

Eva-Maria Auch

## The Abkhazia Conflict in Historical Perspective

After a seven-year gap, Georgian independence day was once again celebrated with a spectacular military parade on 26 May 2004. President Mikhail Saakashvili opened the festivities with a speech given in Georgian, Ossetian and Abkhaz: "The interests of each Ossetian living in Georgia will always be taken into consideration by the Georgian state [...] I also want to address the Abkhaz and urge them once again to enter talks in an effort to build up federative relations [with Georgia] that would give them vast and internationally recognized guarantees of autonomy."<sup>1</sup> The display of military power was thus combined with an olive branch held out by the new government in Tbilisi, raising hopes once more of an end to the entrenched Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, which has seen both sides not only appeal to "historical facts" to justify their claims but also write their own bloody chapters of history in the last 15 years.

Both sides' belief in the historical legitimacy of their claims, the superiority of their nation, and the uniqueness of their mission have often rendered them incapable of making rational political decisions. The fighting that claimed so many victims, created so many refugees, and destroyed infrastructure and trade links between August 1992 and October 1993 has left deep wounds in not only the Georgian and Abkhazian populations, but also among the other minorities in Abkhazia, such as Armenians, Greeks, and Russians.

The use of historical garb to disguise territorial claims, the combination of "ethnogenesis" and "national consolidation",<sup>2</sup> and the overlaying of contemporary political conflicts with historical concerns under the new conditions created by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rise of new national movements mean that an analysis of the background needs to consider many levels. The same factors also make special sensitivity necessary in international efforts to find a solution.

Without attempting the ambitious task of judging between the irreconcilable opinions of the parties to the conflict, the current contribution aims to present the evidence from the pre-Soviet and Soviet periods and to recapitulate the complex history of the conflict since the late 1980s.<sup>3</sup>

---

1 Cited at: [www.ncbuy.com/news/2004-05-26/1107832.html](http://www.ncbuy.com/news/2004-05-26/1107832.html).

2 Cf. Alexander B. Krylov, *Religiya i traditsii Abkhazov*, Moscow 2001, p. 5.

3 Cf. for more detail on the origins of the conflict: Alexander Kokeev, *Der Kampf um das Goldene Vlies. Zum Konflikt zwischen Georgien und Abchasien* [The Struggle over the Golden Fleece. The Conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia], HSFK-Report 8/1993, and the comprehensive research carried out by the Research Group on Conflict and Cooperation Structures in Eastern Europe at the University of Mannheim, Germany: Alexander Kokejew/Georgi Otyrba, *Der Weg in den Abchasien-Krieg* [The Road to War in

### *Abkhazia's Geopolitical Situation and Historical Lot*

Abkhazia, which currently has an area of 8,600 square kilometres, had 537,000 inhabitants in 1989, of whom 46.2 per cent were Georgian, 17.3 per cent Abkhazian, 14.6 per cent Armenian and 14.2 per cent Russian. Situated on the eastern shore of the Black Sea, Abkhazia lies within the territory of legendary Colchis (home to Medea and destination of the Argonauts) and has thus been considered a land of wealth and hospitality since ancient times. The golden ram, whose skin entered mythology as the Golden Fleece sought by Jason, became a symbol of the land's many riches and the avarice it aroused in so many powers. Greeks, Romans, Persians, Byzantines, Arabs, Seljuks, Mongols, Ottomans, not to mention the Russians, have all traded with or (for a time) ruled over the region, which has always been closely linked with the North Caucasus (today, Stavropol and Krasnodar Krai) and the Trans- or South Caucasian lands that the Russians call "*za-Kavkazom*" (the lands behind the Caucasus), and which comprise the modern countries of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. In this classic "transit zone" between the steppes of the Caucasian foreland, the Caucasian highlands, and the Black Sea coast, between the Mediterranean and Central Asia, not only did a great variety of peoples mix with the local population, but external powers exerted political and cultural influence. Ethnic and religious diversity remained characteristic of the region even after the advent of Christianity (in the 4th century) and Islam (in the 7th century).

Political instability and periods of intense rivalry between major powers nevertheless always left space for local rulers. The result was shifting alliances and series of small, short-lived states. In this situation, religions were able to play a role both in identity formation and as indicators of loyalty. Traditional moral codices, customary law, and tribal or clan loyalties were often more powerful than linguistic or religious identification.

The complexity of interrelationships between local, regional, and international factors came to characterize Abkhaz history<sup>4</sup> and was destined to become a problem for the historiography of the modern period as various national movements have laid claim to and politicized their common heritage.

In doing this, Abkhaz and Georgian historians and politicians have had recourse to theories of nation building rooted in Western-European reality, which found their Bolshevik interpretation in Stalin's 1913 definition of nation. Stalin placed particular weight on language, territory, economic life, and "psychological make-up manifested in a common culture", and made these

---

Abkhazia], in: *Untersuchungen des FKKS 13/1997*. See also: Bruno Coppieters, *Westliche Sicherheitspolitik und der Konflikt zwischen Georgien und Abchasien* [Western Security Policy and the Conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia], Bundesinstitut für Ostwissenschaftliche und Internationale Studien, Cologne 1999; Tim Potier, *Conflict in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and South Ossetia: a legal appraisal*, The Hague 2001.

