
16. The Georgian–Abkhazian conflict

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I. Introduction

The Abkhaz have long populated the western Caucasus. They currently number about 100 000 people, speak one of the languages of the Abkhazo-Adygeyan (west Caucasian) language group, and live in the coastal areas on the southern slopes of the Caucasian ridge and along the Black Sea coast. Together with closely related peoples of the western Caucasus (for example, the Abazins, Adygeyans and Kabardians (or Circassians)) they play an important role in the Caucasian ethno-cultural community and consider themselves an integral part of its future. At the same time, the people living in coastal areas on the southern slopes of the Caucasian ridge have achieved broader communication with Asia Minor and the Mediterranean civilizations than any other people of the Caucasus. The geographical position of Abkhazia on the Black Sea coast has made its people a major factor in the historical process of the western Caucasus, acting as an economic and cultural bridge with the outside world.

Georgians and Abkhaz have been neighbours from time immemorial. The Georgians currently number about 4 million people. The process of national consolidation of the Georgian nation is still far from complete: it includes some 20 subgroups, and the Megrelians (sometimes called Mingrelians) and Svans who live in western Georgia are so different in language and culture from other Georgians that it would be more correct to consider them as separate peoples. Some scholars, Hewitt, for example,¹ suggest calling the Georgian nation not ‘Georgians’ but by their own name, Kartvelians, which includes the Georgians, Megrelians and Svans.² To call all the different Kartvelian groups ‘Georgians’ obscures the true ethnic situation. Increasingly, scholars prefer to distinguish between Georgians, Megrelians and Svans, the Georgians being the population of eastern Georgia.³

Historically, Georgian–Abkhaz interaction has alternated between close cooperation and bitter fighting. The beginning of the current Georgian–Abkhaz

¹ Hewitt, G. (ed.), *The Abkhazians: A Handbook*, Peoples of the Caucasus Handbooks (St Martins Press: New York, 1999), pp. 13–16. See also Coppieters, B., Darchiashvili, D. and Akaba, N. (eds), *Praktika Federalizma: Poiski Alternativ dlya Gruzii i Abkhazii* [Practice of federalism: exploring alternatives for Georgia and Abkhazia] (Ves'mir: Moscow, 1999) p. 21.

² The names ‘Georgia’ and ‘Georgian’ most likely derive from the Persian ‘Gurgistan’ and ‘Gurg’ (‘the country of wolves’, ‘wolf’). They first appear in Russian chronicles and documents in the 15th century. The Megrelians are the most numerous in the Kartvelian linguistic group: estimates range from 20% to 30% of the group. This is the primary factor which has prevented their rapid assimilation by Georgians.

³ Mehtiev, A., ‘Baku i Tbilisi nuzhny drug drugu’ [Baku and Tbilisi need each other], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 17 Sep. 1992; and Zhidkov, S., *Brosok Maloy Imperii* [The spurt of a small empire] (Adygeya: Maikop, 1996).

conflict can be traced back to the 1870s when, after the end of the Caucasian war, there was a mass resettlement of Abkhaz to Turkey (the Mahajcers). As a result the Abkhaz territory along the Black Sea—divided into two parts, the north-west (Bzibean) and the south-east (Abjuan)—has since been populated by various nationalities, including Armenians, Greeks, Megrelians and Russians, thus giving modern Abkhazia its multi-ethnic character.

The Georgian nationalist movement that emerged in the 19th century defined the 'primordial Georgian territory' as being that which lay within the borders of the medieval Georgian empire of the 10th–13th centuries. This ignored the initially multi-ethnic character of the state. The first attempts by the movement to base the development of the Georgian state on these 'historical lands' were made after the Russian Empire disintegrated, during the period of the independent Georgian republic (1918–21). In Abkhazia and other ethnic minority areas a policy of assimilation began, with the mass resettlement of Georgians to Abkhazia and the declaration of Georgian as the state language. This policy combined with acts of violence and robberies by the Georgian armies caused many protests among the population of Abkhazia, including some of the local Megrelians.⁴ The establishment of Soviet rule in Abkhazia in March 1921 was, therefore, welcomed by the people and heralded as the end of national oppression and of the Georgian occupation.

In 1921 Abkhazia received the status of a Soviet Republic allied with Georgia by a special treaty, but its status was downgraded in February 1931 to that of an autonomous republic within Georgia with the aim of facilitating the assimilation of the Abkhaz by Georgians. Soviet Communist Party General Secretary Joseph Stalin (a Georgian) regarded the Abkhaz as a primitive people who were to be assimilated by the 'culturally advanced' Georgians.⁵ The period from 1931 to the early 1950s was particularly tragic in the history of Abkhazia. It saw the 'Georgianization' of Abkhazia, which for all intents and purposes meant the genocide of its indigenous population and included the physical extermination of the Abkhaz intelligentsia, the expulsion of Abkhaz from the management of all administrative and public organizations and state enterprises, the closure of Abkhaz schools and the forcible enrolment of Abkhaz children into Georgian schools, the prohibition of teaching in the Abkhaz language in high schools, the replacement of Abkhaz names with Georgian ones, restricted social security for persons of Abkhaz ethnicity, unwritten privileges for Georgians, the massive resettlement of Georgians into Abkhazia, the persecution of Abkhaz culture and the falsification of Abkhaz history.⁶

All through the Soviet period the main goal of the Georgian leadership and of the Georgian nationalist movement as a whole was the creation of a con-

⁴ Mescheryakov, N. V., 'Men'shevistskom rayu: iz vpechatlenii poezdki v Gruziiyu' [In Menshevik paradise: from impressions of a trip to Georgia] (Gosizdat: Moscow, 1921); and Denikin, A., 'Ocherki russkoy smuty' [Studies in Russian troubled times] (Slovo: Berlin, 1925).

