

# An Abkhaz perspective

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**T**he negotiations between Georgia and Abkhazia that have been under way since 1993 have failed to resolve the differences between them and left relations frozen in a condition of 'neither war nor peace'. Indeed, Abkhazia and Georgia now seem further away from political agreement than in April 1994 when the Declaration on Measures for a Political Settlement of the Georgian–Abkhaz Conflict and its appendix the Quadripartite Agreement were signed.

Negotiations have been primarily about the settlement of state and legal relations between Abkhazia and Georgia and the return of Georgian refugees to Abkhazia. On the first issue, the principles underlying the positions are diametrically opposed. Georgians consider Abkhazia to be an inalienable part of Georgia with at most the status of an autonomous republic. From the Georgian perspective any other arrangement might lead to further disintegration of the Georgian state, which is already troubled by its lack of control over Adjara and Javakheti, not to mention South Ossetia. The Abkhaz argue that, as Abkhazia was forcibly incorporated into Georgia by Stalin's regime in 1931, the collapse of the USSR and the subsequent unilateral annulment by Georgia of legal measures joining the two countries in one republic merely confirmed Abkhazia's legal and moral right to independence. Furthermore, Abkhaz claim that the war unleashed by Georgia in 1992 has resulted in de facto independence. From the outset of the conflict the Georgian side pronounced the inviolability of the territorial integrity of the former Soviet Republic of Georgia and the inadmissibility of any internal reorganization of Georgia on federal principles. The Abkhaz representatives did not set out their position so unequivocally. The lack of clarity over whether Abkhazia has been seeking independence or confederal relations



ЧИТАЙТЕ  
ГОЗЕТУ  
РЕСПУБЛИКА  
АБХАЗИЯ

МНОГО КОРРЕКТ  
ГОТОВ  
ИНТЕРЕСНО

КНОСК ГАЗЕТЫ  
РЕСПУБЛИКА АБХАЗИИ



with Georgia is a consequence of constant pressure, including the threat of force, exerted throughout the negotiation process by the West and Russia. The majority of UN Security Council Resolutions have been openly pro-Georgian. This reflects the bias inherent in the negotiation process conducted under the auspices of the UN to which Georgia belongs and Abkhazia does not. In December 1994 Russia introduced restrictions at the Russian–Abkhaz border under the pretext of its military action in Chechnya and in January 1996 implemented the CIS decision to introduce economic sanctions against Abkhazia at Georgian insistence. Pressure on Abkhazia increased further with the creation of the Group of Friends of Georgia, comprising the USA, the UK, Germany, France and Russia. The ambassadors of the ‘Friends’ have actively joined the negotiation process, especially since 1997. As a result they are now better informed about Abkhazia and its demands, but this has not in itself contributed to any significant change in the substance of the negotiations.

## Seeking compromise

Forced to consider compromise formulations accommodating both Abkhazia’s sovereignty and the international community’s demand for the observance of territorial integrity, Abkhazia has looked for a model within the framework of one entity. However, Abkhazia has insisted that negotiations be about the reconstruction of state and legal relations between the two republics rather than the political status of Abkhazia within Georgia. The Abkhaz argue that this compromise was accepted by Georgia, initially in a draft proposal prepared by UN Special Envoy Eduard Brunner in Geneva in April 1994 (although Georgia did not sign this) and then in the joint Declaration on Measures for a Political Settlement which Georgia did sign. The compromise was confirmed by UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali who stated in his report of 3 May 1994 that ‘efforts are being made to find a solution within which Abkhazia would be a subject with sovereign rights within the framework of a union State to be established as a result of negotiations’. The joint Declaration stated that the parties had reached a ‘mutual understanding regarding powers for joint action’ in the fields of foreign policy and foreign economic ties, border guard and customs arrangements, transport and communications, ecology, energy and insuring human and civic rights. From the Abkhaz perspective this model of relations, based on mutually delegated competencies and the equal rights of subjects within the union state, could have served as the basis for a treaty. That it did not was underlined in July 1997 when a draft protocol detailing the procedures regulating legal relations between the parties was prepared through Russian mediation. The Georgians refused to sign at the last minute. They considered themselves to be the central authority of the union state with authority to delegate

responsibilities to Abkhazia, while in the Declaration and in the Abkhaz view, authority within the union state should be derived from two equal subjects leading to the mutual delegation of competencies to the union state. Georgia has since advocated a federal model that differs little from the pre-war period.