4 Cf. Oliver Reisner, in: *Studienhandbuch östliches Europa* [Students' Handbook on Eastern Europe], vol. 2, Stuttgart 2002, p. 291.

the criteria for the recognition of nations. This conception influenced not only official Soviet nationalities policy, with all the legal consequences thereby entailed, but also the thought and discourse patterns of a broad section of the population; even today, political elites continue to think within this framework when justifying claims to territory or sovereignty.

This has put a strain on Georgian-Abkhaz relations in particular and meant that the conflict was being fought by historians before the first shots were fired.

One group of related problems that is regularly reconsidered concerns the autochthony of the Kartvelians and the Abkhaz,<sup>5</sup> the independence of Abkhazia, and the nature of the mediaeval monarchy in Abkhazia and Georgia.<sup>6</sup>

The earliest phase of Georgia's official written history is closely associated with the terms "West Georgia"/Egrisi (Greek: Colchis) and "East Georgia"/Kartli (Greek: Iberia), which stem from the 6th and the 3rd centuries BC, respectively.

While some radically nationalistic Georgian authors assume that the population of West Georgia has been largely Kartvelian since ancient times<sup>7</sup> and dispute the very existence of Abkhazian ethnicity,<sup>8</sup> others distinguish between "Abkhaz" (Colchian) and "Apsil" (of North Caucasian-Adyghian origin), and a third group associates the Abkhaz exclusively with the settlement of the Black Sea coast north of Sukhumi by North Caucasian (Circas-

---

5 Georgia, the name being derived from the Persian for "Land of the Wolves", known as "Gurjistan" in Russian sources from the 15th century, then "Gruziya" (in English Grusinia), is called "Sakartvelo" in Georgian. The "Kartveli" were originally members of various tribes, such as the Egrians (Laz), Svans, Mingrelians (Megreli in Georgian, Samargalo in Mingrelian). Despite substantial differences, the languages of these tribes all belong to the Kartvelian group, while the Abkhaz, who call themselves "Apsua", speak a language that belongs to the Abkhazian-Adyghian group. Mention of "Abazgs" and "Apsils" can be found as far back as the 1st and 2nd centuries. The oldest fragments of the Abkhaz language were written down in Arabic script in the 17th century by the Ottoman traveller Evliya Celebi. The Abkhaz-Cyrillic alphabet was devised by Baron Peter von Uslar in 1862. Nikolai Marr developed a Latin alphabet with 75 letters, which was used between 1926 and 1928, after which point a new Latin script was used. In 1937, a Georgian-based script was introduced. The current Cyrillic alphabet has been in use since 1954. See, for example, <http://www.omniglot.com/writing/abkhaz.htm> or: <http://www.writingsystems.net/languages/abkhaz/index.htm>. Cf. also George Hewitt (ed.), *The Abkhazians. A Handbook*, London 1998.

6 The question of sources poses a particular challenge. Even subjecting sources to close analysis, it is hard to determine what was meant by terms such as "Georgia" or "Abkhazia", or how designations of dynasties, geographic areas, tribes, languages, and so on were differentiated or used synonymously by ancient and mediaeval authors.

7 The term "Georgian" refers to speakers of Kartvelian languages.

8 This claim was made, for example, in 1992 by Irakli Batiashvili, a prominent member of the Georgian National Independence Party. Cf. Boj na reke Gudauta, in: *Novoe vremya* 35/1992, p. 8.

sian/Adyghian) ethnic groups,<sup>9</sup> which emphasizes their status as immigrants.<sup>10</sup>

Abkhaz historiography places the origins of Abkhaz statehood in the first few centuries of the Christian era. Extant sources document the growing strength of Abkhaz principalities and the expansion of a multi-ethnic and religiously diverse Abkhaz kingdom (in some sources referred to as the “Kingdom of Egrisi”) to cover the whole of West Georgia with its capital at Kutaisi from the 7th century. Under the influence of the Abkhaz princes, Christianity, which had been advancing since the 4th century, gradually freed itself from the influence of Greece and Constantinople, and, in the 9th century, the West Georgian church was placed under the control of the Catholicos of Mzkheta. From then on, Georgian increasingly became not only the language of traditional Georgian culture but also the language of the state and of literature. When the Abkhaz king Feodosi the Blind died without issue, his sister’s son, Bagrat III (a Kartvelian on his father’s side), was named his successor. The year of his ascension to the throne – 978 A.D. – is treated by Georgian nationalists as the key date in Georgia’s claim to the “Abkhaz inheritance”, although subsequent monarchs, from Bagrat IV (1027-1072), via David IV the Builder (1089-1125), to Queen Tamar (1184-1213) were each crowned “king (or queen) of the Abkhaz, Kartvels, Rans and Kakhs”. This period of prosperity was also associated with a concept of a Greater Georgia, which was fully expressed with the birth of modern Georgian nationalism in the 19th century and deliberately revived in the early 1990s.<sup>11</sup> With the expansion of the Mongols in the 13th, the Ottoman Turks in the 15th, and the Persians in the 16th century, both external pressure and the forces of internal disintegration increased. As a consequence, the former empire split into the kingdoms of Kartli, Kakhetia, and Imeretia, and the principality of Samskhe, and, as various Oriental great powers vied for advantage, the Caucasus underwent further waves of Islamization. Military campaigns, especially in Black Sea coastal regions and on the plains, caused mass migration towards sheltered valleys. At the same time, the advance of the Muscovites into the vacuum left by the collapse of the Golden Horde led to a wave of immigration from the North Caucasian steppes and the northern slopes of the High Caucasus. After several wars between the Persian and Ottoman Empires, the Treaty of Peace and Frontiers of 1639 established permanent spheres of influence between the two great powers. While Abkhazia was not annexed by the Ottoman Empire,

9 Cf. Mariam Lortkipanidse, *Georgien und seine Autonomien: kurzer Abriss der Geschichte Abchasiens, Atscharas und Südossetiens* [Georgia and Its Autonomous Provinces: A Short History of Abkhazia, Ajaria and South Ossetia], in: *Georgica* 15/1992, pp. 34-38.

