

The Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict: Perception of its Origins and Prospects for its Resolution

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On-going since 1992, the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict poses numerous challenges to the security of Georgia and the Caucasus. Within Georgia, it destabilises the country with the continued presence of nearly 300,000 internally-displaced peoples. The stalemate also deprives Tbilisi not only of access to half of its Black Sea coast and one-ninth of its overall territory but also to valuable income from rich agricultural, forestry products and tourist income from what was the Soviet Riviera. The conflict is a constant reminder of the overall weakness of the Georgian central authorities and some public opinion polls show the Abkhazian situation to be the foremost issue for 90 percent of Georgians.

More broadly, the armed stand-off has implications for transportation and extraction of resources. The main railway linking Georgia to Russia runs through Abkhazia but has been cut since the conflict. When it operates at all, the line now runs strictly within the territory of Abkhazia. Similarly, the highway connecting Georgia and Armenia to Russia runs across Abkhazia and has been out of use since the war. In April 2000 Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze agreed with his Armenian counterpart to apply to the EU for funds to rebuild the Abkhaz part of the Yerevan-Tbilisi highway, despite the fact that Georgian access is denied.¹ The conflict also has ramifications for the establishment of oil pipelines in the region; given the agreement signed in the backdrop of the Istanbul OSCE meeting at the end of 1999, only a small share of the proposed new trans-Caucasian pipeline will run on Georgian territory, and it steers clear of Abkhazia. The conflict also poses broad questions about the future role and presence of the Russian military, or 'peacekeeping' forces in both Georgia and the Caucasus more widely. Internationally, the Georgian government has recently called for a 'Kosovo' style military intervention by NATO to restore Abkhazia to Tbilisi's control; in March 2000 the chairman of Georgia's Parliamentary Committee for Defence and Security even called for his country to wage a 'Chechen variant' war against Abkhazia if it did not re-enter Georgia on Tbilisi's terms.²

Any ability to advance, let alone solve, the violent Abkhaz-Georgian stalemate rests on the opposing interpretations of the war of 1992-93. Briefly stated, the primary obstacles to negotiations derive directly from the differing perceptions of the origins and course of the war. The Georgians insist that their co-ethnics who were displaced from Abkhazia in autumn 1993 and who have lived as refugees thereafter must be allowed to return in full. The Abkhaz, by contrast, assert that a political settlement is a precursor to the refugee question; therefore, the status of the *de facto* Abkhaz state needs at least to be acknowledged. Furthermore, the Abkhaz authorities insist that they be allowed to vet the returnees for 'war crimes' they have committed against the non-Georgian population of Abkhazia during 1992-93.

This stalemate itself, and the unsuccessful international efforts to resolve it, results from varying interpretations of the conflict. These concern the Abkhaz as 'secessionist', as waging a 'secessionist war'; as being 'Muslim'; the conflict being instigated by the Russian Federation; and the nature of the fighting between 1992 and 1993. In addition to shaping the Georgian and Abkhaz positions, all of these issues have also had a direct bearing on international perceptions and responses to

Abkhaz Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic to detach the Republic from Georgia and join the Russian Federation.³

In July 1992, the Abkhaz Parliament rescinded several decrees from Georgia. But this was done in the context of the unravelling of the Georgian state and nation-building efforts by the Georgian-nationalist leader Zviad Gamsakhurdia which resulted in the antagonism of Georgia's many non-Georgian peoples. Furthermore, from the Abkhaz perspective, having had existing laws abrogated by Tbilisi, the Abkhaz government was simply reverting to historical agreements with Georgia whereby each was a republic that entered into a confederal agreement with the other. While the legalities of this position can and should be argued, the Abkhaz position was and remains that the Abkhaz authorities were negotiating with Georgia for a new constitutional agreement. Abkhazia's current *de facto* Foreign Minister Sergei Schamba insists that he was involved in negotiations with the Georgian authorities about a confederal arrangement days in advance of the start of the fighting in August 1992.⁴ Even some Georgians concede that the Abkhaz were negotiating with Tbilisi at this time.⁵ Abkhazia's distinguished historian Stanislav Lakoba maintains that at no point has Abkhazia declared 'independence'. His statement seems to contradict other assertions. Nevertheless, if the Abkhaz were secessionist they were at least doing it peacefully, which brings us to the second issue of a secessionist 'war'.

