

# A Federal Perspective on the Abkhaz-Georgian Conflict



# A Federal Perspective on the Abkhaz-Georgian Conflict:

*From Intractability  
to Pacification*

By

Romina Gurashi and Neno Gabelia

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# INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the 21st century, the problem of the development of regional security is becoming increasingly important in everyday international politics. It especially concerns the post-Soviet countries, which remain in an ongoing difficult process of transformation; conflicts and local wars together with the economic crisis are signs that the situation is affecting these territories. It should be noted that over the last decade, there have been many studies on the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. However, it seems that the authors of most of them prefer a chronological description of events to the detection of possible future scenarios. It is our conviction that we should now leave the past behind us and focus on the future. We are going to do this by analysing the origins of and background to the conflict – which has still not been deeply analysed – and by focusing on the possible transformations of the ongoing conflict. In fact, the reason that the Georgian-Abkhazian negotiations, as well as the peace process, suffered a complete failure apparently lies in the flawed approach that has been used in this regard.

It is obviously impossible to rely on transformation or conflict resolution when there is no clarity about the nature and origin of the conflict. Each side has its own interpretation of past events and their own visions for the future. These views often conflict with each other.

There are many reasons for including this conflict among the “intractable conflicts” that require study. The following factors all indicate that conflict transformation is necessary: the asymmetry of the parties; the deep historical roots of the conflict; the scale of human loss experienced by the parties during military operations; the high levels of involvement by the entire population of Abkhazia; the sharp polarisation of the positions of the parties; and the presence of an “enemy image” in descriptions of the counterpart.

The purpose of the present work is to further transform the relationships, interests, and goals of the different groups involved.

We will therefore analyse the nature, origins and dynamics of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict before and after August 2008, and will identify the causes of inefficiency in the official negotiation process. In this respect, it will be useful to determine the place and role of the players and their own interests.

It is obvious that without the most honest, depoliticised analysis, and rethinking the entire past of Abkhaz-Georgian relations, it would be impossible to develop new approaches to the settlement of the conflict, especially in view of the new realities after the August War. These new realities open up new opportunities to establish long-lasting peace in the region, as well as generating new security challenges on a regional scale. With this study we want to provide impetus for new paradigms to be developed in the negotiation process.

The geopolitical processes that are associated with increased inter-ethnic confrontations, and which are taking place all over the world, complicate the development of modern civilisation and increase the vulnerability of all members of the international community, creating threats to their security.

In this respect, it is very important to conduct analytical research in this area because it contributes to the development of best practice in conflict resolution, which undoubtedly entails replicating power scenarios.

The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, which entered a particularly challenging phase in 1992, was one of the first and longest-running (1992-2008) international conflicts of the former Soviet Union. Complex factors, such as the deep roots of the confrontation, the great human sacrifices of the parties during the hostilities, the high levels of involvement by the entire population of Abkhazia in defending its interests, and the asymmetry in the approaches of the parties, determined the need for an analysis of the nature, origins and dynamics of the conflict.

Considering this, modern realities need careful study in terms of inter-ethnic problems. In looking at the conflict though, it is necessary to emphasise that the years after the end of the “five-day” war of 2008 have been characterised by a period of relative stability, complicated only by the existence of nationalist rhetoric on a regional scale. This “frozen” situation contributed to the idea that a certain political stability has been reached in the post-Soviet space. However, the reality is different. At the beginning of 2014, the situation substantially deteriorated again. A new military-political crisis broke out in the form of a civil war in one of the former Soviet Union regions: Ukraine. These circumstances confirmed the perspective of the Russian authorities on world development, reflected in the “Strategy of national security of the Russian Federation till 2020”.

The main purpose of the present work is to identify the causal relationship between the following: the phenomenon of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict; the definition of the range of challenges in the reconciliation process and the specific solution to the conflict before and

after August 2008; the assessment of the role and position of Russia and Western countries in the conflict.

This will be done in the context of certain challenges:

1. Identification of the features of Abkhazian ethno-political self-determination and the statehood of the Republic of Abkhazia;
2. The specifications of the origins, causes, and driving forces of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict;
3. A comparative analysis of the key approaches of the Russian and Western powers and the specific forms of resolution they suggested for the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict;
4. The study of Abkhazia's internal political development in the post-Soviet period.

It is our conviction that this study should be conducted with one eye on a possible federalist transformation of the institutions of both entities considered.

It is well known that there are many types of federalism, one of which is based on ethnicity and is often called "ethno-federalism" or "multi-ethnic federalism".

After decolonisation, and especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union, federal designs based on ethnic identity have often been used to give recognition to the opposing claims for self-determination and territorial identity that have come from two or more territorial entities which were part of a state. This form of government, in fact, can be considered the most suitable for guaranteeing regional autonomy and managing inter-ethnic tensions in situations where identity problems are devouring centralised states.

This conviction has been supported by the rivers of ink from scholars in this field. It continues to be supported as a possibility for conflict transformation both by the United Nations and the European Union in relation to the Turkish-Cypriot conflict. As the media have reported, despite the long impasse, the peace process anticipating the establishment of a federation between the states at war has received new impetus, and the final agreement seems to be very close.