⁵ Stalin, J., *Sochineniya* [Works] (Politizdat: Moscow, 1946), vol. 2, pp. 350–51.

⁶ Russian Academy of Sciences, Institute of Sociopolitical Studies, *O Bezopasnosti Rossii v Svyazi s Sobytiyami v Abkhazii* [On Russia's security in connection with events in Abkhazia], Analytical paper (Russian Academy of Sciences: Moscow, 1993), pp. 3–4.

solidated Georgian nation in the shortest possible time. With Stalin in power, when the influence of the Georgian lobby in the Kremlin was at its greatest, this policy was carried out by repressive methods. Some peoples were deported from Georgia (Greeks, Kurds and Meskhetian Turks). Others, not even related to the Kartvelians, were declared part of the 'Georgian tribes' and along with Svans and Megrelians were quickly assimilated.

After Stalin's death the Georgian lobby in the central Soviet Government remained but was weakened. From the mid-1950s the Georgian republican authorities were forced by the Soviet Government to stop the worst forms of discrimination against the Abkhaz, but the mass resettlement of Georgians to Abkhazia continued. As a result, at the end of the 1980s the share of Abkhaz in the 525 000-strong population of Abkhazia was reduced to 17.8 per cent while the share of the Georgian population reached 45.7 per cent.⁷ In the mid-1950s, in line with the ideological goals of the resettlement policy, a theory was fabricated declaring the true Abkhaz to be 'an ancient cultural Georgian tribe living on the territory of Abkhazia' and describing the modern Abkhaz as descendants of backward highlanders, Apsuaers,⁸ who ostensibly moved into Abkhazia from the north in the 17th century.⁹ The thesis of the 'resettlement of the Apsuaers' became part of a racist theory asserting a supposed primordial superiority of the 'civilized' Georgians over their neighbours—a theory which dominated in Georgian science and public consciousness. Widespread promotion of this theory caused sharp protests from the Abkhaz intelligentsia and aggravated inter-ethnic relations. Tensions between Abkhaz and Georgians became particularly evident in 1957, 1964, 1967 and 1978 when there were mass protest actions by the Abkhaz population and only emergency intervention by the central government prevented further escalation of the conflict.¹⁰

At the end of the 1980s, in conditions of a growing crisis of the central government, the contradictions between the Abkhaz and the Georgians assumed much sharper forms. The Georgian nationalist movement raised demands for national independence and the creation of a mono-ethnic Georgian state within its 'historical borders'. The Abkhaz actively opposed Georgian separatism. The 'Abkhaz letter' of 1988 formulated a demand for the restoration to Abkhazia of the status of Soviet Socialist republic it enjoyed in 1921–31.¹¹

⁷ *Belaya Kniga Abkhazii: Dokumenty, Materialy, Svidetel'stva* [White book of Abkhazia: documents, materials, evidence] (Vnekom: Moscow, 1993), p. 30. The remainder of the population was made up of Armenians, Greeks, Russians, Ukrainians and others.

⁸ From the Abkhaz' own name for themselves, 'Apsua'.

⁹ Zoroliani, G., Lekishvili, S. and Toidze, L., *Istoricheskiye i Politiko-Pravovye Aspekty Konfliktov v Abkhazii* [Historical and politico-legal aspects of the conflict in Abkhazia] (Metsniereba: Tbilisi, 1995), pp. 12–13; and Pipia, B. and Chikviladze, Z., *Raspyataya Gruzija* [Crucified Georgia] (Pechatny Dvor: St Petersburg, 1995), p. 9.

¹⁰ Vasilyeva, O., *Gruzija kak Model' Postkommunisticheskoy Transformatsii* [Georgia as a model of post-communist transformation] (Gorbachev-Fond: Moscow, 1993), p. 31.

¹¹ *Abkhaziya v Sovetskuyu Epokhu: Abkhazskiy Pis'ma (1947–1989): Sbornik Dokumentov* [Abkhazia during the Soviet epoch: Abkhaz letters (1947–1989): Collection of documents] (El-Fa: Sukhumi, 1992), vol. 1, p. 435. The appeals by Abkhaz political and public figures to the central Soviet Government known as the 'Abkhaz letters' played an important role in the Abkhaz national movement and the history of inter-ethnic relations in Abkhazia. The story of the Abkhaz letters was published in this collection.

In 1989–91 a wave of inter-ethnic conflicts swept through Georgia, behind which Georgian radicals saw the ‘hand of Moscow’. In fact the growth of inter-ethnic tensions could be attributed to the activists for Georgian independence, who called for policies of ‘de-Armenianization’ and ‘de-Azerbaijanization’, the abolition of all autonomies, and even a state birth control programme to limit the expansion of the non-Georgian population. In 1990 the ultra-radical (later President) Zviad Gamsakhurdia elevated the idea of a mono-ethnic Georgian state into official policy. The autonomy of South Ossetia was abolished and open persecution of the non-Georgian population began.¹²

In Abkhazia, following major clashes in 1989 between Abkhaz and Georgians, the conflict was reflected in legislation. Under the slogan of a return to the independent republic of 1918–21, Tbilisi annulled all legal acts of the Soviet period, including those on the allied status of Georgia and Abkhazia (1921) and on the autonomy of Abkhazia within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (1931). In response, in August 1990, the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia adopted a Declaration of the State Sovereignty of the Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic. It declared Abkhazia a ‘sovereign socialist state having all the power of authority on its territory except the rights voluntarily delegated by it to the USSR and Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic by the previous agreements’.¹³ A ‘war of laws’ followed: all Abkhazian legislation was annulled by the Georgian Government. As a result authority was increasingly paralysed in Abkhazia and Tbilisi rapidly lost control of the situation.