The Abkhaz as waging a 'secessionist war'

While the Georgian inhabitants of Abkhazia feared that the minority Abkhaz, who constituted only 17.8% of the population, were engaging in discriminatory practices against them, the Abkhaz did not wage what can be called a secessionist war. This presumes that, in conjunction with a declaration of 'independence', the Abkhaz used force. This impression is given by Western reports that make statements such as 'when separatist Abkhaz forces clashed with Georgian government troops' or the Abkhaz 'doggedly fought for independence'.⁶

No one seems to dispute that soldiers of the Abkhaz Internal Affairs Ministry shot at and killed Georgian military forces in Abkhazia between 14 and 16 August 1992. And this act lends credence to the notion that the Abkhaz fought a secessionist war. Indeed, many representations suggest that the Abkhaz started this conflict. But if the Abkhaz declared independence from Georgia, they did so in advance of those clashes. In addition, the causes of this incident need context and clarification: the conflict between the Abkhaz and Georgian was prompted by an action taken by Georgian forces rather than one taken unilaterally by the Abkhaz in the pursuit of independence.

Instead, the events have their origins in the efforts of the Georgian government to secure a kidnapped cabinet minister of Shevardnadze's government (and his 11 aides) in Zugdidi, a city in western Georgia but, importantly, outside of Abkhazia. The central authorities, fearing further threats to their shaking grip, ordered 3,000 soldiers to search for the official. The band was commanded by Georgian Defence Minister Tengiz Kitovani. Without evidence, and explicitly against an agreement signed by the Georgian and Abkhaz administrations, Kitovani took the forces into Abkhazia. After the Abkhaz military response Kitovani's forces withdrew.

While this entry by Kitovani into Abkhazia was unofficial, a re-entry days later carried the support of Shevardnadze's government. Indeed, the Georgian leader attended rallies in Tbilisi in support of the action. The Georgian forces, now in

greater number and enjoying air and naval support, managed to force the Abkhaz to withdraw from Sukhumi.

In addition to having being presented as secessionist and as having waged a secessionist war, the Abkhaz are referred to as Muslims, and as such, were destined to have conflict with the Christian Georgians. Thus, Western observers refer to 'Muslim Abkhazia' seceding from Georgia,⁷ or how 'some 180,000 Turkic Muslims sought independence from Christian Georgians'.⁸ The latter comment is all the more strikingly inaccurate because it doubles the universally-agreed number of ethnic Abkhaz. To be sure, the Abkhaz share some ethno-linguistic connections with Muslim peoples of the Caucasus. But their stark misrepresentation in Western reportage is made all the more stark because Georgians do not tend to view the Abkhaz as Muslim. By their own official accounts, the Abkhaz view themselves as drawing on numerous traditions; their national symbols indicate a harmony between the various religions and ethnicities of the region. But the Western presumption and simplification of the Abkhaz as Muslim has doubtless helped to categorise them as a hostile population. This is made all the more so as the conflict is largely interpreted as a pawn of largely machinations in the Caucasus.

Russian involvement

The course of the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict also questions another conception about its origins, namely that it was largely or wholly inspired by Russia. To be sure, the Russian Federation appeared to be the winner from the conflict in the short-term. Unusually among the Soviet successor states, Shevardnadze had kept Georgia out of the Commonwealth of Independent States. As the Georgian presence in Abkhazia came under increasing strain from attacks by the Abkhaz and coalition, Shevardnadze personally asked the Yel'tsin government for assistance. Shevardnadze consequently brought Georgia into the CIS and consented to the continued stationing of Russian military forces in Abkhazia and Georgia and Russian use of military facilities in the country. (Russia agreed in late 1999 to the eventual closure of some of its bases in Abkhazia/Georgia.) In addition, as part of the eventual cease-fire negotiated between the Abkhaz and Georgian forces a Russian-led CIS peacekeeping force of between 2,000 and 3,000 troops was and remains positioned between the two sides.