10 Cf. Eka Sakalashvili, Was sucht Rußland in Abchasien? Die Rolle Rußlands im georgisch-abchasischen Konflikt [What Does Russia Want in Abkhazia? Russia’s Role in the Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict], in: *Kaukasische Post* 39/2003: “Abkhazia is an ancient region of Georgia, in which North Caucasian peoples were settled. These people took the name ‘Abkhaz’ from the region. However, Georgians were always present here in larger numbers than any other ethnic group (Abkhaz, Russians, Greeks, Armenians).”

11 Cf. Krylov, cited above (Note 2), p. 9.

which also tended to leave vassal states to look after their own internal affairs, the Black Sea region as far as Kuban did come under Ottoman rule, and the establishment of fortresses<sup>12</sup> along the Black Sea coast and Islamization increased the Turkish influence.

Politically dependent upon and culturally influenced by different powers, East and West Georgia developed in isolation from each other, and the inhabitants of the two regions became estranged. When, in the late 17th century, the influence of the Oriental great powers waned and local rulers began to grow in power again, the principalities of Guria and Mingrelia freed themselves from the kingdom of Imeretia, and the principality of Abkhazia seceded from Mingrelia. While East Georgia (Kartli-Kakhetia) aligned itself with the growing power of Russia in the Treaty of Georgievsk (1783), Abkhazia remained independent under the rule of Prince Georgi Sherwashidze (Chachba) until 1810<sup>13</sup> and even succeeded in maintaining its status as an autonomous principality until 1864. Relations with Russia nevertheless remained problematic. Rebellions, the participation of Abkhazians in the Crimean war on the Ottoman side,<sup>14</sup> and the wave of emigration, especially among Muslims, that followed the end of the Caucasian War led to a sharp decline in the Abkhaz population, while Russians, Armenians, Greeks, Estonians, and especially Georgians settled in the region. In the 1897 census, there were 72,123 Abkhaz speakers in the Russian Empire.<sup>15</sup> In the district of Sukhumi, they made up slightly less than 50 per cent of the population.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, the ongoing process of consolidating the Georgian nation made it necessary to develop a policy towards the country's various ethnic groups. As the concept of the nation favoured by Georgian activists was

- 
- 12 Sukhumi/Sokhumi (formerly Sukhum Kale, Sokhum Kala), the Abkhaz capital, was known in the Roman and Byzantine Empires as Sebastopolis. The Greek colony of Dioscurias was founded at the location of what is now Sukhumi. Although the fortress, which was expanded under Ottoman rule (1578), fell into Russian hands in 1810, it was only officially granted to Russia by the peace of Adrianople in 1829. As a military district (from 1833 the "District of Sukhumi"), it was administered by the governor of Kutaisi or Tbilisi. In 1879, the city had only 1,947 inhabitants. In 1989, the population was 121,406. Up to 1992, it remained a cosmopolitan city in which nine languages were spoken. Sukhumi remained an important centre of tourism and learning in the Soviet Union until the early 1990s.
- 13 The manifesto of 17 February 1810 that declared Abkhazia a protectorate of Alexander I's Russia was cited by the Abkhaz historian E. Ajinjal in 1992 as providing the legal foundation of Abkhaz-Russian relations. Cf. E. Ajinjal, Vazhnyi akt abkhazo-russkikh otnoshenii, in: *Respublika Abkhaziya*, 23 March 1992.
- 14 Under Russian rule, Abkhazia was largely Christianized. Enforced conversion and mass migration led to the decline of Islam. Sovietization had a similar effect. In recent years, however, the population has started to rediscover its Islamic heritage. Cf. Khajimba ili Khaji-ogly. Komu nuzhna islamizatsiya Abkhazii, in: *Gubernskie vedomosti*, 2 September 2004.
- 15 Cf. Henning Bauer/Andreas Kappeler/Brigitte Roth (eds), *Die Nationalitäten des Russischen Reiches in der Volkszählung von 1897* [The Nationalities of the Russian Empire in the Census of 1897], vol. A, Stuttgart 1991, p. 217. The total population of the governorate of Kutaisi was 1,058,000. Of these, 53,600 came from another governorate or state. Cf. *ibid.*, p. 48.
- 16 According to *Izvestiya*, 21 March 1993, there were 200,000 Abkhaz living abroad.

based on culture, integration on the basis of Christianity, the traditions of the Georgian church, and language played a decisive role.<sup>17</sup> This could be applied more easily to the Mingrelians and the Svans than to the Abkhaz, with their strong Islamic-Ottoman cultural influences and ties. In fact, this period saw the beginnings of an Abkhaz cultural awakening and proto-nationalist movement,<sup>18</sup> which was deliberately contrasted to the Georgian national movement.

#### *Independence or Autonomy: Abkhazia under Soviet Rule*

The revolutions of February and October 1917 and the civil war and war of intervention that followed created completely new conditions for the realization of national ambitions. The numerically small Abkhaz people had a number of potential allies among whom they were able to choose: Russia, Turkey, union with the “Mountain Peoples’ Republic of the North Caucasus”, the “Transcaucasian Federation”, or the Georgian Republic.