After Gamsakhurdia’s overthrow in January 1992 the situation in Abkhazia deteriorated further. The war which broke out in 1992–93 was the peak of the conflict between Abkhazia and Georgia, characterized by the aspirations of the Abkhaz to secure their national and physical survival and by the desire of the Georgians to achieve national consolidation on the basis of their own ethnos and to create a mono-ethnic Georgian state on a territory with a multinational population and within completely artificial borders.

Originally Georgian propaganda justified the military intervention in Abkhazia by the need to protect the safety of the railways and to free Georgian officials taken hostage by followers of Gamsakhurdia. Realizing the absurdity of these allegations, President Eduard Shevardnadze later laid the blame for starting the war on Tengiz Kitovani, Minister of Defence for Georgia and a member of the Military Council that had overthrown Gamsakhurdia, alleging that Kitovani had ordered the army into Abkhazia without Shevardnadze’s knowledge. Shevardnadze described the Georgian Army’s actions in Abkhazia as intolerable: ‘I will not even mention the inadmissible methods they used. Tanks, armoured vehicles, removal of the flag from the House of Government

¹² Vasilyeva (note 10), pp. 29–46.

¹³ ‘Deklaratsiya o gosudarstvennom suverenitete Abkhazskoy Sovetskoy Sotsialisticheskoy respubliki: Prinyata X sessiyei Verkhovnogo Soveta Abkhazskoy ASSR 11 sozyva 25 avgusta 1990 goda’ [The Declaration of the state sovereignty of the Abkhaz Soviet Socialist republic adopted by the 10th session of the 11th Supreme Soviet of the Abkhaz ASSR, 25 Aug. 1990], available at URL <<http://www.apsny.org>>; and *Abkhaziya: Khronika Neob'yavlennoy Voyny* [Abkhazia: chronicle of undeclared war] (Luch: Moscow, 1992), part 1, pp. 12–15.

as if it were a foreign country . . . Much of what was done then cannot be justified and cannot be regarded as normal'.¹⁴

In fact there is no doubt that the Georgian-Abkhazian war was provoked not by the situation in Abkhazia—the situation there was calmer than in neighbouring Megrelia, where numerous armed gangs of 'Zviadists'¹⁵ were operating—but by the situation in Tbilisi following the overthrow of Gamsakhurdia. It was probably the personal interests of the members of the Military Council (later the State Council of Georgia) that were behind the military campaign in Abkhazia. For each of them: 'A victory over Abkhazia could be a new important step in his political career. For Shevardnadze, however, this war could open much broader prospects. For the "new opposition" he was a former opponent, a stranger; he was still a Russian citizen with a Moscow residence; his strength was the support he received from Moscow, but he could never achieve the admiration among the Georgian people that Gamsakhurdia enjoyed'.¹⁶ For Shevardnadze therefore a war in Abkhazia was absolutely necessary: without it, the consolidation of his personal power and defeat of his political opponents were inconceivable. In fact it was the war in Abkhazia that allowed him to put down public discontent in Megrelia,¹⁷ to strengthen his own position in Tbilisi, and to dismiss and then arrest those who had overthrown Gamsakhurdia and invited Shevardnadze himself to Georgia (for example, Djaba Ioseliani and Tengiz Kitovani). Thus the Georgian-Abkhazian war was the price which the population of Georgia paid for Shevardnadze's return to power.

Shevardnadze probably received approval for a military operation in Abkhazia from Russian President Boris Yeltsin. It was hardly coincidental that one day before fighting broke out Russia transferred tanks, helicopters, artillery pieces and other military equipment to the Georgian armed forces. However, in spite of its overwhelming superiority in arms and numbers over the Abkhaz militia, the Georgian Army failed to achieve a quick victory.

The massive and fierce resistance that the Georgian Army met came as a surprise for the Georgian leaders, but was completely natural: the Abkhaz population regarded the Georgian military intervention as a real threat to its very existence.¹⁸ The Abkhazian leadership, relying on the support of the public, also succeeded in quickly creating Abkhazian territorial armed forces. They received fast and effective help from the neighbouring peoples of the North Caucasus as a result of the traditional ethnic solidarity among the Abkhaz-Adygeya peoples. Furthermore, the activities of the Georgian leadership appeared so scandalous

¹⁴ Kalinin, Yu., 'Zerkala separatizma: Eduard Shevardnadze v pervuyey rasskazal o taynakh nachala gruzino-abkhazskoy voyny' [Mirrors of separatism: Eduard Shevardnadze discloses for the first time mysteries of how the Georgian-Abkhazian war began], *Moskovskiy Komsomolets*, 10 Feb. 1996.

¹⁵ Followers of Zviad Gamsakhurdia.

¹⁶ Zhidkov (note 3).

¹⁷ Gamsakhurdia was a Megrelian, and it is in Megrelia that the influence of his followers, the 'Zviadists', is strongest.