Apart from these arguments, recent philosophical discussions concerning federalism have addressed several issues, including the reasons for federalism: the promotion of economic stability; the promotion of peace; and the protection of individuals against authorities.

For all these preliminary reasons, we are going to study the ways that federalism can transform conflict. This is crucial for European interests, to

ensure sustained and diversified routes for the transportation of energy resources.

Material from this book can be used for educational purposes in schools. It can also be used for training, and re-training those involved in the frameworks that direct foreign policy, including the planning and development of bilateral relations, to improve the ways in which the potential for conflict can be reduced.

**SECTION I**

**AN HISTORICAL STUDY OF  
THE GEORGIAN-ABKHAZ CONFLICT**

**BY *DR. NENO GABELIA***



# CHAPTER ONE

## THE ORIGINS OF THE ETHNO-POLITICAL CONFLICT

Today, in the territory of the former USSR, current and potential ethnic conflicts are threatening the existence of nations and giving rise to dangerous destructive processes. Constantly-emerging conflicts take the form of ethnic confrontations or, at the very least, show a desire to identify participants as being of a particular ethnicity. The collapse of the USSR and the socialist world system was the most important event of modern times and occurred for several reasons. Ethno-political processes occupy an important place amongst these.

In modern science, it is understood that, in conflict, there is a collision between distinct and sometimes opposing interests, actions, attitudes, political parties, social organisations, and socio-political and socio-economic systems. Conflicts differ from region to region, as well as in level and how relations are managed on an ongoing basis. Factors that vary may be economic, social, political (external and internal), territorial, inter-confessional, and linguistic, etc.

Conflicts may also vary according to the degree of maturity and the nature and severity of their authorisation. Depending on the historical situation, a conflict may tend to either self-destruct, to be settled for subjective reasons, or to exacerbate and then escalate. A. Tokvil, Marx, G. Simmel and later, K. Boulding, L. Kozler, A. Bentli and other theorists viewed conflict as a leading source of policy underlying the changes occurring therein, and which thereby determines the boundaries and nature of existence in public life.

However, in political science there is an opposing opinion. Durkheim, Dewey and several other authors proceed from the position that conflict is secondary to an understanding of policy and is subordinate to the basic social values that bring people together and integrate society into a political system. In their view, the unity of ideals and socio-cultural values allows the resolution of existing conflicts and ensures the stability of a government's regime. In this regard, they deal with many conflicts as anomalies of the political process and policy, in turn, as being tasked with

maintaining “social stability” (Durkheim), or with exerting a “pedagogical influence” on society (Dewey) in order to deter conflicts.

The Caucasus has historically been one of the major regions of the world. Attention is drawn to its unique geographical location, which connects Europe and Asia. Since ancient times, this region has been linguistically, ethnically, religiously and culturally diverse.

All of this has had an important influence on the social development of the Caucasian people. Many books have been written about the Caucasus and Caucasians and many books will be written in the future. This is because of the linguistic and cultural mosaic of the Caucasus, as well as current events. Historically, the Georgians have always had a great interest in the ethnic, linguistic, and cultural diversity of their neighbours, and still do today. The Georgian chronicler, Leonti Mroveli, spoke about the common origin of several Caucasian ethnic groups. It is well known that the data about the history of the Caucasian people is mostly gathered from Georgian sources.

First, we note that the Caucasus is a big region located on the boundary of Europe and Asia. If we create artificial boundaries it amounts to an area today which is more than 467,964 square kilometres. If we add to this the geographical area of the real Caucasus, which is located in Turkey and Iran (the north-eastern villages of Turkey and the extreme northern regions of north-western Iran), the area exceeds 580,000 square kilometres. According to modern scientific data, the North Caucasus belongs to Europe, while the South Caucasus belongs to Asia. One very important feature characterises the Caucasus: throughout history, it has remained ethnically and culturally very colourful. We should not forget that, due to its geographical location, the Caucasus was (and still is) of interest to various empires.

When we are talking about Caucasian civilisation, we should understand what is meant by this term. As well as “culture”, “civilisation” has many definitions and, in science, there is no generally accepted interpretation of the concept/term. Despite this, the opinion of scientists is consistent on a number of points about “civilisation.” At the heart of this term is the Latin word “civilis” meaning “grazh-Danish” or “state”. Philosophical dictionaries and encyclopaedias usually define the concept of “civilisation” as follows: the unity of the material and spiritual achievements of society. Several factors caused the ethnic diversity of the Caucasus: its location at the turn of Europe and Asia; the movement of people to the north and south; the mountainous nature of the region; and the diversity of the local nature. Some of the ethnic groups were very small and their settlement areas were within one or two villages.

Georgians, Armenians, Azeris and even “dvuhtrih” ethnic groups were mostly mountain residents.

The ethnic situation in the Caucasus has changed, especially over the last 200 years, during which Russia has seized the region. The collapse of the Soviet Empire had negative consequences for the ethno-demographic situation of the region. In addition to the autochthonous ethnic groups in the Caucasus, there is a long history of non-native ethnic groups who have migrated there over time, who have turned into indigenous Caucasians and still live there.

