Displaced people from Abkhazia demonstrate in Tbilisi, 1998

Georgian perspectives

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The Georgian government contends that Abkhazia is legally part of Georgia and has autonomous status within it. This position is in part grounded on Georgian acceptance of the legality of the Soviet constitution under which the Abkhaz ASSR was part of the Georgian SSR. As one of the successor states of the USSR Georgia, as defined by its Soviet borders, was recognized by the international community. While this legal reality defines the international perception of the conflict, it is not sufficient for the parties as neither fully accepted the legitimacy of the Soviet institutional structure. The current Georgian state derives its legitimacy from the independent Georgian Democratic Republic of 1918–21 that was recognized by a number of Western powers and Communist Russia. Abkhazia was part of that state with the 1921 Georgian Constitution providing for its autonomous status. In 1991 Georgian independence was restored rather than instituted anew because the 1921 annexation by Communist Russia is considered by Georgians to be an act of military aggression. This is important because Abkhaz claims to independence are partly based on the idea that the status of Abkhazia within Georgia was the result of an arbitrary decision made in 1931 by Joseph Stalin, an ethnic Georgian, and hence could be regarded as an act of Georgian aggression. Georgians insist that Abkhazia was never completely separate from Georgia in Soviet times (accepting that the 1931 decision was a demotion for Abkhazia) and that since all changes in Abkhazia's status and ethnic demography were implemented by a foreign occupying power Georgia cannot therefore be held responsible for them.

Georgia justified its deployment of troops in Abkhazia in August 1992 by the need to guard communications links in the conflict between the new Shevardnadze


ABKHAZIA
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Source: Peter Nasmyth

government and supporters of the recently ousted President Gamsakhurdia. It argues that attempts by aggressive Abkhaz separatists' to disrupt this operation provoked the war but as political conflict with Sukhumi already existed it is reasonable to assume that when Georgian troops entered Abkhazia they were intent on 'solving' the Abkhaz question. Formally, the Georgian assessment of the episode has not changed but Georgian leaders, including President Shevardnadze, have recently admitted partial responsibility for the war. The lion's share of blame is, however, apportioned to Tengiz Kitovani, then leader of the National Guard. His actions in Abkhazia allegedly defied the political authorities and forced Shevardnadze to accept the war as a fait accompli.

Although the Georgian government does not recognize the Ardzinba government because of the conflict and the ethnic cleansing that removed almost all ethnic Georgians from Abkhazia, it acknowledges that Ardzinba is the only possible interlocutor at the negotiation table. Of the two major issues to be negotiated – the political status of Abkhazia and the return of the refugees – Georgia gives priority to the latter.

The refugee issue

The return of the refugees is the more pressing issue. Their ongoing suffering represents a potentially destabilizing factor for Georgia. While Georgian and Abkhaz positions on status are far apart, the return of refugees, at least to the Gali region, seems a realistic goal. There is also an obvious strategic consideration. If all or most of the refugees return they will outnumber the Abkhaz, and the secessionist government will have even less legitimacy to speak on behalf of the whole population of Abkhazia when the question of status is decided. This is precisely why the Sukhumi government is so reluctant to accept the refugees. The prospect of mass return also plays on

Boy with Georgian flag in Tbilisi, 1989

Abkhaz fears for their cultural and economic security, especially beyond the Gali region, where the pre-war population had been mixed and bitter memories of brutal fighting makes future cohabitation especially problematic. The Georgian government insists that adequate security guarantees be provided for the returnees and the hostilities of May 1998 emphasize the need for this. In practice, forces other than Abkhaz will have to provide security, but to date the Abkhaz find this unacceptable. The decision of Ardzinba's government to start the return of refugees to the Gali region unilaterally from 1 March 1999 was dismissed by the Georgian government as propaganda. To date most refugees have not taken up the offer of return because of inadequate security guarantees, continued harassment by the Abkhaz militia and a reluctance to take up Abkhaz citizenship.

