

The isolation of Abkhazia

A failed policy or an opportunity?

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Gali residents cross the Inguri River.

Source: Julia Wishnewetz

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In the wake of the military confrontation over Abkhazia, the Government of Georgia considered a coercive approach appropriate and feasible and sought to isolate Abkhazia, specifically the *de facto* administration in Sukhumi. The aim was simple: to compel the Abkhaz side to abandon its pro-independence policy. The Government of Georgia reckoned on a close relationship with Russia, whose coercive capacity was enormous. Supporters of this approach counted on a swift effect: Abkhazia's economy could not survive provided that the embargo was enforced with sufficient vigour, and the ensuing social discontent would force the *de facto* administration to change policy.

It has become almost a conventional wisdom throughout the expert community that Georgia's strategy of isolating Abkhazia was not well founded. This view, however, overlooks a number of factors that led up to it.

It became clear soon after the 4 April 1994 quadripartite agreement (between the conflict parties, Russia and the UNHCR) on the voluntary return of refugees and displaced persons that the Abkhaz side was unwilling to fulfil its obligations and would hinder the return process by any means, despite appeals from international organizations. UN Security Council Resolution 1036 (12 January 1996) is one of many third-party documents demanding compliance from the Abkhaz side. The *de facto* Abkhaz authorities opted for hostile policies towards the predominantly ethnic Georgian population of the Gali region, who had returned spontaneously to their homes. With a view to continuing the policy of forcible expulsions, Abkhaz militia made regular incursions into the area, allowing torture and killings to take place. Resolution 1036 and the UN Secretary-General's report of 2 January 1996 reflect the international community's deep concern about the matter.

In 1995 the *de facto* authorities initially agreed upon defining the status of Abkhazia within the united Georgian federal state and had signed the Russia-brokered protocol on 24 July. Subsequently, however, they disavowed the document and refused to accept it as a basis for negotiations.

Throughout the conflict, Russia had covertly provided the Abkhaz separatists with arms, ammunition and intelligence and the Russian military participated directly in hostilities on the Abkhaz side. Apparently trying to redeem its fault, Russia feigned impartiality in mediation activities and was even exigent towards the Abkhaz (only later did Russian ambiguity and guile begin to prevail). This was reflected in the content and tone of the overwhelming majority of official documents adopted in that period by the UN, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

However, external political support for Georgia and the instruments available within the UN and OSCE proved inadequate for prevailing upon the Abkhaz side. Thus, a need for major changes in the whole process increasingly became apparent. At the same time, the majority of the CIS member states felt sympathy for Georgia's struggle for the restoration of its territorial integrity and also feared centrifugal tendencies within their own borders. This offered an opportunity and the 1995 CIS Summit adopted a memorandum at Kazakhstan's initiative that provided a legal basis for subsequent steps towards imposing CIS sanctions on Abkhazia.

Fresh memories of the grief and grievances of defeat, as well as the mounting political and social instability that the presence of a sizeable community of displaced persons introduced into Georgian society, fuelled a revanchist public mood. The party of war gained strength and a coercive strategy of isolating Abkhazia increasingly came to be considered as the most relevant policy option.

Structure of Abkhazia's isolation

The isolation of Abkhazia is often incorrectly reduced to the coercive measures adopted by the CIS Summit in 1996. Apart from the CIS sanctions there are five other elements comprising Abkhazia's isolation:

- UN Security Council condemnation. Resolution 876 (1993) strongly condemns the actions of the Abkhaz side in violation of international humanitarian law and "calls on all States to prevent the provision from their territories or by persons under their jurisdiction of all assistance, other than humanitarian assistance, to the Abkhaz side and, in particular, to prevent the supply of any weapons and munitions."
- The Georgian government's rulings (under successive administrations) on closing the port of Sukhumi and the maritime boundary in the Abkhaz offshore waters.
- Georgia's decision not to apply to the International Civil Aviation Organization for a location indicator for Sukhumi airport, which thus cannot be used for international flights.
- The blocked Trans-Caucasian railway through Abkhazia.
- The almost complete absence of economic cooperation between the conflicting sides. The exceptions are the joint operation of the Inguri power station and the alleged illegal cross-border trade between criminal groupings across the region.

These regulations been referred to as a 'blockade,' a term that is inappropriate for several reasons: blockades refer to restrictive measures employed during *inter-state* conflicts and during conditions of belligerency. In this case, belligerency formally ended with the 1994 agreement and restrictions on access were a struggle to assert the sovereignty that neither side was willing to give up. Furthermore, the CIS sanctions are just a set of mutually agreed commitments or obligations of the member states to be implemented mostly by non-military state institutions. Rather than targeting civilians, the CIS sanctions restrict co-operation with the '*de facto* authorities' and admit humanitarian and commercial links provided that the Georgian government is preliminarily notified. Finally, the term is rendered meaningless as Russia has in fact withdrawn from the CIS sanctions and has even granted citizenship to most Abkhazians.