Therefore, the Caucasus is one of the most multi-ethnic regions of the world: small territories, consisting of ethnic groups of different origins, exist side by side; most are the oldest indigenous people of the Caucasus, while others migrated to the region at different periods in history. The multi-ethnic Caucasus has been conditioned by its geographical location, climatic conditions, and its capturing of different empires of the region. Even though there are many works on the history of Caucasian ethnicity, the issue is undeniably still relevant and requires further research, especially since the collapse of the Soviet Empire, and other political world events have led to a new migratory movement of ethnic groups in the Caucasus.

Indigenous ethnic groups who lived in the mountains of the North Caucasus in the early Middle Ages are considered to be the ancestors of the Nakh-Dagestani and Abkhazian-Circassian peoples, who are often mixed together.

The collapse of the Soviet Union and the “socialist camp” led to a fundamental reshaping of the world’s political map, marking the emergence of many new sovereign states. Hasty adoption of the “acts of independence” was carried out without considering the possible effect that changes to territory and status would have on autonomous republics. This led to armed clashes and local conflicts in some regions, one of which was the Georgian-Abkhazian (Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, Transnistria, Abkhazia) war of 1992-1993.

The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict escalated against the background of the Soviet Union’s disintegration because of ineffective social, economic, and national policy. Resisting the process, Abkhazia became part of the Georgian-Soviet Socialist Republic after the revolution. Since 1950, statements had been made about the need for Abkhazia to exit from Georgia. In 1989, Abkhazia’s first case of ethnically-based violence took place, leading to a series of military conflicts: the 1992-1993 war; the war of 1998; and the 2001 conflict in the Kodori Valley. Some of these conflicts not only caused waves of refugees, bloodshed, and destruction,

but also led to Abkhazia being isolated from Georgia and Russia for almost 20 years.

During the settlement of the conflict, negotiations always came back to two basic situations: the status of Abkhazia as a state and the position of Georgian refugees.

In summarising these conflicts, it should also be pointed out that there were a number of external players who, in one way or another, affected the political “game” in troubled regions. According to experts, when the ethno-political situation along the Russian borders escalated, its main purpose was to provoke the South Caucasus countries into reacting against the reckless actions of the United States and others. Important factors here are, on the one hand, the parallel solution of the Kosovo problem, which is impossible not to compare with the situations in South Ossetia and Abkhazia. On the other hand, the year in which these two ethnic problems arose — which involved Russian citizens — was also an election year in Russia.

In general, we can talk about the poor performance of non-military methods of conflict settlement in all three ethno-political situations. South Ossetia and Abkhazia are unrecognised states, Georgia has not revised its relationships in practice, and Nagorno-Karabakh is in the process of a settlement which is likely to anticipate a scenario similar to former Georgian autonomy.

The main topic of this study is one of those states, Georgia, and an issue highlighted by Georgia’s violent transition to independence: the role of small arms and light weapons. This study attempts to shed light on how the spread and use of small arms fuelled conflicts that characterised Georgia’s independence and continued to contribute instability and insecurity, inhibiting development and recovery. I also hope this study helps to show the humanitarian impact of the collapse of the Soviet system and the terrible consequences of using armed violence to achieve political goals in the post-Soviet period. Georgia is a particularly interesting case study of how conflict increased the availability of weapons.

Despite the urgency of the problem under investigation for modern historical science and international processes, this topic remains poorly understood in terms of its history and new trends. Identifying the causes and prerequisites of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict has been widely discussed, by both domestic and foreign researchers. The historical roots of the conflict have been analysed in the works of V.A. Shnirelman, D. Malysheva, N.N. Aqaba, G.P. Lezhava, Coppieters, Nodia, G. Zhorzholiani, K.B. Barbaryan, S. Markedonov, and others. However, although the background of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict has been

studied, there are important individual aspects of the conflict that have not yet been fully analysed.

## **The Ethnicity of the Abkhazians and the Territory of their Settlement**

Abkhazia is one of the unrecognised states formed because of the collapse of the Soviet Union, almost simultaneously with 15 “newly independent” states which are now fully legitimate members of the international community. Their appearance was a historical paradox: on the eve of the collapse of the Union, most of the populations in these countries (as demonstrated by referendums) were against secession and the creation of their own states, and were opposed to the separatists of the titular “nations” of Union republics.

The collapse of the Soviet Union turned out to be a turning point in the history of Abkhazia. Within a short period of time, autonomy became polarised in the population on ethnic grounds. In their hopes for a better future, the Georgian community aimed to create a single national state of their own. In general, it supported an ultra-nationalist platform for the opposition leader who then became the first president of an independent Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia. The Georgian authorities expressed blind patriotism in the slogan “Georgia for Georgians”, which was unacceptable to the non-Georgian population of Abkhazia.

The origin of the Abkhaz people is one of the most difficult issues for historical science. An important factor that must be considered when addressing the question of the origin of the Abkhazians is genetic affiliation and the Caucasus ethnic family, which is divided into three main branches: western, or Abkhaz-Adyg (Abkhaz, Abaza, Adygei, Cherkess, Kabardians); eastern, or Nakh-Dagestani (Chechens, Ingush, Avars, Laks, Dargin, Lezgins and others); and southern, or Kartvelian, which includes Georgians.

The conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia has a long and complex history. Its roots go back to the pre-Soviet and early Soviet era. As a result of the Caucasian War in the first half and middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a large part of the indigenous Abkhazian population was forced to leave and move to the Ottoman Empire. According to the Abkhaz historian, Stanislav Lakoba, the Caucasian War was a disaster for the Abkhazians. More than 50% of the population fled their homes and became refugees in Turtsii. The influx of ethnic Georgians on Abkhazian land was originally supported by the authorities of the Russian Empire; Orthodox Georgians saw this support as natural in the South Caucasus.

In 1886, the ethnic Abkhaz accounted for 85.7% of the population of Abkhazia. By 1897 their number had fallen to 55.3%. One of the most important aspects of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict is the different (often mutually exclusive) readings of history from ancient times until the end of the Soviet era. While a significant portion of the Georgian political elite believed in the Soviet project, it was generally on the darker pages of Georgian history and was regarded as a time of Soviet occupation. The Abkhaz approach to the era of the Soviet Union was more versatile and often positive. According to Stanislav Lakoba, until the death in 1936 of the head of the Abkhaz government, Nestor Lakoba, Abkhazia was experiencing a period of stability, ethnic harmony, and economic and cultural success. Thereafter, between 1937 and 1953, Abkhazia experienced a “dark period of expansion of the Georgian and the repression of the Abkhaz as a people. Khrushchev's policy has resulted in the rehabilitation of the Abkhaz and the revival of their culture and education.”

According to some experts, the inclusion of Abkhazia within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic reflected the pro-Georgian policy of Moscow in the period of Stalin's rule. The experience of staying part of Soviet Georgia had far-reaching consequences for Abkhazia and contributed to further alienation and strained relations between the Abkhaz and the Georgians.

Abkhazians' ethnicity (Apsua identity) and language is close to the Circassian people of the north-western Caucasus. Representatives of the Caucasian ethno-linguistic family are the oldest inhabitants of the Caucasus (hence the name, “paleokavkazskie”). However, it should be noted that some linguists deny the genetic relationship between the Kartvelian languages and the languages of the Abkhaz-Adyghe and Nakh-da gestanskoy groups. According to these authors, there are currently two fundamental but unrelated families of languages in the Caucasus: Kartvelian and North. The issue of the early ethno-genetics of the Abkhaz people was repeatedly raised in literature in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

One common theory in the past was the so-called “Abkhaz origin Ethio-Egyptian theory”, which stated that ancient Colchians and the ancestors of Abkhazians moved to the Caucasus from north-east Africa (B. Nibur, P. Uslar, D. Gulia, et al.).

Other conclusions of the theory state that Abkhazians are from the North Caucasus. Moreover, according to some authors, this supposedly happened in ancient times (M. Kissling, A. Svanidze, et al.) but, according to others, not until the late Middle Ages (A. Dyachkov-Tarasov).

The third migration theory of the origins of the Abkhazians suggests their ancestors were from Asia Minor and the directly adjoining areas of south-western Caucasus (A. Gleye, N. Marr, et al.). We shall see below that, of the old assumptions, a relationship with the Abkhaz Circassians is not devoid of scientific merit.

Finally, there is also a hypothesis that suggests the Abkhazian-Circassian tribes came from Asia Minor (in Western Transcaucasia), from where they moved to the North Caucasus, and it was only in the first centuries that ancestors of Abkhazians again returned to the Caucasus and occupied the territory of modern Abkhazia (I. Dzhavahi- shvili).

On the southern borders of Russia, Christian people, including Slavs, live alongside Islamic people (the Georgians, Armenians, Turkic and Iranians). The result is an incredible hodgepodge of people and religions. Abkhazians and Turkic (mainly Muslim) people came under the rule of Georgia a millennium ago. Georgia itself was absorbed by the Russian Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century war with Russia, and after the revolution, Abkhazia and Chechnya helped establish Soviet power in Russia. However, due to the weakness of Russia, the Georgian Mensheviks overthrew Soviet power in Abkhazia and attached the territory to Georgia. With the Sovietization of Georgia (in February 1921), an independent Abkhazian Soviet Republic of Georgia was formed on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1921 and was concluded with an agreement that confirmed the new composition. In April 1925, the Abkhazian Congress of Soviets approved the Constitution of the Republic. As soon as there was the political possibility of acceding to Russia (after the transfer of Crimea Ukraine), the Abkhaz political struggle for accession to the Krasnodar territory began. But the Georgian leader, Mzhavanadze, confidently promised that all those who were discontented could be attached to Krasnoyarsk territory.

After ten years, even when Eduard Shevardnadze was the president, the Abkhaz were again politically active. However, the Georgian president mastered the situation. At the end of the 1980s, an armed confrontation between Abkhazians and Georgians began. The moribund Soviet Union could stop the bleeding. The collapse of the USSR and the weakness of Russia gave Georgia a second chance (similar to the situation in the 1920s) to gain Abkhazia.