Following the failure in November 1917 of the attempt to unite with the peoples of the North Caucasus, the Abkhaz People’s Soviet in Sukhumi signed an agreement on 9 February 1918 on mutual relations with the Georgian National Council. This recognized an “indivisible Abkhazia within frontiers stretching from the River Ingur to the River Mzymta” (later known as the River Psou). However, this did not stop the Georgian Democratic Republic that was declared in May 1918 from sending troops to “meet the Bolshevik menace” in June 1918 with German backing. To this day, Abkhazians consider this the date of their country’s annexation by Georgia, while Georgians speak of the “restoration of Georgian unity”.<sup>19</sup> Following Georgia’s conquest by the Red Army in February 1921, Abkhazia’s legal status came up for discussion once again: A “Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia” was initially declared on 4 March 1921 alongside the “Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia”. On 21 May 1921, a decision was made on the incorporation of Abkhazia in a Georgian federation, and, in a separate treaty of union, signed on 16 December 1921, the two republics agreed on especially close military, political, and financial/economic co-operation. Abkhazia joined the Transcaucasian Federation as an equal partner of Georgia, Armenia, and Azerbaijan, and, as a member of the Federation, participated in the founding of the Soviet Union as a full subject of international law. “In this way, the sover-

---

17 On the development of the Georgian national movement, see Oliver Reisner, *Die Entstehungs- und Entwicklungsbedingungen der nationalen Bewegung in Georgien bis 1921* [The Conditions Surrounding the Origins and Development of the National Movement in Georgia up to 1921], in: Uwe Halbach/Andreas Kappeler (eds), *Krisenherd Kaukasus* [Flashpoint Caucasus], Baden-Baden 1995, pp. 63-79.

18 The development in 1862 of a Cyrillic-based alphabet for Abkhaz promoted not only the creation of Abkhaz literature but also the separate development of the Georgian and Abkhaz national movements.

19 Cf. Kokejew/Otyrba, cited above (Note 3), p. 7 (author’s translation).

eignty of Abkhazia was not limited by the Georgian constitution, but solely by that of the Transcaucasian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic and the USSR. Abkhazia thus retained the formal right to secede from both federations without reference to Georgia.”<sup>20</sup>

With not a little help from Georgians Joseph Stalin and Lavrenti Beriia, Abkhazia was transformed into an Autonomous Republic of Georgia in 1931. This represented not only the removal of its status as a republic, i.e. a legal downgrading, but also opened the door to a policy of Georgianization. Restrictions on Abkhaz language education and the introduction of the Georgian alphabet were only one aspect of this. The organized settlement of Georgians (intensified after 1936 and following the deportation of the Greeks in 1949) was much further reaching: The settlement in Abkhazia of some 100,000 Georgians between 1937 and 1956 alone turned the Abkhaz into a minority in their own country. In the most recent official census, taken in 1989, they accounted for less than 18 per cent (105,380), while the Georgian population was around 45 per cent of a total of 537,000.<sup>21</sup>

These developments were problematic in two regards. While the Abkhaz had to come to terms with restrictions to their autonomy, the quota system within the Soviet nationalities policy allowed for the creation and privileging of national cadres. The Georgian majority was thus increasingly brought into conflict with privileges reserved by law for an Abkhaz (minority) nomenklatura.<sup>22</sup> While the Georgian majority looked to Tbilisi for support, the Abkhaz minority turned to Moscow. Calls multiplied for the Abkhaz Autonomous Republic to be placed under the jurisdiction of the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic (RSFSR) – a challenge to Tbilisi and to the Georgian national movement in particular.<sup>23</sup>

#### *The Development of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict*

After 1956, a new generation emerged within the Georgian national movement, which was to influence the Georgian political scene until the mid-1990s: the dissidents. They included among their number Zviad Gamsakhur-

---

20 Ibid., p. 7 (author's translation).

21 Cf. Abkhaziya. Vojna za suverenitet, in: *Voennij vestnik* 1/1992, p. 15. According to Otto Filep, *Georgien – Lageanalyse Februar 2002* [Georgia – Country Analysis February 2002], Schweizerische Flüchtlingshilfe, Berne 2002, p. 3, the total population of Abkhazia was 506,000 in 1993 and 285,000 in 2001.

22 Of the 15 People's Deputies that Abkhazia was entitled to send to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, eight were ethnic Abkhaz. Of the 140 members of the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet, 57 were Abkhaz (40.7 per cent), 53 Georgian (37.8 per cent), 14 Russian (ten per cent) and the remaining seven (11.5 per cent) were representatives of the Armenian, Azerbaijani, Estonian, and Jewish minorities. A third of all senior managers and politicians belonged to the Abkhaz minority. Cf. Temur Mirianashvili, *My, abkhazy i drugie*, in: *Literaturnaya Gruzija* 3/1991, cited in: *Nachrichten aus Georgien* 1/1994, p. 4.