Effects of the isolation

The expediency of sustaining Abkhazia's isolation is now becoming a topical issue in Georgian political discourse. In the absence of the anticipated quick results, the isolation policies stagnated. Nobody argues that they have contributed to reconciling the conflicting agendas in Tbilisi and Sukhumi. Mutual alienation has increased and the already minuscule resources of trust and motivations for seeking a compromise solution have been squandered. Isolation solidifies Abkhaz society's image of Georgia as the enemy, while dramatically reducing the Abkhaz nation's options and leaving it to the mercy of Russia. Mutual distrust sustains support for the party of war, while the reinforcement of Georgia's jurisdiction in Upper Abkhazia (a new toponym for what was known as Kodori Gorge) in 2006 has given birth to a party of war in Abkhaz-controlled territory. Against this backdrop, the prospects for co-operation and compromise are diminished and the resources for engagement and reconciliation seem marginal.

The primary reason for the failure of isolation to cause policy change within the Abkhaz side has been poor implementation of their central element, the CIS-imposed regime of sanctions. Russia's undeclared and gradual withdrawal has seriously invalidated it. At the same time, as the events around the 2004 presidential elections in Abkhazia have demonstrated, Russia possesses significant resources for coercion. The closure of the border-crossing point at Psou River and the ban on admitting Abkhaz citrus plants to the Russian market, coupled with other reprisals, sufficed to allow Russia manipulation of the elections.

When they were first introduced, the Georgian government's initial expectations regarding the impact of these sanctions were well grounded. The miscalculation in this strategy was the erroneous assumption that Russia would adhere to and fully implement the agreed policies. The other reason for failure has been the fact that these sanctions were inappropriately perceived as a blockade by international public opinion and the Abkhaz side had been perceived as a victim of unjust coercion. As a result, the isolation policies have become a losing strategy for Georgia in the battle of ideas.

Is there a way forward?

Whilst the ineffectiveness of the CIS-imposed sanctions in achieving their goals is indisputable, Abkhazia's development remains constrained by its isolation. Notwithstanding the increasing number of seasonal tourists from Russia and the revitalization of certain economic sectors, Abkhazia remains largely underdeveloped. *De facto* 'independence' does not provide a basis for the real economic growth or cultural development that, among other things, would ensure long-term demographic security. Abkhazia remains ineligible for appropriate investment or institutional capacity building assistance. Georgian-sanctioned de-isolation is a must, which gives Tbilisi leverage at the bargaining table.

Although it is unanimously acknowledged that sooner or later the policies of isolation will have to be changed, no one in Georgia holds that this change should be instant and unconditional. Moreover, it is argued that current trends in Russia's policy – as well as the obedience the Abkhaz *de facto* leadership shows to Russia – suggest that de-isolation would draw Russia and Abkhazia closer together, rather than motivate the Abkhaz side to reconcile with Tbilisi. Only gradual and conditional lifting of sanctions, therefore, could avoid damage to Georgia's national interests. In the absence of a clear grand strategy, however, no specific plans for lifting the sanctions have hitherto been discussed in the

Georgian policy community. Georgia's planned withdrawal from the CIS, the necessity of renewed dialogue with the Abkhaz side, and the possible implications of the 2014 Winter Olympics in the Russian city Sochi, less than 50 km from the conflict zone, each establish contexts in which different strategies for lifting sanctions ought to be applied. While the costs and benefits of each policy alternative remain unexplored, this general school of thought is now widespread in Georgia's decision-making elite.

The best way out of the current limbo would be direct and constructive dialogue in relation to the gradual elimination of the elements of Abkhazia's isolation combined with counter-proposals of equal weight. These proposals could range from the return of IDPs, to IDP property rights, to changing existing peacekeeping arrangements. Potentially, agreement upon issues of such magnitude could encourage the conflicting sides to truly engage in peaceful dialogue, thereby broadening prospects for a compromise solution.

However, given existing levels of mutual mistrust and resentment, additional reciprocal incentives might be needed in order to promote and sustain the mentioned dialogue. In this respect, the Government of Georgia, on its part, should first of all abandon the zero-sum approach to the conflict resolution process which implies as an ultimate goal the restoration of the country's territorial integrity by any means. Whilst this approach is seen as legitimate by its advocates, it contributes little to the dialogue between the sides and/or the overall efficiency of the mediating efforts of third parties. Also, the policies of coercion must give way to policies of attraction through Georgia becoming a truly democratic country with sustained economic growth and a good record of protecting basic human rights. Within this new paradigm, guarantees around the non-resumption of hostilities should also be discussed.

In the meantime, third-party facilitation must also change. European institutions, whose credibility and resources have not been fully exploited so far, must become more actively engaged. As a benchmark of this engagement, Abkhazia should be offered an alternative vision for development, establishing European political, legal and administrative institutions. This could provide a basis for convergence of the development agendas of Tbilisi and Sukhumi, thus contributing to building much needed trust and confidence.