Sanctions and the path away from peace

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In the aftermath of their military defeat, and seeking to win back what had been lost through war, Georgian negotiators took an uncompromising position on a number of issues, especially the political status of Abkhazia. They attempted to use various levers to make Abkhazia pliable in negotiations, including calling for regional sanctions by the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

Restrictions on Abkhazia

Once it was persuaded to join the CIS in 1993, Tbilisi tried to use its membership to regain Abkhazia. Above all, this meant bargaining with Moscow. In 1994 the Georgian leader Eduard Shevardnadze succeeded in using “the Chechen factor” – allegations that Chechens had been trained in Abkhazia – as a pretext to persuade Russia to introduce trade restrictions across the Russian-Abkhaz border. In 1995 he negotiated a deal that allowed Russia to retain its five military bases in Georgia. Finally, in January 1996 a formal decision was taken at the CIS summit to impose sanctions on Abkhazia. The heads of the ex-Soviet republics (with the exception of Belarus) followed Russia’s lead in condemning what they called “Abkhazia’s destructive position, hindering the achievement of a mutually acceptable solution of the conflict,” which implied satisfying Georgia’s territorial claims.

As a result of the CIS decision, restrictions were put on trade and financial relations with Abkhazia, as well as on transport and telephone communications. The airport was closed for external flights and the railway functioned only within Abkhazia’s borders. The seaports were closed for passenger boats, and Abkhaz boats could not leave port to bring goods from Turkey. Special regulations were introduced on the Abkhaz-Russian border that heavily restricted the cross-border movement of Abkhaz citizens as well as transport, goods and medicines. With many dependent on petty trade across the border, this cut the population off from their main source of economic survival.
Though officially sanctions were introduced by the CIS and in effect implemented by Russia, official Western mediators in the negotiation process supported sanctions by refusing to respond to Abkhaz appeals. They ignored the findings and recommendations of the UN Needs Assessment Mission of 1998, which suggested that restrictions on Abkhazia be “eased in the interest of promoting reconciliation and of creating a better negotiating climate.” The mission also linked the lifting of sanctions with steps by Abkhaz authorities to “liberalize controls which tend to hinder normal commercial relations between Georgians and Abkhazians.” However, international mediators backed only Georgia’s demand that any economic development be channelled to Abkhazia through Tbilisi. Moreover, they linked any significant investment in the destroyed economy to unilateral political concessions on the part of Abkhazia. Under sanctions, donor funds for even small-scale rehabilitation were restricted, leaving many schools, enterprises and residential houses in ruins and the level of unemployment extraordinarily high.

Russia and the relaxation of restrictions

Georgia’s expectation of isolating Abkhazia from the rest of the world has been only partially satisfied. From 2000, Russia eased its regulations on the Abkhaz border and gradually eased other sanctions – although this did not lead to a general lifting of sanctions, such as the re-opening of the airport or to changes in regulations concerning seaports. However, there is now active cooperation between Abkhaz and Russian business communities and high-level contacts are maintained between Abkhaz and Russian officials.

Georgia did not anticipate how the isolation policy and sanctions would increase Abkhazia’s reliance on Russia. From 1996, Abkhaz passports were no longer recognized by Russia as documents valid for travel outside the Russian Federation. This not only restricted Abkhaz citizens’ right to free movement, but also made Russia the only ‘outside world’ with which Abkhazia could communicate. Requests by Abkhaz officials and civil society activists to the UN to issue temporary international travel documents for Abkhaz citizens until the conflict was resolved were rejected. In recent years, thousands of Abkhaz citizens have adopted Russian citizenship, allowing them to travel in and beyond Russia. Russian passports also provided old people with citizenship, allowing them to travel in and beyond Russian borders.

From the perspective of ordinary Abkhazians, Russia is their only ally, while the image of Georgia as an enemy grows stronger. This does not mean they are prepared to give up their sovereignty and allow Russia to interfere in their internal affairs: during the presidential elections in Abkhazia in 2004, the majority of the population voted against Moscow’s preferred candidate, thus jeopardizing relations with their only strategic partner. Accordingly, political relations between Abkhazia and Russia are not absolutely straightforward. Moscow and Tbilisi have concerns over Abkhazia’s contacts with other countries for differing reasons. Russia wants to be the major player in the region and is trying to monopolize contacts with Abkhazia. Ironically, this tears Georgia between two incompatible desires: the desire to completely isolate Abkhazia from the outside world; but also to decrease Russia’s influence in Abkhazia, which, for example, sometimes requires it to turn a blind eye to Abkhazia’s trade with Turkish businesses.