The status issue

Georgia's major concession regarding status has been to accept a federal solution. Although details may vary as negotiations proceed Georgia's bottom line proposal is that Abkhazia should have autonomous rights within a (probably asymmetrical) federal framework while retaining the major governmental functions which are held by the centre in most federations. This is contrary to Abkhaz proposals to have a federation (or confederation) so loose that it makes the idea of a common state meaningless for Georgians. However, no substantive discussion has ever taken place (at least not publicly) on the kind of federal (or confederal) solution that could be applied. This may be due to a lack of political will to change the situation or a belief that playing with terms like 'federation' or 'confederation' will result in an advantage over time.

Military and economic pressures

In the wake of the war the Georgian leadership has repeatedly expressed its commitment to a peaceful, negotiated solution which it has pursued through talks mediated by the UN and Russia, as well as through bilateral talks. Despite Shevardnadze's having said he does not rule out force in the event of political failure, a meeting between Shevardnadze and Ardzinba in Tbilisi in August 1997 resulted in a pledge not to use force, since when the Georgian government has refrained from any new threat of force. Nevertheless, in southern Abkhazia a Georgian guerrilla movement has developed. Despite consistent accusations that the Georgian government backs the guerrillas, both the government and guerrilla representatives deny any connection. The government has not condemned the guerrillas, rather it says their activities are the legitimate response of desperate people. As a result of the events in May 1998 and subsequent negotiations between August and October of that year, the Georgian government accepted a more active role in 'fighting terrorism' in Abkhazia. Some commentators saw this as an indirect recognition of their past support for the guerrilla movement. Frequent criticism of the Georgian government for 'persecuting Georgian partisans', voiced by advocates of a tougher line, however, suggests that the Georgian government is no longer using the partisans to gain political advantage.

Whatever the real involvement of the Georgian government with the guerrilla movement, it seems clear that a new military campaign is not considered an option for the foreseeable future. It is widely understood that a new war would undermine Georgia's prospects for economic development and have dire consequences for the country's international standing, especially in the aftermath of accession to the Council of Europe. With no military option, economic pressure and international isolation of the Sukhumi government are the major levers at Georgia's disposal. The Georgian government demands the maintenance of the economic sanctions against Abkhazia instituted by the CIS at Georgian insistence. Some voices in Georgia oppose these sanctions saying that government should not cause deprivation among its own citizens. The authorities appear to be open to the idea of lifting them – but only in response to concessions from the Abkhaz side on the refugee issue. In order to reach such a deal (to which the parties were reportedly close in October 1998) Georgia would not only use economic sanctions as a stick but also add co-operative economic projects as a carrot.

The Russian role

Georgian–Russian relations constitute the most controversial part of the problem. Nobody in Georgia doubts that Russia helped the Abkhaz during the war and continues to use the conflict as a lever to influence Georgia. Russia's central role as a mediator is easily construed as damaging to Georgian interests. At the same time, the government believes that to exclude Russia from the conflict resolution process would be counter-productive as Russia still has the resources to destabilize Georgia either by opting for more open support for the Abkhaz or by meddling in other regions of the country.

From late 1993 until early 1995 there was a rapprochement with Russia. Georgia clearly hoped to reach a deal whereby it accepted Russia's military strategic domination, the long-term maintenance of its military bases in Georgia and its role as prime mediator in return for help in regaining Abkhazia. Although Russia never formally undertook this obligation, assurances were reportedly made. The Georgian side implied this in spelling out that an agreement on military bases would come into force only after Georgia regained jurisdiction over Abkhazia.

From Georgia's perspective, Russia failed to fulfil its part of the bargain. From 1995 Georgian policy therefore began to change. While not openly renouncing the 'strategic partnership' nor initially asking for peacekeepers or military bases to leave, Georgia started to use their uncertain status to pressure Russia to support and implement economic sanctions against Abkhazia. The Georgian government began pursuing a strategy to increase international, in particular Western, involvement in the conflict and replace the Russian peacekeepers, in whom they have no trust, with an international force. In 1997 Shevardnadze spoke in favour of using the 'Bosnian model' for settling the conflict. He proposed seeking Security Council legitimization for the use of force to achieve a peace settlement, as in Bosnia, but not that Georgia and Abkhazia should form two separate entities united in a 'Bosnian way'.