This climate is not conducive to constructive negotiations and inevitably the parties have adopted different strategies. Georgia constantly attempts to use its fluctuating relationship with Russia to exert pressure on Abkhazia to become more accommodating. For example, a precondition for the continued presence of Russian military bases in Georgia is the reintegration of Abkhazia into Georgia. Furthermore, Georgia plays Russia against the West by advocating the replacement of the CISPKF with an international force, while also advocating that the CISPKF mandate be widened to include police functions to secure the mass return of refugees. The prospective oil pipeline from Baku, the undesirable precedent which secession in Abkhazia would set for the Russian Federation, and the insistence on the return of the refugees before the issue of political status can be addressed are other levers used by Georgia.

Abkhazia has much less room for manoeuvre. The Abkhaz are accused by Georgia and the West of a pro-Russian orientation, but their increasing reliance on Russia is a direct consequence of the Georgian-instigated, Russian-imposed blockade. However, despite the isolation it causes, the incomplete nature of the blockade means that Russia is the only realistic route for external travel and the best option for trade, regardless of whether or not this is a preference. The Abkhaz do not want this isolation, but neither do they want to be integrated into the international community through Tbilisi.

The Abkhaz have few illusions about Russia whose strategic interests in the region militate against recognizing Abkhaz independence, which would mean the loss of Georgia and the creation of a precedent for its own federal subjects, above all with regard to Chechnya. However, recognition of Abkhaz sovereignty within the framework of Georgia provides Russia with a lever to influence both republics. Transferring the initiative exclusively to Georgia – in other words, to the West – is not in Russia’s interests either. The status quo is therefore convenient. Furthermore, any decisive Russian moves against Abkhazia could destabilize the situation in the North Caucasus thereby renewing the threat to the territorial integrity of Russia itself.

## Negotiations going nowhere

For the last five years Georgian–Abkhaz negotiations have reflected the struggle between Russia and the West for spheres of influence over the perimeter of the Eurasian corridor. Declarations by both mediators that the conflicting parties should engage in direct dialogue and that only the parties themselves can decide the shape of their relations can hardly be taken at face value given the geopolitical context.

Nevertheless, there have been negotiations and increased direct contact between the parties, particularly at a high level, as well as between representatives of civil society. But while direct contact, including between the presidents and their envoys, has improved dialogue within limited confines it has not led to meaningful progress. Meetings also arise out of the practicalities of living in a conflict zone and the need to address issues concerning cross-border trade or security and the exchange of hostages. These contacts occur mostly in the Gal region between the Gal population and people from neighbouring villages, and between heads of village and town administrations, on either side of the Ingur River.

More structured meetings, often characterized by the involvement of NGOs seeking dialogue as an alternative to war, have been held under the banner of long-term confidence building. The UN has also tried to engage the two communities in confidence building, especially in meetings held in Athens in October 1998 and Istanbul in June 1999 but no NGO representatives with experience in civic peace initiatives were invited. The meetings did not result in any reconciliatory moves and were in fact a pretext to bring the chief negotiators together in an informal environment. Abkhaz society believes that this absence of progress reflects the lack of confidence in the UN caused by the perceived bias it shows to Georgia, a member state. UN-supported confidence building is more likely to succeed through the implementation of agreements that have already been signed, particularly under the UN's aegis, rather than through such meetings.

Deadlock between the parties over issues of status and return in the first years of negotiations challenged the mediators to look for agreement in other spheres. The creation in November 1997 of a Co-ordination Council within the framework of the Geneva Process, and a UN Needs Assessment Mission to Abkhazia in February 1998 to evaluate the economic situation, created the temporary illusion of a breakthrough. However, Georgian reluctance to have the mission report acted upon revealed yet another impasse. It became clear that the international community regards economic and even humanitarian aid to Abkhazia as directly dependent on progress towards a political settlement within the framework of a Georgian

state. But the use of economic development by Georgia and the Western negotiators as an inducement to Abkhazia to integrate into the Georgian economy would be a compromise too far for Abkhazia. Russia's continuing policy of sanctions against Abkhazia serves only to highlight the lack of alternatives.

Not expecting Abkhazia to compromise in exchange for economic assistance, from early 1998 President Shevardnadze began to refer to the 'Bosnian model' of settlement and demanded a change in the nature of the peacekeeping operation, arguing that peace through coercion could achieve the conditions for the safe return of Georgian refugees to Abkhazia. However, peace based on such coercion would not be sustainable.