23 For a detailed discussion of the political mobilization of the national movements in Georgia and Abkhazia, see Kokejew/Otyrba, cited above (Note 3), pp. 24-34.

dia (1939-1993), who was a professor of English, and the musicologist Merab Kostava. They were active from the early 1970s until the mid-1980s above all via the "Helsinki Groups" and it was they who linked the debate over the Georgian language and cultural heritage to questions of human rights. The attempt of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR in Moscow to amend the constitution to remove the privileged status of national languages and give Russian and other tongues equal status collapsed on 14 April 1978 in the face of mass protests. Starting in 1985, with the arrival of Glasnost and Perestroika and the filling-in of the "blank pages" of Soviet history, a new level of constitutional discussion was possible, which, in the name of "demands for reparations", was eventually to lead to calls for secession. In 1988 there was already open talk of demanding the restoration of the Abkhazian Union Republic and allegations that the Georgian government was pursuing a nationalistic "great power" policy.

The defining moment in the escalation towards war was a mass meeting held on 19 March 1989 in the village of Lykhny.<sup>24</sup> Some 30,000 people took part and signed what became known as the "Abkhaz letter", which demanded Abkhazia's secession from the Georgian state and the re-establishment of the Abkhazian Union Republic. These demands were opposed energetically in Georgia, and protests against the "ungrateful separatists" became an important catalyst in mobilizing mass support for the Georgian national movement. This became obvious in events such as the demonstrations in Tbilisi on 9 April 1989, which were violently put down by Soviet troops with the death of 19 demonstrators. The demonstrations also signalled the start of a "nationalistic reorientation" on the part of the Georgian party and state leadership, who now, in order to preserve their own power – under the watchword of preserving Georgian unity – became increasingly tolerant of the operation of nationalist movements and organizations in the public sphere. The announcement that the Abkhazian University in Sukhumi would be divided along national lines was the trigger for the first violent clashes between Georgians and Abkhaz on 15-16 July 1989, which left 17 dead and 448 injured.

One year later, the conflict was taken up again on the stage of international law. The new law on the delimitation of powers between the Union and its federal subjects of April 1990 and the discussions on a new treaty of union provided Abkhazia with the formal grounds to question the status of the Abkhaz Autonomous Republic as a part of the Georgian Union Republic in April/May 1990. As part of its own struggle for independence from the central government in Moscow, the Georgian leadership had declared all treaties signed after Sovietization in 1921 to be null and void. This included the treaty that established the Transcaucasian Federation and the Treaty of Union. Thereafter, on 25 August 1990 and in the absence of the Georgian dele-

---

24 Lykhny has significant symbolic importance. A sacred grove was located here in the pre-Christian era, where assemblies of the representatives of all the Abkhaz settlements were held.

gates, the Abkhaz deputies to the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet passed a “Declaration on the State Sovereignty of the Abkhazian ASSR”. A resolution “On Legal Guarantees for the Protection of the Statehood of Abkhazia” proposed steps for restoring Abkhazia’s constitutional status as it was under the arrangement of 4 March 1921 (i.e. reviving its status as a union republic). However, these activities were accompanied by anti-Georgian propaganda and public calls for the involvement of Moscow in seeking a solution,<sup>25</sup> which the Georgian side perceived as an attack on its sovereignty. In reaction to the unilateral course taken by the Abkhazian delegates, all the decisions of the Supreme Soviet in Sukhumi were treated as in breach of the Georgian constitution and declared null and void.

With the victory of Zviad Gamsakhurdia and his coalition, “Round Table – Free Georgia”, in the elections of October 1990, the demands made by the Georgian nationalists of both the Soviet Union and Georgia’s own minorities and autonomous subjects were radicalized. With slogans such as “Defend Georgian Unity”,<sup>26</sup> “Abkhazia is Georgia”, “Fight the Separatists and Stooges of Moscow’s Imperial Policy” and several conspiracy theories<sup>27</sup> being circulated with the aim of forging a united Georgian front, the conflict between nationalities escalated.<sup>28</sup> In December 1990, Vladislav Ardzinba, a history professor and deputy of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, was elected head of the Abkhaz Supreme Soviet. Under him, co-operation with Moscow intensified as did interest in joining the RFSFR. A new Abkhaz parliamentary election law earmarked – despite strong criticism from Georgians living in Abkhazia – 28 seats for ethnic Abkhaz, 26 for Georgians, and eleven for representatives of other ethnic groups, such as Russians, Greeks, and Armenians. While, despite numerous incidents, parliamentary elections were held in three rounds on 29 September, 13 October, and 1 December 1991, no arrangement could be found in parliament that could satisfy all interests. With the support of the non-Georgian deputies, the Abkhaz influence grew in every area of

---

25 On 26 April 1990, the Soviet law “On the Delimitation of Powers between the USSR and the Subjects of the Federation” was passed, which was intended to deal with the questions of recognition of new Autonomous Republics, the changed status of existing Autonomous Republics, and to resolve disputes between Union Republics and Autonomous Republics, and which gave sole competency for this to the highest organs of state of the USSR. Cf. also Egbert Jahn/Barbara Maier, *Das Scheitern der sowjetischen Unionserneuerung* [The Failure to Restructure the Soviet Union], HSKF-Report 2/1992, p. 15.

26 While slogans used by the “Aidgylara” (“Unity”) Popular Forum of Abkhazia (PFA), such as “Defend the Community of Abkhazian Peoples!” or “Equal Rights for All Peoples”, were based on a territorial rather than an ethnic concept of nationhood, the most popular motto of the Georgian Nationalists was the Ilia Chavchavadze Society’s slogan “Homeland, Language, Faith”. This attitude informed their struggle for Georgian “unity”.