Sanctions, peace negotiations and democratisation

By the time sanctions were imposed, Abkhazia had already been actively involved in the negotiation process and several important agreements had been signed both on the principles of dividing competences between Sukhum and Tbilisi, as well as on the return of Georgian refugees to Abkhazia. Clearly the aim of sanctions was not to bring Abkhazia to the negotiating table, but rather to force it to accept a political resolution on Georgia’s terms. As is probably often the case, sanctions did not have a normative focus on reaching peace, unless peace is equated with the resolution of the conflict according to Georgia’s territorial claims. Georgia has succeeded in making the contested issue of ‘territorial integrity’ itself a framework for the internationally facilitated negotiation process. With unconditional international support for Georgia’s ‘territorial integrity’ (to a degree comparable to Western countries’ backing of Kosovo’s right to self-determination), peace has not been approached from the perspective of a process in which the parties seek mutually acceptable political arrangements. Neither the confederal nor even federal principles for a political resolution that were discussed at Russia’s initiative by Abkhazians in the mid- to late-1990s could satisfy Georgia’s desire for maximum control over Abkhazia. Although ‘the highest possible autonomy’ has since been discussed by Georgia, there is still little flesh on the bones of the idea.

Not surprisingly, Abkhazians perceived sanctions as a means to punish them for their stance. Consequently they have added to the mistrust that characterizes Georgian-Abkhaz relations, including the mistrust of the majority of the population of Abkhazia towards ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia (who live mainly in the Gali district on the Abkhaz side of the border with Georgia). In recent years the Abkhaz authorities as well as NGOs...
have made serious efforts to overcome this mutual mistrust and create conditions for the reintegration of Georgian returnees in Abkhaz society, although this is undermined by Georgian disparagement and persecution of returnees who cooperate with Abkhaz authorities. In addition to isolation policy, sources of Abkhaz mistrust include Georgia’s threats “to get back lost territories at any cost,” its attempts to take control over the Gal region, its disproportionate military budget, and its military campaign in the Kodor Gorge in summer 2006 in violation of prior agreements.

Sanctions and the subsequent perception of Georgia as the main source of Abkhaz troubles have been instrumentalized by opponents of democratic change in internal political debates within Abkhazia. They argued that Abkhazia could not allow any internal division in the face of a common enemy. In reality, there was and is a full Abkhaz consensus on the issue of Abkhazia’s independence from Georgia and any divisions concern the democratization process itself. But the siege mentality that developed as a result of isolation and the neglect of the rights of Abkhaz people by the international community became a convenient instrument for those opposing the development of a democratic, pluralistic society, which was framed as a Western construct.

Fortunately, in recent years Abkhaz society has largely managed to overcome the siege mentality and the fear that democratization will weaken Abkhazia in the face of the external threat. Yet international resistance to the idea of recognition of Abkhazia, particularly in view of the anticipated recognition of Kosovo, has considerably affected Abkhaz society’s trust in the international community. Some groups in Abkhazia identify democratic principles with international Realpolitik and its double standards, rather than as values to underpin their society. They tend to see a hidden agenda even behind the activities of international NGOs, working in Abkhazia, suspecting that international aid is given in the hope that democratization will make the Abkhaz society and its elite more flexible on the issue of independence.

The international community is careful not to take steps that would be regarded as any form of legitimization of the Abkhaz state. In line with this policy, not only is peace interpreted as respect for Georgia’s territorial integrity, but there are no explicit efforts to create incentives and conditionalities to promote democratization, human rights, free elections and good governance (as there are in Kosovo). Nevertheless, it is expected implicitly that Abkhazia honours international norms in all these spheres. Although international institutions regularly declare that elections in Abkhazia are not recognized, they nevertheless take note of the progress in the democratization process. For instance, Security Council resolutions report on the achievements of Abkhaz civil society. Some Western governments support the development of democratic institutions in Abkhazia through international NGOs and the European Commission is currently funding a series of projects in the country aimed at the decentralization of power.

**Conclusion**

Georgia and other international actors have misjudged the political, economic and social consequences of the policy of isolating Abkhazia. A lack of international political will and flexibility with regard to Georgian-Abkhaz relations constrains new approaches to the conflict. It is not possible to make progress towards a resolution without addressing the causes of the existing lack of confidence – not least the isolation policy that has deepened mistrust towards Georgia. The current drive to present the deep-rooted Georgian-Abkhaz conflict exclusively from the perspective of Russian-Georgian confrontation (in the hope of recruiting even more Western support for Georgia) further alienates Abkhazians.

There is a need for a more balanced international approach based on the interests of both parties. In this respect, the need for the international community to ensure that parties to the conflict honour previous agreements is of paramount importance. Moreover, the conclusion of the UN Needs Assessment Mission – that addressing the needs of Abkhazia in economic, educational, social and other spheres will create a more favourable climate for negotiations – is still valid.