¹⁸ One month after the hostilities began the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Abkhaz Republic adopted a special resolution which described 'mass terror, physical extermination of people, torture of prisoners and hostages carried out by the State Council of Georgia in Abkhazia as an act of genocide of the Abkhaz nation'. 'On genocide of the Abkhaz nation', Resolution no. 10-127, Gudauta, 16 Sep. 1992.

and unfair that there was a large influx of volunteers from different parts of the former Soviet Union, including Chechens, Ossetians, Russians and Ukrainians, to fight the Georgian Army. Usually these volunteers formed international brigades but the Cossacks from southern Russia formed their own units.¹⁹

Initially the Abkhazian armed forces experienced an acute shortage of arms. There is widespread opinion in the West that they received their arms from the Russian military.²⁰ In the view of the present author, based on numerous interviews with local veterans of the Georgian–Abkhazian war, arms were indeed often purchased from the Russian military but this was the result of private deals, reflecting the progressive disintegration of government authority under Yeltsin, and did not represent a refined Byzantine approach to the conflict on the part of the Russian authorities. Moreover, when the Georgian Army was defeated at Gagra in 1992 the Abkhazian Army seized a large amount of modern military equipment, including tanks, surface-to-air missile systems and artillery pieces, which eased their arms and ammunition shortage.

The Georgian–Abkhazian war lasted over a year and was very bloody and destructive. About 20 000 civilians died in Abkhazia;²¹ material damage was estimated at \$11.5 billion.²² The war resulted in a fundamental change in the ethnic groups in the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict. Although the attitudes of Georgians, Megrelians and Svans differed,²³ the local Georgian population on the whole supported the military action. Other ethnic groups, initially neutral in the conflict, later adopted a pro-Abkhaz position as a result of robberies and other excesses by the Georgian military. Thus, since 1992 the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict has assumed the character of a confrontation between the Georgian state and the local Georgian community, on the one hand, and the rest of the multi-ethnic population of Abkhazia, on the other hand.

II. The post-war situation

After the defeat of the Georgian Army and the flight of part of the local Georgian population from Abkhazia,²⁴ the political position of the Abkhazian leadership solidified. The overwhelming majority of the population consistently

¹⁹ 'Konfederatsiya gorskikh narodov Kavkaza vstupayet v boy' [The Confederation of Caucasian Mountain Peoples joins the fight], *Krasnaya Zvezda*, 27 Aug. 1992, p. 1: and Leontyeva, L., 'The path of war', *Moscow News*, 6–13 Sep. 1992.

²⁰ *Gruziya/Abkhaziya: Narusheniya Zakonov Vedeniya Voyny i Rol' Rossii v Konflikte* [Georgia/Abkhazia: violations of the laws of war and Russia's role in the conflict] (Human Rights Watch: Helsinki, 1995).

²¹ *Stabilizatsiya Mezhnatsionalnykh i Sotsiokulturnykh Otnoshenii na Kavkaze* [Stabilization of inter-ethnic and socio-cultural relations in the Caucasus] (Etnosfera: Moscow, 1999), p. 87.

²² Mukhin, V., 'Abkhaziya nikogda ne stanet avtonomnoy edinitsey Gruzii' [Abkhazia will never become an autonomy of Georgia], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 29 Sep. 2000.

²³ The attitude taken by Megrelians towards the war is described in Zhidkov (note 3), pp. 236–37.

²⁴ According to the Department of Statistics of the Government of Abkhazia, by 1995 the population of Abkhazia was reduced to 313 000, of which 29.1% were Abkhaz, 28.7% Georgians, 19.8% Armenians, 16.5% Russians, 2.6% Ukrainians, 1.1% Greeks and 2.2% others. Krylov, A., *Post-Sovetskaya Abkhaziya: Traditsii, Religii, Narod* [Post-Soviet Abkhazia: traditions, religions, people] (OOAgent: Moscow, 1999), p. 11.

supported independence and a strongly pro-Russian orientation. Internal political stability allowed Abkhazia's leaders to resolve the country's economic problems in spite of isolation from the outside world.

Abkhazia's economic achievements were especially evident in comparison with Georgia's. Its social and economic infrastructure was restored without foreign aid and relied entirely on Abkhazia's domestic potential. The greatest success was in the production of electric power. While in Georgia over the past eight years the energy crisis has resulted in restrictions on public electricity consumption (to six hours per day, and during the winter months of 2001 only one or two hours per day), in Abkhazia there were no such restrictions and electric power tariffs for ordinary consumers remained the lowest throughout the former Soviet Union. In 1999 Abkhazia harvested about 10 000 tons of tea and 1000 tons of tobacco, while exporting over 20 000 tons of citrus crops, achieving a positive trade balance for the first time since the end of the war.²⁵

After the breakup of the Soviet Union the leaders of Abkhazia considered reunion with Russia a priority task. An appeal of the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia to the Supreme Soviet of the Russian Federation dated 23 March 1993 asked it to 'return the Republic of Abkhazia into the Russian fold, or to place it under the protection of Russia in the appropriate international legal form'.²⁶ A resolution adopted at a mass meeting held in Abkhazia on 16 April 1995 repeated the request to the Russian Government for a reunion of Abkhazia and Russia.²⁷ However, there was no positive reaction to these requests. Russia's policy was clearly pro-Georgian policy at that time, and the Abkhazian leadership was forced to work towards legalizing the state's independence. On 3 October 1999, along with the presidential elections in Abkhazia, a referendum was held in the country in which the overwhelming majority of Abkhazians (97.7 per cent of voters) supported the creation of an independent and democratic Abkhazian state.²⁸ On the basis of the result, on 12 October 1999 Abkhazia adopted an Act of State Independence of the Republic of Abkhazia.²⁹

Understanding that in the circumstances it would be impossible to achieve *de jure* recognition of Abkhazia's independence by the world community, the Abkhazian leadership agreed to possible coexistence with Georgia in a 'common state' within the borders of the former Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. At the same time Abkhazia rejected the status of autonomy and agreed to build relations with Georgia only on the basis of equality within a common state whose functions would be limited to foreign policy, defence, finance, border

²⁵ Mukhin (note 22).