Other mediators

The UN is another outside actor involved in mediation and is represented in the region by a military observer mission (UNOMIG) as well as a Special Representative of the Secretary-General. Initially, the Georgian government entertained considerable hopes that the UN would play a decisive role in the conflict settlement; its failure to do so has invited sharp criticism. This failure can be explained by, on the one hand, Russia's reluctance to give up its leading role in the conflict and, on the other, by insufficient interest from the major Western powers. As this interest increased, a Friends of Georgia group comprising the USA, the UK, Germany, France and Russia was created but its attempt to change the format of negotiations by taking on a central role for itself was crushed by the obvious Abkhaz and less obvious Russian opposition. More recently other regional countries (Turkey and Greece) have proposed that they play a more active mediating role in co-operation with the UN. While these initiatives have failed to bring substantial change, they are welcomed by the Georgian government as a way of balancing Russia's dominating role in the conflict and increasing the chances of a settlement in the long run.

Retaining commitment to Abkhazia

Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of the official Georgian position, it is often asked how strong Georgia's commitment is to Abkhazia. With the war lost and the chances of regaining the territory by political or military means at best uncertain, why does Georgia not simply accept secession or a face-saving deal providing for a legal fiction of a 'common state' without any effective Georgian sovereignty? There are several reasons for Georgian persistence.

Probably the most basic reason for Georgian persistence is the way Georgians imagine themselves as a nation. A nation defines itself, against a backdrop of historical experiences and political opportunities, by the idea of 'country' which individuals collectively hold and by the kind of recognition they expect from the 'world'.

Once constructed and translated into political action, such 'national projects' display amazing persistence: they may be negotiated on the margins, but rarely changed in essence. The way Georgians and Abkhaz constructed their national projects in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries clashed. On the demise of the Soviet Union this made conflict, though not necessarily bloodshed, inevitable. Georgians overwhelmingly consider Abkhazia to be a legitimate part of their country and attempts to cut it off are linked to a (neo-) imperial Russian conspiracy, just as Abkhaz consider this Georgian position an expression of 'Georgian imperialism'.

The Abkhaz are not the only, or even the largest, ethnic minority in Georgia. At the fall of the Soviet Union there were more Armenians, Azeris, Russians and Ossetians in Georgia than Abkhaz. Compact pockets of mainly Armenians and Azeris live on the borders with Armenia and Azerbaijan respectively, while in Adjaria the majority of the population is ethnic Georgian of Muslim background. If the Georgian state were to accept the legitimacy of Abkhazia's secession on ethnic grounds the precedent might lead to further disintegration, jeopardizing the viability of the Georgian state, which has already proved weak and vulnerable in its first years of independence.

Many Georgians consider the launching of the war in Abkhazia in 1992 to have been a mistake, and some of them are ashamed of the way Georgian troops (or the unruly militias which fought in the name of the Georgian state) behaved there. But few Georgians, however liberal minded, believe that the Abkhaz cause per se is more just; that the Abkhaz strategy of changing the ethnic demography of Abkhazia by purging Georgians is acceptable; or that Georgians do not have the right to defend what they believe to be their territory. Even those prepared to accept the secession of Abkhazia would do so on pragmatic grounds ('we have lost the war and should accept the consequences') rather than on moral grounds ('the Abkhaz are right and we have to accept this').

There are strong pragmatic reasons for continuing the status quo. Far-reaching and humiliating concessions to the Abkhaz would be extremely unpopular and endanger political stability in Georgia. Opinion polls show that although giving up Abkhazia would be unpopular, and the vast majority of refugees insist on returning, most people consider the economy to be the most urgent issue. This may suggest that the commitment to Abkhazia is not strong, but also that it is possible to live without a final settlement of the Abkhaz issue.