## CHAPTER TWO

### ABKHAZIA, FROM SOVIET AUTONOMY TO BREAKAWAY REPUBLIC

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, there were a lot of conflicts (“territorial” and “ethnic”), some of which turned into armed conflicts and to which solutions have still not been found. This was particularly the case in the Georgian-Ossetian, Georgian-Abkhazian, and Armenian-Azerbaijani conflicts.

I will try to analyse the historical and political aspects of the emergence and development of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, which is key in the Caucasian region. The possible prospects for settlement of the conflict, with assistance from members of the international community, will be considered. It is well known that history has had a huge impact on the Balkan conflicts. The history “really influences minds of people, their perception and the relations, which have in certain cases taken roots in psychology of the nation or the people, being transferred from generations in generation.”

Since the late 1980s, a prominent feature of the political reality in the Caucasus has been ethno-territorial conflicts, which have undermined stability and complicated prospects for development, strengthening, and economic self-sufficiency in the region. The crisis for the central government of the Soviet Union — which was no longer able to perform its key function of universally ensuring the safety and preservation of a sustainable and effective social and economic situation — inevitably led to circumstances in which indigenous people needed to find ways to form specific support for their own strength, and in-principle approval for new political guidelines.

The conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia demonstrated two fundamental principles of international law: on the one hand, people's right to self-determination and, on the other hand, the principle of territorial integrity. In this period, there were several areas where wars took place almost simultaneously: Karabakh (1991-1994); South Ossetia (1991-1992); the Prigorodny district of North Ossetia (1992); Chechnya (1999); and Abkhazia (1992-1993). The causes of these conflicts were the

aspirations of small nations, who wanted to change the political status of their territory or, rather, to achieve sovereignty but often under the influence of nationalist slogans and outside influences.

Nation unions and autonomous republics were deeply involved in the process of achieving self-determination and the search for national and international legitimacy. In this regard, the exacerbation of the “Abkhaz issue” is also directly connected with the beginning of the ethno-national identity of Georgians. Although in modern literature there is no unequivocal opinion on the origins of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, ethnic tensions were clearly not the root cause because the reasons are also of a serious political nature.

The Abkhazian kingdom arose in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. In the second half of the 9<sup>th</sup> century it became part of Georgia. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century, Abkhazia was conquered by the Mongols and from the 16<sup>th</sup> century was dependent on Turkey. In 1810 it became part of Russia and until 1864 enjoyed *de facto* autonomy. The elimination of this autonomy resulted in the mass dissatisfaction of the Abkhazian population, leading to the Lykhy uprisings in 1866 and the events of the Russian-Turkish war of 1877-1878. A significant portion of ethnic Abkhazians had been squeezed out of the Russian Empire. According to some estimates, the number of remaining Abkhazians amounted to 60% of those who had lived in the area until the mid-1860s. Almost simultaneously with the events in the Caucasus, serfdom was abolished, which made it possible for landless Georgian peasants to move to empty neighbouring lands.

After the collapse of the Russian Empire, Soviet Russia recognised the independent territory of Georgia within the Psou River, which meant that Abkhazia was part of the newly formed Democratic Republic of Georgia. It was enshrined in the Russian-Georgian agreement of 7<sup>th</sup> May 1920, which stated that “the state border between Russia and Georgia passes from the Black Sea along the river Psou to Ahahcha Mountain” (the Abkhazian section of the contemporary Russian-Georgian border). In Georgia on 25<sup>th</sup> February 1921, there was the Bolshevik revolution and, on 4<sup>th</sup> March 1921 Soviet power was established in Abkhazia.

## **The Georgian-Abkhaz Armed Conflict**

On 16<sup>th</sup> December 1921, the Abkhazian Soviet Socialist Republic was part of the Georgian SSR. After February 1931 it was an autonomous republic. Since December 1990 it has been the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia. During the existence of the Transcaucasian Federation (a union of the Soviet Republics of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, 1922-1936)

and the USSR, Abkhazia was part of Georgia. Abkhazia's independence was not confirmed by constitutions, the Transcaucasian Federation, or the USSR. In 1931, the constitutional status of Abkhazia become appropriate to its actual legal status and it was defined as “an autonomous republic within Georgia.”

In accordance with the provisions of the constitutions of both 1936 and 1977, education according to Union directives was an integral part of the Union's republics which, of course, had no right to secede from the republics or the Soviet Union.

In 1937-1938, the Abkhaz alphabet was based on Georgian graphics. In 1945-1946, training in Abkhaz schools was translated into Georgian and many Abkhaz place names were replaced. Discriminatory measures have subsequently been significantly relaxed and media in the Abkhazian language started to appear, reviving national education. However, the ethnic discrimination policy has played a negative role. Between the 1960s and 1980s, the ethno-demographic balance was changing and it was not in favour of Abkhazians. In 1979, Georgians were already 43.8% of the population. The “repression policy on the Abkhaz language and culture, carried out by specific persons of Georgian nationality (and not only by policymakers, but also by ordinary performers), formed [a] generic” enemy image “to the mass of the Georgian displaced persons, possessed by the same social privileges,” says the modern Georgian political scientist, Ghia Nodia.