²⁶ *Gruzino-Abkhazskiy Konflikt: Proshloye, Nastoyascheye, Perspektivy Uregulirovaniya* [The Georgian-Abkhazian conflict: past, present and prospects of settlement] (Institute of Diaspora and Integration, Institute of the CIS Countries: Moscow, 1998), p. 27.

²⁷ 'Obrashcheniye skhoda mnogonatsional'nogo naroda Abkhazii, posvyashchennogo 185-letiyu dobrovol'nogo vkhazheniya Abkhazii v sostav Rossii' [Appeal of the mass meeting of the multinational people of Abkhazia devoted to the 185th anniversary of the voluntary entry of Abkhazia into Russia], Sukhumi, 16 Apr. 1995 (copy in SIPRI archive).

²⁸ See the Internet site of the Republic of Abkhazia (Apsny), URL <<http://www.apsny.org>>.

²⁹ Akt Gosudarstvennoy Nezavisimosti Respubliki Abkhaziya [Act of state independence of the Republic of Abkhazia], Sukhumi, 12 Oct. 1999 (copy in SIPRI archive).

protection and customs services. Initially the Georgian leadership agreed with this approach. It was reflected in the joint Statement on Measures for a Political Settlement of 4 April 1994 in which Georgia and Abkhazia agreed to act as equal sides and pledged to resume official relations on this basis.³⁰ Later, however, the Georgian leadership changed its position and refused to build relations with Abkhazia on the basis of equality.

The Georgian leadership did not blame Abkhazia's secession on its own policies but interpreted it as an annexation and occupation of the primordial territory of Georgia and as 'aggression of international terrorism against a sovereign state'.³¹ For Tbilisi the only acceptable resolution to the conflict was to grant Abkhazia the status of autonomy inside the unified Georgian state, and neither the future structure of the Georgian state nor a possible form of autonomy for Abkhazia were even discussed.

For the whole post-Soviet period Georgia's policy of state-building has been conducted on the basis of rigid unitarism. The result of this policy was a profound economic crisis and the progressive disintegration of Georgia. The government in Tbilisi lost control over all the autonomies that existed during the Soviet period (Abkhazia, Adzharia and South Ossetia), over Javaheti with its compact 130 000 Armenian population, and over many mountain areas such as Svanetia and the Pankisi gorge, which is populated by Chechen-Kistins.

The ruinous character of the policy of building a mono-ethnic state in a country where the share of ethnic minorities in the population is over 30 per cent was absolutely clear. However, the majority of Georgian legislators continued to take a negative attitude to any measures that might 'undermine the unity of the Georgian state'.³² The 1995 constitution proclaimed Georgia 'an independent, unified and indivisible' state and the term 'federalism' is not used in it. The constitution proclaims that 'citizens of Georgia regulate matters of local importance through local self-government as long as it does not encroach upon national sovereignty'. It also states that 'when conditions are appropriate and self-government bodies have been established throughout the territory of Georgia, the parliament shall be formed with two chambers: the Council of the Republic and the Senate'. In the future the Senate will consist of 'members elected from Abkhazia, Adzharia and other territorial units of Georgia as well as five members appointed by the President'.³³

Consisting exclusively of ethnic Georgians, the political leadership of Georgia³⁴ did not even consider the possibility of starting national construction on the basis of federalism rather than on the basis of a unitary state.

The Abkhazian problem remains the highest priority on Georgia's security agenda and it influences its approach to other conflicts. As one South Ossetian leader observed, 'a Georgian–Ossetian settlement will hardly be possible before a Georgian–Abkhazian settlement as South Ossetia does not anticipate having a

³⁰ The text of this Statement was published in Sukhumi on 5 Apr. 1994.

³¹ *Gruzino-Abkhazskiy Konflikt* (note 26), p. 15.

³² *Gruzino-Abkhazskiy Konflikt* (note 26), p. 15.

³³ The Constitution of Georgia, available at URL <<http://www.apsny.org>>.

³⁴ Coppieters *et al.* (note 1), p. 48.

status lower than that of Abkhazia'.³⁵ It is also clear that Adzharia will adopt a similar position. Although the Adzharian Government has not formally declared its intention to secede, it operates in a completely independent way and disregards the Tbilisi authorities. The customs, the office of the public prosecutor, the courts, the police and the coastguard are under its full control. Posts with armed units have been set up on the administrative borders of Adzharia to prevent any armed infiltration from Georgia. The authorities of Abkhazia and Adzharia maintain constant contact, and during the Georgian-Abkhazian war Adzharia declared its neutrality. The Adzharian authorities take their own position on the issue of the Russian military presence in the South Caucasus. They oppose the withdrawal of the Russian troops from the territory of Adzharia and have openly declared a pro-Russia policy.³⁶

Tbilisi's control over Javaheti is similarly only nominal. Its Armenian population is pro-Russian and pro-Armenian, and is increasingly demanding autonomy.³⁷ With the progressive disintegration of the Georgian state, such compact national minorities living in Georgia as the Megrelians and Svans, and then Georgian sub-ethnic groups such as the Cahetians, Gurians, Khevsurs and Tushins, may also demand autonomy. The possibility of the country splitting into many different parts as it was in the 13th-18th centuries until Georgia became part of the Russian Empire may therefore again become a reality. This would mean not only the collapse of the Georgian state but also a tragedy for the Georgian people.