## The refugee dilemma

Analysis of the roles of the UN and OSCE and the nature of UN Security Council Resolutions reveals a markedly tougher stance with regard to Abkhazia than to other conflict and refugee situations in the Caucasus. For example, the Security Council expressed at most serious concern about the demographic changes in Nagorno-Karabakh, while demanding of Abkhazia the return of refugees with no prior conditions and before the differences which had provoked the conflict were resolved. The Security Council stressed the unacceptability of linking the process of the return of refugees to a political settlement, whereas they have not exerted similar pressure on the Armenians over Karabakh.

For the Georgian leadership the return of the refugees is above all a political question. A long-term policy of Georgianization resulted in Georgians constituting the largest ethnic group of Abkhazia's pre-war multinational population. With the departure from the Georgian – occupied territories of the Greek and Jewish populations during the war and the economic migration of some Russians, Armenians and Abkhaz, mainly to Russia and Armenia, the mass return of Georgian refugees alone would create a demographic situation clearly favouring Georgia. After its recent defeat in the war Tbilisi has no confidence in its ability to resolve the 'Abkhaz problem' on its own and is trying to use the Georgian population from Abkhazia, under the cover of international organizations, as an instrument for forcing a resolution of the conflict in its favour. This strategy lies behind the revived proposal to expand the Security Zone beyond the Gal region and give the peacekeeping forces police functions. Many in Abkhazia believe this would simply create a larger area of instability and further embroil the peacekeepers in conflict since it is in the Security Zone that the Georgian guerrillas are most active.

In Abkhazia the Georgian refugees are generally distrusted. Those who fought with or supported the Georgian forces are often regarded as traitors. In these circumstances Abkhaz society could only countenance the return of Georgians who did not fight on the Georgian side once Abkhazia receives recognition as an independent state. Given the history of Georgian–Abkhaz relations only international recognition would convince Abkhaz society that the return of the refugees would not represent a threat to its security. What is more, the Abkhaz believe that descendants of Abkhaz refugees from the nineteenth century Caucasian War now living mostly in Turkey, should be allowed an equal right to return, whereas Russian sanctions ban the entry into Abkhazia of foreign citizens.

While the humanitarian plight of the refugees is a factor that looms over the negotiation process, those who claim to represent them play a negative role. The Georgian government does not formally support the ‘government-in-exile’ (the ethnic Georgian former members of the government and parliament of Abkhazia, now mainly based in Tbilisi and Zugdidi and linked to guerrilla groups sent into Abkhazia). Nevertheless, there is constant reference to them as an alternative if Abkhazia does not agree to the compromises Georgia wants. The Abkhaz refuse to negotiate with representatives of the ‘government-in-exile’, because this would narrow the subject of negotiations to relations between two communities from Abkhazia, instead of between Georgia and Abkhazia.

In October 1998 leaders of the ‘government-in-exile’ founded the Party for the Liberation of Abkhazia which adopted a resolution stating that the return of Georgian refugees would be possible only after Georgian jurisdiction has been established over the whole territory of Abkhazia. Inflammatory language and the threat of mobilizing refugees for future campaigns in Abkhazia has done nothing to promote reconciliation, rather it has inclined Abkhaz to be increasingly negative about return. However, the refugee leaders’ only option is to return to Abkhazia victorious. The Abkhaz will not allow them back with other refugees because they consider them to be responsible for the war of 1992–93 and the following terrorist activities. In this context the Abkhaz are unlikely to let them be a party to the negotiations. Nevertheless, when a political solution is achieved it is with refugees that Abkhaz society will have to rebuild relations, however antagonistic they currently are.