The formation of an image of the Georgian enemy refers to the beginning of the 1930s. The Abkhaz population began to associate their hopes for ethno-national self-determination with the output from Georgia. Tensions between the Georgian government and Abkhaz autonomy periodically manifested during the Soviet period. The migration policy, which began under the auspices of Lavrenty Beria, reduced the share of Abkhazians in the republic's total population — at the beginning of the 1990s, it was only 17%. The migration of Georgians to Abkhazia (1937-1954 years) occurred by them sleeping in Abkhaz villages. This was in addition to the Greek population of Georgian villages, who were liberated after the Greeks were deported from Abkhazia in 1949.

The Abkhaz language (until 1950) was excluded from the official program and replaced in secondary schools by the compulsory learning of the Georgian language. Abkhaz writing was translated into the Georgian graphic base (and in 1954 was translated into the Russian base). Mass demonstrations and unrest among the Abkhazian population, demanding the withdrawal of Abkhazia from the Georgian SSR, broke out in April 1957, April 1967 and (largest of all) in May and September 1978. On 18<sup>th</sup>

March 1989, in the village of Lykhny (the ancient capital of the Abkhazian princes), a gathering of 30,000 Abkhaz people put forward the proposal that Abkhazia should withdraw from Georgia and restore its status as a union republic. On 15-16<sup>th</sup> July 1989, bloody clashes took place in Sukhumi between Georgians and Abkhazians, resulting in 16 deaths. Leaders of the republic resolved the conflict and the incident did not result in any further serious consequences.

The escalation of the situation in Abkhazia occurred because of the announcement by Georgian authorities that the Constitution of the Georgian SSR of 1978 was to be abolished, and the Constitution of the Georgian Democratic Republic of 1918 (which proclaimed Georgia a unitary state and excluded the existence of territorial autonomies) would be restored. In Abkhazia, it was hailed as the beginning of full assimilation of Abkhazian ethnicity which, by this time, was a minority in the Abkhaz ASSR population. On 25<sup>th</sup> August 1990, the Supreme Council of Abkhazia adopted the Declaration of Sovereignty of the Abkhaz ASSR, which led to a split among the deputies of the Georgian-Abkhaz and the armed forces faction, who spoke out against the Declaration. On 31<sup>st</sup> March 1991, Georgia, including Abkhazia, held a referendum on the restoration of state sovereignty.

The Abkhaz ASSR had referendum attendance of 61.27% of voters: 97.73% of them voted in favour of the sovereignty of Georgia, which constituted 59.84% of the total number of voters of Abkhazia. Only 1.42% of those who participated in the voting (i.e. 1.37% of the total number of voters) voted against. Across Georgia, participation in the referendum was 90.79%, of which 99.08% voted for the restoration of Georgia's state sovereignty. Based on the referendum results, the Supreme Council of Georgia, proclaimed the Declaration on the Restoration of the State Sovereignty of the Republic of Georgia on 9<sup>th</sup> April 1991. After this date, the armed forces of Abkhazia accepted regulations in accordance with Georgian law and made changes to the Constitution of the Abkhaz ASSR, which included the basic law of autonomy that recognised Abkhazia as an autonomous unit within Georgia.

On 25<sup>th</sup> September 1991, elections were held in the armed forces of Abkhazia and deputy corps were formed on a quota basis: 28 seats for Abkhaz, 26 for Georgians, and 11 representatives from other ethnic groups. In early February 1992, political tensions in Abkhazia escalated because, under the pretext of fighting with supporters of Zviad Gamsakhurdia (the ousted president), Abkhazia entered the unit of the Georgian National Guard. The highest point in the growing contradictions

between the Abkhaz and Georgian armed forces factions was reached on 5<sup>th</sup> May 1992, when the Georgian faction left the session.

June 1992 saw the beginnings of the process that created armed forces in Abkhazia, in the form of the Abkhazia regiment of internal troops and local Georgian units. On 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1992, Abkhazia adopted a decree on the termination of the Constitution of Abkhazia of 1978 and the enactment of the Constitution of 1925, which fixed the status of Abkhazia as autonomous. However, this was not recognised by the central government of Georgia. On 14<sup>th</sup> August 1992, the military action between Georgia and Abkhazia escalated into a real war with the use of aircraft, artillery, and other weapons.

The aim of the Georgian government was to establish control over part of its territory and to preserve its integrity. The aim of the Abkhaz authorities was greater autonomy and, ultimately, independence. The National Guard, a paramilitary formation, and individual volunteers were all on the side of the central government. Armed groups from the non-Georgian population, volunteers who came from the North Caucasus, and Russian Cossacks were on the side of the Abkhaz leadership. On 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1992 there was a meeting in Moscow between Boris Yeltsin and Eduard Shevardnadze (the then Russian president and Chairman of the State Council of Georgia), at which they signed a document providing a cease-fire, the withdrawal of Georgian troops from Abkhazia, and the return of refugees.