If the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict was entirely Russian-inspired then Moscow has done exceedingly well. The evidence that Russia actually provoked the conflict, however, seems sketchy at best. Indeed, it seems fair to suggest that the Russian government would not only have had to be responsible for the Zugdidi kidnappings that provoked Kitovani's unauthorized entry into Abkhazia but also to be sure of the course of subsequent events. Regardless of whether Russia was capable of such a scenario, Western perceptions see the whole conflict of 1992-93 as, to cite one recent example, a 'Russian-backed war against Georgia'.⁹

International Perceptions of the Start and Conduct of the War

An added dimension for the conflict, and its possible resolution, is international perception of events in 1992 and 1993. Particularly frustrating, if not also emotionally disturbing for the Abkhaz, is the view adopted by the international community that the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict simply began in September 1993. By taking this starting date, the start of the conflict appears to be 250,000-300,000 Georgians being expelled from Abkhazia. The term 'ethnic cleansing' has been used against the Abkhaz for this period.¹⁰ According to this scenario, then, the Abkhaz

provoked a conflict, depopulated a territory on an ethnic basis, and still deny what is taken by the international community to be the right of hundreds of thousands to return to their homeland. These images are reinforced in the minds of international observers; UN participants in the Observer Mission in Georgia that monitors the cease-fire and tense border between Abkhazia and Georgia are flown over the refugee camps in Zugdidi as part of their induction course.

UN officials recall that the Abkhaz forces were successful in repelling the Georgians by breaking a cease-fire negotiated in the Russian city of Sochi on 27 July 1993. This act, while a tactical necessity for the Abkhaz coalition, is taken by outside observers in the way Shevardnadze intended: that they are people who break this word and resort to force. Thus, Shevardnadze claimed in a desperate telegram to Yel'tsin in September 1993, as the Abkhaz coalition's attack progressed, that the Georgians were 'deceived' and that he was left to pledge to fly to Sukhumi and defend it with his own 'bare hands'.¹¹

Major Western powers and the UN misunderstood the nature of the conflict when they established an initiative of major Western powers entitled Friends of Georgia. Its very name signalled to the Abkhaz that they were ignored, even illegitimate in the problem, that the international community sided clearly with one faction.

For the Abkhaz, this account of events is incorrect, and provides a major obstacle to resolution. For the Abkhaz, the conflict starting date of September 1993 is more than a selective treatment of history; it also neglects the quality of what they see as a war and an occupation waged against them. Subsequent UN efforts seem to have helped the Abkhaz somewhat, the Abkhaz *de facto* Foreign Minister stating, for example, that senior UN officials, are aware of the whole situation. Other Abkhaz officials, however, noted what was called a 'curiosity' that when senior UN representatives come to understand the Abkhaz side they are reshuffled to other UN missions.¹²

Apart from not having waged a secessionist war, the Abkhaz argue that a 'genocide' was waged against them and all non-Georgian peoples of Abkhazia. The evidence they draw from this includes that Jewish and Greek inhabitants of Abkhazia felt especially compelled to flee, a compunction born out by the documentable efforts of both Greece and Israel to evacuate their co-ethnics from the fighting. For the Abkhaz more specifically the war was conducted deliberately to obliterate the records of their history and culture and therefore of their national existence. The intended destruction, for example, of the Abkhaz National Archives by the Georgian National Guard and the machine-gunning of monuments are taken by the Abkhaz as genocide under standard definitions which include the specific targeting of cultural collections and artefacts. These types of acts have certainly been documented elsewhere.¹³ In addition, the Abkhaz cited statements by Georgian officials to demonstrate that the war, once underway, was converted into one waged to destroy the Abkhaz people and nation. These include Kitovani's charge that he would willingly 'sacrifice 100,000 Georgians to rid Georgia of the 97,000 Abkhaz'. Even if the conflict could be said to have started by accident due to Kitovani's unauthorised incursion into Abkhazia, Shevardnadze endorsed it thereafter. He also became directly involved in the Georgian war efforts, which included his participation in pro-war rallies in Tbilisi when the fighting began in August 1992 and his wartime trips to Abkhazia.