It is logical therefore that the Georgian Government is only ready to give Abkhazia autonomous status. It has concentrated all its diplomatic efforts on the Georgian refugee problem. The return of the Georgian population to Abkhazia, which the Georgian leaders insist on, will obviously result in a renewal of hostilities, as it is completely unacceptable for the people of Abkhazia and its leadership. Natella Akaba, an Abkhazian political analyst, writes that among those who fall under the definition of 'refugees':

There are many people who committed criminal and military offences in 1992-93. Abkhazia is a small country: everybody knows nearly everything about their neighbours; the names of those who in the late 1980s demanded the liquidation of the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic and who in August 1992 wrote to the Georgian leaders asking for Georgian troops (which ended in bloody clashes) are well known. If they come back, another war will be inevitable.³⁸

³⁵ Hanbabjan, A., 'Gruziya-Abkhaziya... Obsuzhdeniye konstitutsionnogo statusa samoprovzglashennoy respubliki chrevato ser'yoznymi posledstviyami' [Georgia-Abkhazia... Discussion of the constitutional status of the self-proclaimed republic is fraught with serious consequences], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 19 Sep. 2000.

³⁶ Soidze, O. and Berdzenishvili, D., 'Protivostoyaniye mezhdru Tbilisi i Batumi ili o problemakh sobrannosti natsii i polnote gosudarstva' [Confrontation between Tbilisi and Batumi, or on problems of consolidation of the nation and completeness of the state], *Tsentral'naya Aziya i Kavkaz* (Luleå), no. 2 (2000), p. 214. On the Russian military presence, see section III in this chapter.

³⁷ Soidze and Berdzenishvili (note 36), pp. 217-18.

³⁸ Akaba, N., 'Georgian-Abkhazian conflict: rooted in the past, resolved in future', *Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Luleå), no. 6 (2000), p. 119.

At the same time neither the population of Abkhazia nor its leaders object to a gradual, staged return of refugees, first of all to the Gali region. However, the leadership of Georgia is strongly against this mode of resolving the refugee problem. In the opinion of Russian political analysts these objections are raised because 'a staged return of refugees presents a threat [to Georgia] of their "political" assimilation and gradual integration into the Abkhazian state, in particular because the Sukhumi authorities are taking appropriate steps in this direction: among the deputies of the Abkhazian Parliament there are now two Georgians/Megrelians elected by the population of the Gali region'.³⁹

The mass return of Georgian refugees on which the Georgian leadership insists does not mean a peaceful resolution of the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict but is actually intended to help to create favourable conditions for a new military campaign for the conquest of Abkhazia, and after that of other rebellious regions and peoples in Georgia.

III. The position of Russia

The official position of the Russian Federation on the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict is based on the recognition of the inviolability of Georgia's territorial integrity, inside which Abkhazia should be given broad political rights. On the basis of this position Russia has acted as an intermediary helping the conflicting sides conclude the Memorandum of Understanding (December 1993), the Agreement on Refugees and the Statement on Measures for Political Settlement of April 1993. At the request of both sides, in July 1994 a Russian peace-keeping force numbering about 2500 soldiers moved into a security zone along the Georgia–Abkhazia border.⁴⁰

Soon after the deployment, Russian diplomacy ceased to take the interests of the Abkhazian side into account and began to act as a lobbyist for Georgian interests. The then Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Andrey Kozyrev, 'drew himself a plan for the economic suffocation of Abkhazia, having shown a good understanding for the specific features of its subtropical economy'.⁴¹ Under this plan, in December 1994 the Russian Government established a 'special' regime of economic and political relations with Abkhazia which actually meant a blockade of Abkhazia and its isolation not only from Russia but also from the rest of the world.⁴² The purpose of Russian diplomacy at that time was to force the Abkhazian Government to accept such conditions as would mean full capitulation to Tbilisi.⁴³ However, the economic and political blockade of

³⁹ *Gruzino-Abkhazskiy Konflikt* (note 26), pp. 19–20.

⁴⁰ The number of Russian peacekeepers in Abkhazia is not constant. Initially they numbered 2500, but by the end of 1996 that was reduced to 1500. By the end of 2000 the number of Russian peacekeepers in Abkhazia was 1747. Figure supplied by the Russian Embassy in Stockholm, 26 Feb. 2001.

⁴¹ *Gruzino-Abkhazskiy Konflikt* (note 26), p. 25.

⁴² Government of the Russian Federation Decree no. 1394, 19 Dec. 1994.

⁴³ The dominance of the Georgian lobby in the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs was largely explained by a 'personnel heritage' left by Eduard Shevardnadze, former Minister of Foreign Affairs of the USSR under Mikhail Gorbachev. Reflecting this, in the middle of 1990s a popular joke was to call the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia.

Abkhazia not only did not help resolve the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict; it strengthened the animosity of the population of Abkhazia towards Georgia. It did not, however, result in anti-Russian feelings: both the Abkhazian authorities and the general public viewed it as the result of diplomatic intrigues by Tbilisi with the Georgian lobby in Moscow and of Western pressure on Russia.