Since the conflicting parties failed to comply with any point of the agreement, military operations continued and, by the end of 1992, the war had reached the position where none of the parties could win. On 15<sup>th</sup> December 1992, Georgia and Abkhazia signed several documents on the cessation of hostilities and the withdrawal of heavy weapons and troops from the region of military operations. There was a period of relative calm but, in early 1993, hostilities resumed after an attack on Sukhumi. Georgian troops now occupied Abkhazia. At the end of September 1993, Sukhumi came under the control of Abkhaz troops, forcing Georgian troops to leave Abkhazia completely.

According to official data, 16,000 people were killed during the war, of which 4,000 were Abkhazians, 10,000 were Georgians and 2,000 were volunteers from various republics of the North Caucasus and South Ossetia. In Moscow on 14<sup>th</sup> May 1994, a meeting between the Georgian and Abkhaz sides (under the mediation of Russia) resulted in the signing of the Agreement on a Ceasefire and Separation of Forces. Based on this document and the subsequent decision of the Council of Heads of State of the CIS, collective peacekeeping forces of the CIS have been located in

the conflict zone since June 1994, with the task of maintaining the ceasefire.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE PEACE PROCESS, 1993-2004: FAILURES AND SUCCESSES

Collective peacekeeping forces, fully composed of Russian soldiers, controlled a 30-kilometre security zone in the region of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. In the conflict zone, there were always about 3,000 peacekeepers. The mandate for the term of the Russian peacekeepers was defined as six months but, after this period, the Council of Heads of State of the CIS decided to extend the duration of their mandate. In 1997, under the auspices of the UN and in the framework of the Geneva negotiations, the Georgian-Abkhaz Coordinating Council was established, to resolve the conflict. The Council was composed of three representatives from the Georgian and Abkhaz sides and was also attended by representatives from the United Nations and the Russian Federation, as facilitators. In 2001, this work was suspended because of difficulties in Georgian-Abkhaz relations. On 15<sup>th</sup> May 2006, the Coordinating Council, on both the Georgian and Abkhaz sides, resumed their work.

Since the beginning of spring 2008, units of Georgian armed forces were on a series of tactical exercises, including in the areas adjacent to the security zone. At the landfill, Orpolo conducted training for fire departments from the Gori artillery brigade, artillery battalions and infantry brigades. In April, training was conducted, and reconnaissance aircraft and Su-25 were near the Georgian-Abkhazian administrative border. On 18<sup>th</sup> March and 20<sup>th</sup> April, unmanned aerial reconnaissance aircraft belonging to the Georgian side were shot down in the security zone. On 30<sup>th</sup> April, the number of the Russian peacekeeping contingent in Abkhazia was increased from 2,000 to 3,000 people. This was the maximum number of peacekeepers Moscow had agreed to provide in the agreement on a ceasefire and the separation of forces (14<sup>th</sup> May 1994).

On 4<sup>th</sup> April, Abkhazian authorities reported that the air defence forces of the unrecognised republic shot down two Georgian unmanned reconnaissance aircraft. The Georgian Foreign Ministry called the reports “nonsense and misinformation.” At the same time, the Georgian Foreign Ministry said that Georgia would continue to fly its drones over Abkhazia

to collect data about the “military intervention” in Russia. On 16<sup>th</sup> May 2008, the UN General Assembly on the initiative of Georgia adopted a resolution on the return of refugees to Abkhazia. In accordance with the text of the resolution, the General Assembly “stresses the urgent need for the speedy development of a timetable to ensure the prompt voluntary return of all refugees and internally displaced persons to their homes in Abkhazia (Georgia).” The clear majority of EU member states, as well as Japan, China, and Latin American countries, abstained. The clear majority of abstentions were from the CIS countries.

On 2<sup>nd</sup> May, Georgian TV channels reported that there had been explosions and a shoot-out in the Gali district of Abkhazia. The Georgian Interior Ministry announced that two buses exploded and that victims had been taken to the hospital of Zugdidi. The Georgian authorities linked PE with the Abkhaz authorities’ attempt to prevent a vote to pass the day elections to Georgia’s parliament. Sergei Bagapsh, the Abkhaz president, denied allegations that the unrecognised republic was implicated in the shoot-out and explosions. In June and July, a series of explosions resulted in the injury and deaths of several civilians. In Gagra on 29<sup>th</sup> June, two blasts happened just five minutes apart. One device exploded in the market in Gagra, while the other exploded near the “Continent” supermarket, a few metres away from the commercial bank, “Gagra-Bank.” Six people were injured.

On 6<sup>th</sup> July, there was an explosion in a cafe in the Gali district of eastern Abkhazia, near the border with Georgia, which killed four people, including the UN mission’s translator and the military border GBS of Abkhazia. On 6<sup>th</sup> July, in the village area of Ruhi, there were four explosions which took place while police cars were driving past. No police were injured but equipment was damaged. On 9<sup>th</sup> July, according to Georgian media, there was an attack on a Georgian checkpoint not far from the village of Chuburkhinji. Several shots were fired from a grenade launcher, followed by machine guns. On 18<sup>th</sup> July, Ghali met the unrecognised republic’s president, Sergei Bagapsh, with the German foreign minister, Frank-Walter Steinmeier, to discuss the plan submitted by Germany for the settlement of the Georgian-Abkhaz problem. The Abkhaz side rejected the plan, saying it should determine the need to include provision for the withdrawal of Georgian troops from the upper Kodori Gorge, and a signing of the agreement on the condition of a non-resumption of hostilities.