Georgians will only accept fundamental concessions if the alternative is demonstrably disastrous. But it is not absolutely clear in whose favour time is working. On the one hand, the longer Abkhazia stays effectively independent, the more the current status quo will become entrenched and the more Georgian refugees will die, settle elsewhere in Georgia, or give up hope of return. On the other hand, the government can argue that its 'no peace, no war' strategy is working. Owing to international isolation and uncertain prospects for the future, the situation in Abkhazia is steadily deteriorating, and will continue to do so, while Georgia recovers and continues to develop, as political stabilization and economic growth rates appear to confirm. Western influence is growing in the region at the expense of Russian domination. This suggests that the balance of forces will change in Georgia's favour. If this trend is realized the trauma of the war could lose its psychological power, and being part of Georgia again instead of an isolated territory with no prospects could be increasingly attractive to the Abkhaz public. At some point, according to this reasoning, the Abkhaz leadership will have to accept a compromise.

International experience confirms both parties in their current tactics. The lesson of Yugoslavia is that nothing happens until the USA becomes involved. At this point the leaders on both sides will realize that the political costs of failure to reach a settlement are greater than those of making unpopular concessions. Until then, it pays to persist with current policy, not to take premature steps towards the other party, to improve your negotiating position (also by military means if it is opportune), to look for more allies and to promote your cause in the West. The final settlement will depend less on ideas of fairness or on international law than on the durability of the ceasefire line and the midway-point between the demands of the parties.

Prospects for change

Unless there are dramatic changes in the international environment there is little likelihood that Georgia's official position will change in the foreseeable future. But strong pressures from within may have an impact.

The refugee community loses most from the 'no peace, no war' policy and is the source of calls for a tougher line. Tamaz Nadareishvili, chairman of the 'government-in-exile' and the most prominent representative of the refugee population, criticizes the government's commitment to the negotiations process and openly calls for a military solution, strongly supporting the guerrilla movement. He and other leaders of the refugee community are outspoken in calling for the immediate withdrawal of the CISPKF. However, not all refugees trust Nadareishvili and the refugee community has fragmented, possibly diminishing its political clout. But there is no politically active refugee organization espousing a conciliatory stance, which casts a pall over political debates in Georgia.

While many Georgians would accept a military solution as legitimate, the idea of starting a new war in the absence of a real army is hardly popular. Because of this, Nadareishvili was compelled to invent a vague slogan of returning to Abkhazia – 'not through war, but by force'. Some nationalist parties may lean towards a military solution, but it is too unpopular to become a central issue. Periodically, refugees organize protests either in Tbilisi or Zugdidi, but they are unable to push the Georgian government beyond its general position.

Alternative proposals

While the government is widely criticized for the failure of its Abkhaz policy, hardly any serious alternative proposals have been put forward that are likely to prove acceptable. Ivlian Khaindrava's Republican Party published a proposal for the territorial division of Abkhazia in 1997, but it was not met with enthusiasm on either side. A number of meetings between NGOs have facilitated the exchange of information, provided forums for dialogue and created personal contacts useful for confidence building in the long term, but no alternative plans for resolving the conflict have emerged.

The most encouraging recent sign may be the more active direct negotiations between Georgian and Abkhaz leaders. Intense exchanges between Tbilisi and Sukhumi and a series of reciprocal visits by high-level officials Lordkipanidze and Bagapsh from August to October 1998 brought expectations of a breakthrough on the return of refugees. The agreement fell through over the failure to resolve the issue of security guarantees for the returnees. However, this was probably the first instance when the sides negotiated in earnest instead of pretending to negotiate while seeking a deal with the allegedly omnipotent Russians. While those expecting a breakthrough have been bitterly disappointed, both sides may have found a genuine common interest in not being dragged into a new war (the disaster of May 1998 showed how possible this is). Now that the illusion of the 'Russian solution' seems to have faded away and while other powerful players (like NATO) drag their feet, the parties may learn how to manage, if not solve, the conflict themselves.