Introduction to the Georgia-Abkhazia case study

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The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict has proved to be among the most intractable of the conflicts that flared at the demise of the Soviet Union. Throughout the twentieth century Abkhazia's status in relation to Georgia generated conflict, though rarely violent. Differing interpretations of Abkhazia's incorporation into Georgia, disputes over the exercise of power regarding demography, language, access to resources and political representation generated grievances that have shaped contemporary attitudes.

Tensions escalated into violence and erupted into war in August 1992 when the Georgian government sent troops into Abkhazia. Thirteen months of fighting ended in September 1993 when Abkhaz forces retook Sukhum/i, with significant support from North Caucasian irregulars as well as from elements within the Russian army. Georgian paramilitary forces and a substantial Georgian population fled the territory. The fighting lead to Georgian accusations of ethnic cleansing, matched by Abkhaz accusations of human rights violations during the war. Abkhazia was left physically devastated with extensive damage to infrastructure, much of which has not been repaired. As the articles by Archil Gegeshidze and Liana Kvarchelia show, the parties to the conflict have different perceptions of the role of sanctions – both in sustaining the isolation and underdevelopment of Abkhazia and as a tool in shaping negotiations – yet both authors recognize that sanctions have not contributed to the resolution of the conflict. This introduction provides some context and highlights key aspects of the sanctions issue as experienced by the respective parties.

A frozen peace process

Since a Russian-mediated ceasefire agreement formally ended hostilities in May 1994, substantial efforts to produce a sustainable resolution have failed. Negotiations have been deadlocked, punctuated by periods of heightened tension when hostilities threatened to resume. Little common ground has been found for a resolution of Abkhazia's status. The de facto but unrecognized authorities demand sovereignty and recognition of Abkhazia's independence (unilaterally declared following a 1999 referendum). Georgia seeks to re-establish its territorial integrity, offering wide-scale autonomy to Abkhazia without detailing what this would mean, and at times using threats of force to assert its position. Georgia requires the safe return of internally displaced persons (IDPs), variously estimated at 180,000-300,000, before the issue of status can be resolved. The Abkhaz authorities have countenanced a limited return and demand the prior determination of the political and legal status of Abkhazia, fearing that a return to the pre-war demography would leave the ethnic Abkhaz vulnerable.

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The UN facilitates the 'Geneva' negotiations process and deploys a mission to monitor the nominally Commonwealth of Independent States (but in fact Russian) peacekeeping force that maintains the separation of forces line. A Group of Friends (France, Germany, Russia, UK and US) assists the UN Secretary General's Special Representative in facilitating the process. Russia plays a complex role mediating, exerting pressure (often very crudely) on Georgia and providing a lifeline (though not without costs) to Abkhazia. The parties have increasingly sought outside support rather than engaging directly with one another. This often crystallizes into Georgian reliance on Western allies (in particular the US but also articulating clear European aspirations) and Abkhaz dependence on Russia. The UN has struggled to sustain momentum in direct negotiations, balancing incompatible approaches to status with emphasis on confidence-building related to security, economic cooperation and IDP return, but frequently operating in crisis prevention mode as the parties spar with each other and avoid discussion of fundamentals. A change of Georgian and Abkhaz Presidents (in 2004 and 2005 respectively) led to new energy in negotiations but there was insufficient substance to sustain the parties' confidence that negotiations could produce the outcomes they desired. Instead, in the summer of 2006, a Georgian government operation to take control of the Kodori Gorge - administratively part of Abkhazia but not under their control - derailed the process. This operation reflected Georgian frustration with a process that they considered to be meandering nowhere. Although talks were resumed after several months, the formal negotiations process remains blocked.

Psychological legacy

Despite senior-level negotiations and civil society engagement in initiatives that have promoted frank and at times creative dialogue for more than a decade, there has been little constructive debate about the deleterious impact of sanctions on the preparedness of the parties to engage with one another. In 2005 the parties commenced negotiations about opening the railway through Abkhazia. Yet neither this measure nor the occasional references to opening sea traffic or promoting trade have progressed.

In many ways the existence of the regime of restrictions has become a comfortable excuse for the parties not to engage. The Abkhaz view it as a means to sustain alienation from Georgia and thereby bolster their aspiration of separateness. The Georgians see the failure of sanctions as exemplifying Russian perfidy and Abkhaz intransigence. Georgia has veered between exerting pressure and making attempts to convince the Abkhaz that Georgia could be an attractive and secure option for them. Sanctions continue to serve as a mirage of applying pressure for change. The Abkhaz doubt that they can achieve their goals in a negotiations process that they see as operating along a Georgian agenda. Neither party has offered or identified meaningful incentives to recalibrate strategies and positions and address deeper interests. International actors have provided modest support for initiatives designed to overcome isolation, build confidence or promote development without adequately addressing underlying concerns regarding identity and security. Indeed far more significant support has gone into the state-building projects of the respective parties - openly on the part of the US and EU in regard to Georgia and covertly on the part of Russia in regard to Abkhazia.

As a result, the conflict is often seen as 'frozen'. The people most affected - the inhabitants of Abkhazia and those displaced from there by war - are left in limbo. It is the peace process rather than the conflict itself that is frozen. Isolation has enabled the Abkhaz to consolidate their political identity and the sanctions have perversely provided a security blanket against Georgian influence. In 2006-07 Georgian frustrations with the process and concerns about external engagement in Abkhazia reduced the space for international development and civil society initiatives. A February 2008 interview by the newly appointed Georgian Minister for Reintegration for the first time articulated a view that there should be no "taboo issues" on the negotiating table and a "full or partial" lifting of the economic embargo could become part of negotiations. It remains to be seen if this soft rhetoric can herald a substantive change.

Despite many technical complexities, addressing the embargo could open new avenues. Yet the decade-long existence of sanctions has left a psychological legacy of Abkhazalienation and self-reliance that few in Georgia understand. Policy changes in the restrictions regime are unlikely on their own to win confidence. When Georgian-Russian relations plummeted to new depths in 2006 and a severe embargo was imposed on staple Georgian products, there was little recognition in Georgia of parallels with the Abkhaz experience of sanctions - or of the ways in which embargos have not just an economic but a psychological and symbolic impact.

In the face of much evidence that sanctions have hemmed the parties into a mutually destructive relationship, neither they nor the international players have been able to shift the debate. Incentives that do exist either focus on potential futures ('Europeanization') or compromises that could put at risk security and identity and hence appear far from attractive. The most damaging legacy of sanctions is thus a mentality that undermines respect and patience, seeks to impose solutions and entrenches the separation of communities.