27 Cf. the interview with Zviad Gamsakhurdia in *die Tageszeitung*, 18 March 2001, “Hooligans und Banditen” [Hooligans and Bandits], and Christian Schmidt-Häuer, *Erst befreit und dann besessen* [First Freed and then Fixated], in: *Die Zeit* 40/1991, p. 3.

28 Meskhetians were refused re-entry into Georgia, Dagestani Avars and Russian Dukhobors were forced to leave the country. Unrest spread among the Armenians and Azeris living in the southern border regions, while the conflict in South Ossetia had already claimed its first victims and Ajaria took steps to disassociate itself from the central government.

economic, academic, and political life. At the same time, the displeasure of the Georgian majority at the “Abkhaz ethnocracy” increased. Only six months after the parliamentary elections, the Georgian delegates demanded a new ballot based on a reformed and “equitable” electoral law. When this failed, they withdrew their co-operation and removed themselves to Tbilisi.

Unsettled by the growth of Georgian nationalism, the power struggles in Tbilisi, and the radicalizing effect of paramilitary units, virtually all the ethnic groups living in Abkhazia founded their own political associations and started to look for allies both within and outside the region. In June 1992, an alliance was forged between Abkhaz and representatives of the non-Georgian population.<sup>29</sup> Plans for the peaceful resolution of the conflict were proposed as early as the spring of 1992. The Abkhaz Popular Forum “Aidgylara” insisted that the Georgian government make a legally binding statement of the republic’s multinational character and federal structure. It also demanded the creation of a bicameral parliament and a guarantee of Abkhazia’s self-governing status. However, the Georgian side feared precisely that greater autonomy for Abkhazia would lead to the disintegration of the state. Despite statements to the contrary from Eduard Shevardnadze, who replaced Gamsakhurdia in March 1992, following a coup in January of that year, legislation to create a federation remained off the agenda.

### *The Escalation of the Conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia*

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the dispute over CIS membership (which Georgia at first rejected), the change of regime in Tbilisi, and the dashing of the hopes of those who thought greater willingness to compromise would be forthcoming on the issue of autonomy, tensions rose in the early summer of 1992. While the Georgian leadership directly confronted Russia and faced a boycott as a result, the Abkhaz stressed their willingness to co-operate. When Georgia claimed a 21 square kilometre strip of coast around the harbour of Ochamchira in order to establish a naval base, it was interpreted as an attack on Abkhaz sovereignty. On 23 July, a narrow majority of the Abkhaz parliament – in the absence of the Georgian delegates – suspended the constitution of 1978 and reverted to the one from 1925. At the same time, the official name “The Republic of Abkhazia”, a coat of arms, and a flag were introduced. The Georgian State Council declared this unconstitutional, although Georgia had, on 22 February 1992, already annulled the con-

---

29 Besides parliamentary co-operation, an alliance was formed between “Aidgylara”, the Russian organization “Slavic House”, the Armenian group “Krunk”, the Greek cultural centre and the Ossetian union “Alan”. Representatives of the Abkhaz population also co-operated with “Congress of the Peoples of the Caucasus”, the third meeting of which was held in Sukhumi in early November 1991, and a treaty of confederation was signed on 1 November 1991. Cf. unpublished manuscripts of congress documents (in the possession of the author). This alliance made it possible for a number of armed groups to fight within the ranks of the Abkhaz army in the war of 1992-93 against Georgia.

stitution of 1978, restoring the constitution of 1921, which did not include Abkhazia. This led to an escalation of events, both within Abkhazia, where the various political factions clashed and parliament suspended its work, and in Georgian-Abkhaz relations. Attempts to negotiate failed and were repeatedly postponed – the only success was the agreement with Georgian Defence Minister Tengis Kitovani on the withdrawal of the irregular Mkhedrioni units on 13 June in Sukhumi. Nevertheless, these groups were not willing to subordinate themselves to the central authority but had sworn loyalty to their leader, Jaba Ioseliani. At the same time, the Abkhaz side had begun to arm itself: Alongside attempts to resolve the issues of contention by means of negotiations, both sides were prepared to use military means.

During the night of the 13-14 August 1992, the forces of the Georgian State Council (5,000 national guards, 53 tanks, and four attack helicopters) crossed the Abkhaz border. This represented the escalation of the political conflict between Georgia into a military confrontation, which was only to end after more than a year of bitter struggle and several broken ceasefire agreements.<sup>30</sup> The conflict, which remains unresolved to this day, has already written its own history, key elements of which the following table attempts to represent:

*The Course of the Conflict and Efforts to Resolve It*<sup>31</sup>

1992 14 Aug.	Troops of the Georgian State Council march into Abkhazia. They aim to prevent sabotage and plundering of rail infrastructure and to rescue Georgian government officials who are being held captive there. The president of the Abkhaz parliament, Vladislav Ardzinba, announces a general mobilization and requests support from Russia and the Confederation of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus (KGNK).
18 Aug.	The KGNK presents Georgia with an ultimatum for the withdrawal of troops from Abkhazia and announces that it is deploying volunteers.
25 Sept.	The parliament of the Russian Federation passes a motion declaring Georgia responsible for the outbreak of war.
October	An Abkhaz offensive captures Gagra and the west of the country.
8 Oct.	Georgia requests NATO and the CSCE to help “defend the territorial integrity” of Georgia.