The blockade of Abkhazia completely contradicted Russia's national interests, and it was severely criticized in both houses of the Russian Parliament.⁴⁴ It could have meant the destabilization of the situation and the undermining of Russia's positions in the entire western Caucasus. However, it was never completely implemented because of the progressive crisis of the Yeltsin Administration and its inability to persuade the regions to implement decisions taken at the federal level. Many subjects of the Russian Federation—Bashkortostan, Tatarstan, Krasnodar Krai (territory) and the republics of the North Caucasus—continued political and economic relations with Abkhazia against the wishes of the central government.

Georgian-Russian cooperation did not bring either side the expected benefits. It did not protect Russia's geopolitical interests and did not guarantee the preservation of its military bases in Georgia. The Georgian Government was extremely disappointed that Russia did not expand the powers of its peace-keeping force by giving it police functions over the entire territory of Abkhazia: according to Tbilisi's plans, Russia should first pacify Abkhazia and then return it to Georgian rule.

Long before Yeltsin's departure from office in December 1999 the policy of Tbilisi turned anti-Russian. In the hope of military intervention by the West in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, Georgian diplomacy called for the creation around Russia of a 'belt of democratic states' and actively supported the idea of creating a uniform Caucasus (without the participation of Russia); the policy aimed to destabilize the situation in the North Caucasus and remove Russia from the South Caucasus.

Many Georgian leaders are convinced that after the disintegration of the Soviet Union the confrontation between Russia and the West continues. They therefore pin their hopes on military intervention by the West in the Abkhazian conflict since, in their opinion, the Abkhazian problem is not only Georgia's problem but 'is linked to those world processes of which we are eyewitnesses; that is, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the beginning of a new redistribution of the world . . . Georgia becomes a stable partner of the West which, in its turn, tries to complete the process which has been started—to crush the Russian Empire by all possible means'.⁴⁵

Such a policy adopted by Tbilisi could only worsen relations with Russia. It is sharply criticised by the Georgian opposition who regard it as 'unceremoniously

⁴⁴ Resolution of the State Duma no. 1640, 2 June 1997; Appeal of the Federation Council to President Boris Yeltsin no. 166, 15 May 1997; and Appeal of the State Duma to the Government of the Russian Federation, 11 Jan. 1999.

⁴⁵ Nadareishvili, T., 'Ya ne nadeyus' chto abkhazskiy vopros reshitsya mirnym putyom' [I do not believe that the Abkhazian problem will be resolved peacefully], *Tsentral'naya Aziya i Kavkaz* (Luleå), no. 2 (2000), p. 27.

ignoring Russia's national interests' and as a manifestation of 'irrational Russophobia' on the part of the Georgian Government.⁴⁶

With Vladimir Putin's rise to power, Russia ceased to consider Georgia as its political ally in the region. Its position on the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict also changed. In September 1999 Putin, then Russian Prime Minister, annulled the 'special' regime on the border with Abkhazia, thus lifting the economic blockade.⁴⁷ In November 2000, the President of Abkhazia, Vladislav Ardzinba, visited Moscow for the first time in several years for bilateral Abkhazian–Russian consultations on political and economic issues. In particular, discussions focused on the Abkhazian leadership's desire to maintain the Russian military presence in the South Caucasus as it is the one major factor for stability, and on its opposition to the proposed closure of the Russian military base at Gudauta in Abkhazia.⁴⁸

When frontier areas of Georgia were transformed into rear bases for Chechen separatists and there were allegations that official Tbilisi was supporting them,⁴⁹ there was a crisis in Georgian–Russian relations. In December 2000 Russia (for the first time within the framework of the Commonwealth of Independent States, the CIS) introduced a visa regime for citizens of Georgia; however, the regime did not apply to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The conclusion can be drawn that Russia has begun to develop a new system for addressing its interests in the South Caucasus. Active participants in this system are now not only Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia but also the unrecognized states in the region, including Abkhazia. Thus all the states in the South Caucasus that exist *de facto* may form important elements of stability and political balance in the region, which is a strategically important one for Russia.

IV. The position of the West

The Western countries support Georgia's territorial integrity and take a one-sidedly pro-Georgian position. During the Georgian–Abkhazian war the West did not condemn Georgia for excessive use of force and did not express concern over the violations of basic human rights and individual freedoms perpetrated by the Georgian military. It approved the introduction of repressive sanctions against Abkhazia as 'the most effective means of achieving political peace',⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Kobalia, V., 'Rossiya zakhlopнула dver' k spaseniyu' [Russia slams the door to rescue], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 24 Feb. 2001.

⁴⁷ Government of the Russian Federation Decree no. 1029, 9 Sep. 1999.

⁴⁸ 'O kharaktere rossiyskogo-abkhazskikh peregovorov' [The character of the Russian–Abkhazian negotiations], *Apsnypress* (Sukhumi), no. 225 (22 Nov. 2000). In June 2001 the Abkhazian leadership initiated a blockade of the base at Gudauta, thus preventing its closure and withdrawal of military equipment from the base. TV1 (Tbilisi), 14 June 2001, in 'Georgia: Abkhaz foreign minister says Russian hardware should remain in Abkhazia', Foreign Broadcast Information Service, *Daily Report–Central Eurasia* (FBIS-SOV), FBIS-SOV-2001-0614, 14 June 2001; and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL), *RFE/RL Newslines*, vol. 5, no. 127, Part I (9 July 2001).

⁴⁹ Broladze, N., 'Kuda ischezli narushiteli granitsy?' [Where have border infringers disappeared?], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 23 Nov. 2000; and Aleksandrov, V., 'Na kholmakh Gruzii—bandity' [Gangsters on the hills of Georgia], *Trud*, 28 Nov. 2000.