The return of refugees to the Gal region of Abkhazia, which before the war was populated predominantly by Mingrelians who did not on the whole participate in military action on the Georgian side in 1992–93, has been regarded in Abkhazia as a less painful option. By the beginning of 1998, international organizations estimated that more than sixty thousand people had returned to the

region. However, in 1998 alone thirteen civilians, thirty-six Abkhaz militiamen and eight peacekeepers died at the hands of terrorists. In May 1998 the situation changed drastically with the sharp rise in terrorist activity by Georgian paramilitary units. This led to clashes with the Abkhaz militia and an unsuccessful attempt by Georgia to seize the Gal region, as a result of which some thirty thousands residents were again displaced. Having experienced another defeat the government in Tbilisi, which had until then distanced itself from the ‘partisans’, practically admitted its responsibility for the events by signing an agreement on a ceasefire and separation of forces. The Gagra Protocol of 26 May 1998 obliges Georgia ‘to take effective measures to halt the penetration into Abkhazia of terrorist and sabotage groups, armed bands and individuals’, but no criminal case has yet been instituted in Georgia in connection with terrorist activity. On the contrary, Zurab Samushia, the commander of the White Legion terrorist unit gives press conferences in Tbilisi and terrorists continue to penetrate the Gal region and occasionally beyond.

Georgia’s bad faith frequently goes unchallenged by the international community, repeating a familiar pattern in which the Abkhaz are censured for their activities but abuses committed by the Georgians go largely unmarked. The August 1992 invasion of Abkhazia is ignored and no condemnation is levelled at Georgia for the mass human rights violations and killings during the war, while Abkhazia is accused of ethnic cleansing. In January 1999 on the eve of the UN Security Council session the Abkhaz president called on Tbilisi and international organizations to support Abkhazia’s unilateral decision to allow the return of refugees to districts which previously had compact Georgian populations – namely the Gal region. However, the Georgian government, despite its own previous demands for the return of the Georgian population to Abkhazia prior to a political solution, now linked the safe return of the refugees to a political settlement, understanding by this the establishment of Georgian jurisdiction over Abkhazia. The Security Council responded to the Abkhaz initiative on 29 January 1999 by referring to the Lisbon resolution of the OSCE, which interpreted the mass exodus of the Georgian population during the liberation of Abkhazia from Georgian armed forces in September 1993 as ethnic cleansing.

## Abkhaz society will not be ignored

The Security Council is not the only source of pressure on the Abkhaz leadership. If agreements are signed limiting the de facto independence of Abkhazia, its leaders will have to answer to their own people. President Ardzinba has already been publicly attacked for his visit to Tbilisi in August 1997 and there has been fierce criticism of the draft agreements on the creation of a common state with



Source: Mia Foster/Alicia Patterson Foundation

Georgia. Nevertheless, in general there is a passive attitude to the negotiation process in Abkhazia, partly explained by the grind of daily survival and partly by the fact that most people do not believe the president was sincere in his intention to unite with Georgia. Experience, however, shows that society is instantly mobilized by the slightest deterioration in the situation as in 1994 when a Russian general in charge of peacekeeping operations attempted to open the Abkhaz–Georgian border to the mass return of refugees.

Abkhaz society is consolidated around the idea that the Abkhaz nation, like any other, including the Georgian, has the right to freedom and independence. The Abkhaz cannot understand why the desire of other nations for independence is so problematic for Georgian society. The answer may be found in the evolution of Georgian mass consciousness which has for decades been influenced by descriptions of Georgians as hospitable ‘landlords’ who have given shelter to ‘members of other nationalities’.

The past decade has stirred the historical memory of the Abkhaz who for over a century have regarded Georgia as a source of aggression. The attempt to resolve the ‘Abkhaz question’ once and for all by force removed all trust in Georgia. While revanchist policy is frequently aired in the Georgian media, calls by Georgian intellectuals to reject the policy of sanctions receive no positive response from

the government, still less the public. In the absence of a conciliatory tone or any sense of culpability for instigating the war, many Abkhaz believe that Georgia, whose democratic credentials have yet to be proven, is an unattractive partner with which to build a common state.

It is difficult to gauge the viability of a settlement that forces the Abkhaz to adopt the Georgian idea of coexistence. The history of relations with Georgia suggests that only statehood, underpinned by international guarantees, will achieve conditions of security and the preservation not only of the identity of the Abkhaz nation but of its physical survival. Being within Georgia, as the recent war has shown, does not provide such guarantees. Georgia also needs to decide whether territorial integrity in the traditional sense is more important than stability and a flourishing economy.

Whatever form relations between Georgia and Abkhazia take, it will be possible to speak of genuine peace and security in the region only if the principle of equal rights lies at the foundation of these relations. Whether this principle is achieved through the signing of a treaty on peace and good-neighbourliness by two independent states, or within the framework of a Georgian–Abkhaz confederation, or through the creation of supranational, Caucasus-wide structures depends on how far the interests of realpolitik are aimed at achieving an enduring resolution.