On 9<sup>th</sup> August, President Sergey Bagapsh of Abkhazia told journalists that the operation to oust Georgian troops had begun in the Kodori Gorge. As directed by the president’s announcement, reservists from the

Abkhazian army were mobilised. According to Abkhazia's minister of foreign affairs, Sergey Shamba, the reservists would be called up as required in the areas bordering Georgia — Gali, Ochamchira, Tkvarcheli and Gulripshi. The military situation in those areas continued for ten days. On 11<sup>th</sup> August, Interior Ministry spokesman, Shota Utiashvili, said that Russian and Abkhazian military were occupying the Georgian village in the Khurcha Zugdidi district. This information was not confirmed by other sources.

On 12<sup>th</sup> August, Abkhazia launched an operation to oust Georgian troops from the Kodori Gorge. Abkhazia's minister of foreign affairs, Sergey Shamba, said that the Russian military was not involved in the fighting in Kodori Gorge. On the same day, the Abkhaz army entered the upper Kodori Valley and was surrounded by Georgian forces. The president of the unrecognised republic of Abkhazia, Sergei Bagapsh, vowed that Abkhaz troops would establish control over the eastern (Georgia) part of the gorge for several days. In the Georgian part of Kodori Gorge, the Abkhazia flag was raised.

Since 1989, the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict has gone through several stages. The first phase (March 1989 - July 1992) was political and legal. Unlike South Ossetia, the conflict did not begin with the ideological justification of ethnic mutual claims, but as a debate about the legitimacy of the legal (illegal) entry of Abkhazia into Georgia and the legal validity of the (unfounded) ethno-national self-determination of Georgia and Abkhazia. At first, the struggle was not so much between Tbilisi and Sukhumi as between the Abkhaz and Georgian communities in Abkhazia. The Georgian-Abkhazian confrontation was different to and greater than the South Ossetian ethnic mosaic.

The Lykhny gathering was attended by about 5,000 representatives of the Armenian, Russian and Greek communities of Abkhazia. Abkhaz nationalists focused public attention on their opponents' "Georgianisation": "Abkhazia is not only made up of ethnic Abkhaz, but also Russian, Armenians and Greeks." The leader of the Abkhazia Russian community, historian and archaeologist Yuri Voronov, did much for the ideological and legal basis of national self-determination in Abkhazia. In 1989 and in early 1992, he wrongfully talked about the Abkhaz separatists. At the time, the separatists in relation to the USSR were Georgians. Abkhazians then resisted the Georgian national-radicals in order to protect the Abkhaz single state. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Abkhaz elite initially appeared as "Soviet revanchists."

The second phase (July 1992 - July 1994) was military and political. Between the first and second steps came the decision to abolish the

Constitution of the Abkhazian Supreme Council of the Abkhaz ASSR of 1978, and restore the Constitutional Treaty of 1925, which cancelled the legal framework of Abkhazia, making it part of Georgia. Georgian authorities then placed Georgian State Council troops on Abkhazia territory, which was the beginning of a major armed conflict. The Georgian-Abkhaz conflict was an inter-ethnic confrontation in Abkhazia that developed into a military clash between the Georgian government and the breakaway territory.

Since that time, the Abkhazian national movement of pro-Soviet separatists saw its main purpose as withdrawal from an independent Georgia. In the autumn of 1993, Georgia suffered a military defeat and lost control of territory in Abkhazia. However, this did not put an end to military confrontation between the conflicting parties.

The third stage (July 1994 - July 2006) attempted to settle the consequences of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Between the second and the third stages there was a large-scale operation of Russian peacekeeping forces. Since 1994 (in 1998 and 2001), the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict — despite occasional difficulties — largely moved to a process of negotiation between the warring parties, with the participation of Russia and international organisations. Topics for negotiations included the status of Abkhazia and the return of Georgian refugees to their former places of residence.

The fourth stage (July 2006-present) has attempted to “unfreeze” the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. The beginning of this phase of the operation was in the Kodori region. From this moment, negotiations between the conflicting parties were on hold. The Georgian authorities were trying to change the very format of the negotiation process, introducing the so-called “government of Abkhazia in exile” (consisting largely of ethnic Georgians) as the country’s sole legitimate representative. As for the authorities of the unrecognised Abkhazia, the Georgian president did his utmost to present them only as Russian puppets. According to Mikheil Saakashvili (16<sup>th</sup> July 2006), “it is not ethnic conflict (confrontation in South Ossetia and in Abkhazia - SM). It is imposed on us by political conflicts. They relate to the attempts of post-Soviet forces, remnants of the old Soviet imperialist thinking, to gain control over at least some of the neighbouring territories.”

### **The Situation after the August Five-day War**

The conflict between Russia and Georgia caused several new challenges and radically changed the situation in the South Caucasus,