⁵⁰ *Gruzino-Abkhazskiy Konflikt* (note 26), p. 25.

refused to consider the security needs of Abkhazia and concentrated all its criticism on the Abkhazian leadership.⁵¹ This unbalanced position only increased the mistrust between the conflicting parties and caused the Abkhazian Government to take a negative attitude to any Western diplomatic initiative.

Meeting the leaders of the three South Caucasus states at the UN Millennium Summit in New York in September 2000, then US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright 'made it clear that all future American Administrations will continue to consider the post-Soviet space a zone of the US strategic and vital interests'.⁵² NATO's adoption in April 1999 of the concept of humanitarian intervention, which meant that military intervention by NATO in the internal affairs of foreign states would be permissible, raised hopes in Georgia that a military action similar to that carried out by NATO in Yugoslavia might be taken in Abkhazia.

Georgia has expressed its interest in replacing the Russian peacekeeping force with other foreign forces.⁵³ Although this initiative found support in Turkey and Ukraine, the West refused to consider sending forces to Abkhazia as it could not risk 'sustaining losses there similar to those incurred in previous years by the Russian contingents participating in peace-making operations'.⁵⁴

Hoping to attract the military intervention of the West in the conflict, Georgia expressed its determination to join NATO quickly.⁵⁵ This appeared impossible. Conditions for the acceptance of new members include economic stabilization, the resolution of conflicts on the territory of an applicant, the attainment of NATO standards of military equipment and training, and constructive relations with neighbours. As a result, despite the constant expansion of cooperation between Georgia and NATO in the military sphere, the West has limited its activity in the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict to sending military observers.⁵⁶

In recent years the policy of Western countries in the Caucasian region has been increasingly influenced by the 'oil factor'. In the mid-1990s the Western countries adopted a new energy security doctrine which called for the diversification of energy transport routes to Europe. The European Union (EU) introduced the TRACECA (the Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia) and INOGATE (Interstate Oil and Gas Transport to Europe) projects.⁵⁷ On this basis development began of a new system of transport routes for petroleum and gas to Europe from Central Asian and the South Caucasus. An oil pipeline from Baku to Supsa was laid through the territory of Georgia, its final section being

⁵¹ Coppieters *et al.* (note 1), p. 63.

⁵² Nuriev, E., 'No war, no peace in the Caucasus: the geopolitical game continues!', *Central Asia and the Caucasus* (Luleå), no. 6 (2000), p. 13.

⁵³ 'Gruziya predlagayet peresmotret' mandat mirotvortsev' [Georgia propose to review the peace-keepers' mandate], *Segodnya*, 24 Mar. 1997, p. 1. See also Lynch, D., *The Conflict in Abkhazia: Dilemmas in Russian 'Peacekeeping' Policy* (Royal Institute of International Affairs: London, 1998), pp. 31–36.

⁵⁴ Coppieters *et al.* (note 1), p. 58.

⁵⁵ Associated Press, 'Georgian leader hopes to join NATO', 29 Apr. 1999.

⁵⁶ In the UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG), tasked with verifying the compliance of both sides with the ceasefire agreement.

⁵⁷ For details see the TRACECA Internet site, URL <<http://www.traceca.org>>; and the INOGATE Internet site, URL <<http://www.inogate.com>>.

close to the zone of the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict. The economic penetration of the West into the South Caucasus and Central Asia also led to an increase of its political influence in these regions.

The construction, with Western investment, of a new system of oil and gas pipelines that would bypass Iran and Russia was received with apprehension in Russia as it could deprive it of revenues from oil transit. Repeated statements made in Western countries to the effect that they ‘refused to consider the region as part of the Russian sphere of influence’,⁵⁸ while at the same time regarding it as a zone of NATO’s strategic interests, were recognized by Russia as clear proof of the West’s ambition to exclude it from the region.

V. Conclusions

At present the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict has little chance of being resolved politically: the interests of the conflicting sides are in complete contradiction. While political efforts to halt the fighting have so far been unsuccessful, the resumption of hostilities would cause the destabilization not only of Abkhazia but also of the entire west Caucasian region. It is unacceptable, therefore, either from the point of view of Russia’s interests (the threat of destabilization in the North Caucasus) or from that of the West (the danger of military operations spreading to the systems of oil and gas pipelines between Central Asia, the Caucasus and the outside world).

The political normalization of the conflict is impossible unless Georgia puts an end to its policy of unitarism. A single Georgian state within the borders of the former Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic is possible only as a federation of equal peoples like Belgium or Switzerland. Each people must be granted its own form of statehood and representation in the central government. There should also be international guarantees of the rights of ethnic minorities and of the territorial integrity of Georgia. On the other hand, a continuation of the policy of unitarism may result in the further disintegration of the Georgian state; in that case Abkhazia may aspire to international recognition as an independent state.

Contradictions between Russia and the West in the South Caucasus present a serious potential danger. Under the existing conditions of general instability in the region, further escalation may be caused with the minimum of effort. Russia and the West should, therefore, be interested not in continuing their rivalry but in closer coordination of their regional policies. The basis of such cooperation might be mutual recognition of each other’s strategic interests in the region. The development of a coordinated policy might be an effective means of stabilizing the entire Caucasian region and creating a basis for the resolution of local conflicts, including the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict.

⁵⁸ Coppieters *et al.* (note 1), p. 51.