For their part, the Abkhaz generally maintain that Georgians could not have been harmed, let alone subject to 'ethnic cleansing' in August 1993 when the Abkhaz

forces and their allies managed, after a fourth attempt, to re-capture Sukhumi. As the coalition moved eastward, tens of thousands of Georgians fled. Indeed, Abkhaz who partook in that fighting contend that the Georgians fled a day-and-a-half in advance of the Abkhaz approach. The head of Abkhazia National Commission for Human Rights insists that Georgians were not harmed and stressed that a 'manual' for the just conduct of war was distributed to Abkhaz forces in advance. When pressed, he consented that in war, people can be killed and injured.¹⁴ In may be best to agree that they were 'autrocities on both sides'.¹⁵

Rather than attempting to make a moral claim here, what remains relevant for both the origins and resolution of the conflict is perception of wrong-doing. It is to the aspects of the origins of the conflict and their relation to advancing the resolution of the conflict that the last section turns.

Conflict and Conflict Resolution

The Abkhaz are unlikely to be sympathetic to negotiations that do not recognise crimes against them and which squarely and exclusively place blame and injustice on them.

To be sure, the Abkhaz, as any negotiating party, need some flexibility in their position. Reintegration, even as a republic, into Georgia seems impossible in any form. But a confederal system has equally not been ruled out and has in fact been referred to in some of the mediations between Sukhumi and Tbilisi (although Abkhaz tend to argue that only independence is possible and that, having negotiated for a confederal system with Georgia before August 1992 it would be counterproductive to opt for that now). But the Abkhaz authorities will need a position that is intelligible to potential mediating parties and which does not cause a problem at home. After all, from limited discussions and readings, the Abkhaz population appear to believe that their government's position is unambiguously for independence, a position which the Abkhaz people themselves also want. Anything short of that on the negotiating table may undercut the hand of the Abkhaz authorities at home. But without modification, negotiations with the Georgian government appear impossible.

For Tbilisi, the costs of a stalemate with Abkhazia are not necessarily prohibitive but will certainly remain high. While the loss of Abkhazia pains both the population and the Shevardnadze government, both engage in cognitive dissonance. From the national currency to bus shelter advertisements, the map of Georgia is shown as including Abkhazia. New highway signs across Georgia give the distance to Sukhumi, even though a Georgian would never be able to drive into Abkhazia.

The refugee crisis, however, remains a tangible reminder for Tbilisi. The expellees from Abkhazia are well-organised; their spokesmen vocal. Refugees occupy some of the most prominent buildings in Tbilisi, and draw vast resources from the Georgian state; when payments were halted, refugees protested.

For the Abkhaz authorities repatriation remains a possibility. As journalist Neal Ascherson observed, post-1993 Abkhazia initially appeared similar to Cambodia, 'natural territory for "Pol-Pottery"', where rural, nationalistic Abkhaz values would be imposed ruthlessly on all. But he found that that was not the case; rather the Abkhaz authorities acknowledge the 'diversity of Abkhazia, and have no intentions

of forcing a single culture on its peoples'. Furthermore, there is an insistence that all cultures, including Georgian, would be developed.¹⁶ One is struck, driving along the road from the Inguri river border-crossing to Sukhumi how few indications of a nascent state, let alone nation-state, there are.