30 For further details of the course of the civil war, see: Kokeev, cited above (Note 3), pp. 18-26.

31 Cf. also Naira Gelaschwili, *Georgien. Ein Paradies in Trümmern* [Georgia: A Paradise in Ruins], Berlin 1993; Bruno Coppieters/Ghia Nodia/Yuri Anchabadze (eds), *Georgians and Abkhazians: the search for a peace settlement*, Cologne 1998; Helmut Udo Napiontek, *Krisenregion Kaukasus: georgische Entwicklungsperspektiven vor dem Hintergrund von innerstaatlichen Konflikten, russischen Hegemonialansprüchen und „Petropolitics“; eine Situationsanalyse* [Crisis in the Caucasus: Prospects for Georgian Development against the Background of intrastate conflicts, Russian Hegemonic Claims, and “Petropolitics”]; a Situation Analysis], Hamburg 1998; Edmund Herzig, *The new Caucasus: Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia*, London 1999; Silvia Iacuzzi, *Popular Support for Democracy in Georgia: an empirical research project*, Norderstedt 2002.

6 Nov. – 13 Dec.	The CSCE decides to send a mission to Georgia to help resolve the conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia.
1993 8 May	The defence ministers of Russia and Georgia agree on a timetable for the withdrawal of Russian troops from Georgia.
Late June	Abkhaz forces launch a new major offensive on Sukhumi and the Georgian supply lines.
27 July	Georgia, Abkhazia and Russia sign a third ceasefire agreement in Sochi.
24 Aug.	The UN Security Council resolves to establish a UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG).
16 Sept.	An Abkhaz attack on Sukhumi is launched; the city falls on 27 September.
30 Sept.	The Georgian forces in Abkhazia are completely defeated.
1994 29 Mar.	The mandate of the CSCE mission is expanded to “ensure liaison with the United Nations operations in Abkhazia”.
3 Apr.	Abkhazia and Georgia sign an agreement governing the end of hostilities and the return to Abkhazia of some 250,000 Georgian refugees that abandoned their homes during the war.
14 May	Ceasefire in Abkhazia.
9 June	Russian President Boris Yeltsin decrees the establishment of a peace-keeping force for Abkhazia.
4 July	After a brief cessation of hostilities, Georgian forces once more open fire on Abkhaz units in the Kodori Gorge.
21 July	The UN Security Council endorses the deployment of Russian peace-keeping troops in Abkhazia, while also calling for the deployment of additional UN observers in the area. CIS peacekeepers (a 3,000-strong force) occupy a twelve-kilometre-wide demarcation line on the Inguri River. Their operations are to be monitored by UNOMIG.
1 Sept.	During discussions in Geneva under the aegis of the UN, the parties to the conflict agree on conditions for the return of Georgian refugees.
12 Oct.	Refugees start to return. Ca. 50,000 return, 40,000 of whom are driven out once more in 1998.
26 Nov.	The Abkhaz parliament adopts a new constitution declaring the Republic of Abkhazia to be a sovereign constitutional state in accordance with the right of peoples to self determination. The president of the Abkhaz parliament, Vladislav Ardzinba, is elected the first president of the republic.
1 Dec.	The Georgian parliament refuses categorically to recognize the legitimacy of the Abkhaz parliament and constitution and underlines Georgia’s “moral and political right” to use any means necessary to restore its sovereignty.
6 Dec.	Delegates to the CSCE Summit in Budapest fail to agree on a plan to keep the peace in the region.
1995 30 Mar.	Against the background of the war in Chechnya, Abkhazia distances itself from its previous demands for complete independence and declares itself prepared to accept a federation of equals with Georgia.
24 Aug	The Georgian parliament adopts a new constitution; no mention is made of Abkhazia or South Ossetia.
1996	The Abkhaz side proposes the creation of a “Federal Union of Georgia

13 Feb.	and Abkhazia". The proposed union would contain elements of both a federation and a confederation.
6 July	An OSCE mission calls for the investigation of serious human-rights violations in Abkhazia. The victims are largely ethnic Georgians.
22 July	Abkhazia and Georgia reach agreement on the question of Russian peacekeeping troops. The troops, stationed in Gali District, to which tens of thousands of Georgian refugees wish to return, are to be granted police powers.
2 Oct.	The Georgian parliament declares the Abkhaz elections planned for 23 November 1996 to be illegal.
23 Nov.	Despite international protests, the elections to the Abkhaz parliament go ahead. Eighty-one candidates, including 65 Abkhaz and three Georgians, stand for the 35 seats.
1997 27 Jan.	Abkhazia's President Ardzinba calls for an extension of the Russian-led CIS peacekeeping mission in Abkhazia. The pro-Georgian Abkhaz government in exile, in contrast, calls for the troops to be removed.
25 Feb.	The presidents of Georgia and Abkhazia, Ardzinba and Shevardnadze, suspend bilateral talks on the future status of Abkhazia.
19 Nov.	A new forum for negotiations aimed at intensifying the Abkhazia peace process is established in Geneva under the aegis of the United Nations and with the participation of the "Group of Friends of the UN Secretary General" (France, Germany, the Russian Federation, the UK, the USA, and, since 1999, Ukraine) – the "Geneva Process".
1998 May	Severe clashes in the Abkhaz Gali District; around 40,000 Georgians are driven out – some of them for the second time.
1999 31 Oct.	The second "democratic" parliamentary elections are held in Georgia. No election is held in Abkhazia, where the incumbent delegates simply retain their seats.
2000-2001	The Russian forces are withdrawn (9,200 troops from four bases: Vassiani, Akhalkalaki, Gudauta, Batumi).
2001 Oct.	Fighting breaks out once more between Georgian guerrillas and Abkhaz security forces along the Georgian-Abkhaz border. For the first time, Chechen militias join the Georgian side.
2002 July	A resolution on Abkhazia by the UN Security Council proposes that Abkhazia remains an Autonomous Republic within the state of Georgia. "Basic Principles for the Division of Competencies between Tbilisi and Sukhumi" are agreed.
27 Dec.	Clashes between Georgian civilians and Abkhaz security forces.
2003 Feb.	A high-level international meeting to solve the Abkhaz conflict is held in Geneva.
10 Mar.	Georgia offers to establish a federation with Abkhazia; the offer is rejected by Prime Minister Raul Khajimba.
June	The Finnish diplomat Heikki Talvitie is appointed the EU's first Special Representative for the South Caucasus.

