPO report, Central Asian Survey, 12 (3), (1993), p. 338. [Back](#)
4. Anatol Lieven, *Georgia: A Failing State?*, Eurasia Insight, February 4, 2001. [Back](#)
5. For more detail see Bruno Coppieters, 'Western Security Policies and the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict', in Coppieters, Darchiashvili and Akaba eds., *Federal Practice: Exploring Alternatives for Georgia and Abkhazia* (2000), pp. 48–9. [Back](#)