Nevertheless, for at least two reasons there must be appreciation of the Abkhaz fear of a return of refugees. First, some would genuinely have been involved in the war against the Abkhaz in 1992–93; second, the Abkhaz are too fearful of the demographic significance of a repatriation of most or all of the 300,000 refugees. The Abkhaz would lose their numerical superiority which they have regained after 100 years of what they see as 'colonisation' by Georgians.¹⁷

A partial resolution involves gradual return of the refugees, of greater numbers than as been achieved previously, subject to fair vetting by the Abkhaz, and probably under international supervision. This aim, however, remains inconceivable without Abkhaz concerns being taken into consideration by the international community and a modification of the international view that the Abkhaz are the sole instigators and propagators of the conflict. Objective benefits to resolving the conflict are great. But the contrasting interpretations of the origins of the conflict remain the greatest obstacle to its resolution.

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ENDNOTES

¹ *Jamestown Monitor*, 4 April 2000.

² In an apparent change in policy, Georgian Presidential adviser Levan Aleksidze said that 'Georgia will not launch hostilities' against Abkhazia 'because the international community may respond with force as it did in Bosnia'. *RFE/RL Newslines* (Vol 4, No 44, Part I, 2 March 2000).

³ Elizabeth Fuller, 'Abkhazia on the brink of Civil War', *RFE/RL Research Report* (Vol 1, No 35, 4 September 1992), esp p1; and 'New Abkhaz campaign for Secession from the Georgian SSR', *Report on the USSR* (No 14, 1989).

⁴ Interview with Foreign Minister Sergei Shamba, 6 September 1999.

⁵ Georgii Anchabadze, "Popytki neitralizatsii gruzino-abkhazskogo konflikta metodami narodnoy diplomatii," in Paula Garba (ed) *Rol' Neofitsial'noy Diplomatii v Mirotvorcheskom Protssesse* (Irvine: University of California, 1999) p28–9.

⁶ See, for example, *Strategic Survey, 1993–1994* (London: IISS, 1994), p91.

⁷ Jennifer Gould, *Vodka, Tears and Lenin's Angel* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1997), p68.

⁸ Gerald Segal, *The World Affairs Companion* (fifth edn, London: Simon & Schuster, 1996), p163. On religion generally, see Rachel Clogg, 'Religion' in George Hewitt (ed), *The Abkhazians: A Handbook* (London: Curzon Press, 1999).

⁹ *The Economist*, 9 October 1999, p28.

¹⁰ Henry R Huttenbach, 'Post-Socialist Crisis and Disorder in Transcaucasia', in Vladimir Tismaneanu (ed), *Political Culture and Civil Society in Russia and the New States of Eurasia* (New York: M E Sharpe, 1994), p359.

¹¹ As reported in ITAR-TASS, 16 September 1993.

¹² Various interviews, September 1993.

¹³ Ascherson, *Black Sea* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1995), p253–54; *Abkhazia, 1992–93* (Moskva: MAX, 1995).

¹⁴ Interview, 7 September 1999.

¹⁵ Ascherson, *Black Sea*, p247.

¹⁶ *Ibid*, p254-5. For a series of different views on the conflict and its resolution, including both Abkhaz and Georgian, see Jonathan Cohen (ed), *The Georgia-Abkhazia Peace Process, Accord* (issue 7, 1999).

¹⁷ The Abkhaz refer to the following statistics to show the increase of Georgians in their Republic, a process that is interpreted as undertaken deliberately by Stalin and Beria to achieve the 'forced Georgianization of Abkhazia'. S M Shamba "K Voprosu O Pravovom, Istoricheskom I Moral'nom Obosnovanii Prava Abkhazii Na Nezavisimost" (nash otvet L A Aleksidze) (mimeo) and Y N Voronov, *Abkhazians: Who Are They?* (Sukhum: Abkhazian State University, 1999, p19-20).

Year	1886	1897	1926	1939	1959	1970	1989
Abkhazians	58,963	58,697	55,918	56,197	61,193	83,097	93,267
Georgians	4,166	25,875	67,494	91,967	158,221	213,322	239,872
Russians	971	5,135	20,456	60,201	86,715	79,730	74,913
Armenians	1,049	6,552	30,048	49,705	64,400	73,000	75,541
Greeks	2,149	5,393	27,085	34,621	9,111	13,600	14,664

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