2004	The change of regime in Tbilisi in November 2003 leads to new hope that the conflict will be resolved. UNOMIG's mandate is extended. UNOMIG currently comprises 118 military and eleven civilian observers. <sup>32</sup> Transport routes to Abkhazia are opened and extended (Sochi to Sukhumi). The Council of the European Union and the European Commission resolve to include the South Caucasus in the concept of the "New Neighbourhood Policy".
May	First EU expert-level conference on the South Caucasus. In Ajaria, Aslan Abashidze is overthrown. Tbilisi re-establishes the authority of the central government.
June	Renewed tension in South Ossetia.
31 July	After a Turkish ship comes under fire in Abkhaz waters, Abkhazia abandons the process of negotiating a settlement of the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict. The Georgian president no longer rules out stronger measures.
Aug.	The EU announces it will provide four million euros to victims of the Abkhaz conflict. The funds will be used to help displaced persons in Georgia, Abkhazia, and West Georgia.
3 Oct.	Presidential elections in Abkhazia.

In 2003, Abkhazia celebrated the tenth anniversary of the "victory in the struggle for independence". It remains, however, very far from being a success story.

Although Abkhazia has succeeded in establishing its own state institutions and non-state organizations (which are described as functional, despite the high levels of corruption), the status quo is still regularly challenged by acts of violence. The process of separating from the Georgian "motherland", war, and international isolation have condemned the region to a permanent economic and social crisis with no prospect of development. Pursuing a one-sided pro-Russian course has greatly increased Abkhazia's political and economic dependence. The majority of the Abkhaz population have adopted Russian citizenship<sup>33</sup> (mainly in order to receive internationally valid travel documents, work permits or pensions), and out of what was originally an *ad hoc* arrangement in a crisis situation, the Russian influence has come to be accepted as an everyday part of life.

Besides the basic unsolved issue of Abkhazia's status under international law, an ongoing cause of tension is the issue of refugee return and the legal position of the Georgians who were expelled from Abkhazia. Tens of thousands of Georgian refugees have returned to the southern region of Gali

32 As of 31 October 2004, see: <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/unomig/>.

33 The population is currently estimated at 214,000 (including 60,000 Georgian returnees in Gali District), of which 64,000 are Abkhaz (before the war, there were over 100,000), 70,000 Armenian, and 40,000 Russian. Abkhaz passports are to be issued as of 1 November 2004, finally replacing the Soviet and Georgian passports that currently remain in use.

and continue to do so in an unorganized fashion and under catastrophic security conditions.<sup>34</sup> These two fundamental problems were the focus of heated debate on internal affairs in the run-up to the presidential election (which was not recognized by the international community) held on 3 October 2004 between followers of Ardzinba and opposition candidates.<sup>35</sup> The possibility of Ardzinba being overthrown by force under the leadership of “Amtsakhara”, the “Organization of Veterans of the War of 1992/93”, had been indicated as early as the spring of 2003.

When, on 11 October 2004, the electoral commission announced the victory of Sergei Bagapsh, the opposition politician and managing director of the state power company Chernomorenergo, who, with 50.08 per cent of the vote, had beaten “Moscow’s candidate” and former Prime Minister Raul Khajimba, the tension between government and opposition came to a head. Under pressure from the incumbent president, the results were declared invalid and new elections called for the end of December. There followed demonstrations, attacks on the supreme court, as well as TV and radio stations, and parliament ceased to function.

The government in Tbilisi reacted with mixed feelings to the political unrest in Abkhazia. Alongside hopes that peace negotiations could be held, which had been revived by the change of regime in Georgia in November 2003, have come fear of a further escalation. It is necessary to wait and see to what extent Russia is prepared to give up its strategic “outpost” of Abkhazia and to accept a government that is more moderate and willing to negotiate. At the same time, the unrest in Abkhazia, new waves of refugees, and an attack on the neighbouring regions of Samegrelo and Imeriti could provide the Georgian side with a pretext to attempt a military solution.

However, all the conflict parties know that a non-violent resolution to the conflict requires time to overcome the estrangement of Abkhaz and Georgian societies and to build trust in the idea of coexisting as equals. In the meantime, hope remains that, with international support, the Georgian government will succeed in proving that it can consistently and reliably pursue a policy of non-violence and can enter into negotiations to end the conflict with an Abkhaz leadership that may be more willing to compromise.

---

34 Cf. *Politischer Jahresbericht der Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung 2004* [Annual Political Report of the Heinrich Böll Foundation], Tbilisi 2004, p. 12.

35 The five candidates in the election received a total of 87,442 votes, 44,002 of which went to Bagapsh and 30,815 to Khajimba.