

Self-Determination Conflict Profile

Georgia / Abkhazia

By Robert M. Cutler

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History

Roughly three millennia ago, two unions among tribes then inhabiting present-day Georgia established the political structures that survive in the written historical record. One of these unions was that of the Colchis, whose land Greek legend depicts in the myth of Jason and the Argonauts as the origin of the Golden Fleece. After the Colchis' kingdom weakened and fell, its eastern provinces constituted themselves a new kingdom called Kartli. At the same time, roughly about the time of Rome's founding according to the legend of Romulus and Remus (753 BC),

the Greeks began colonizing the Black Sea coast in the west of the land. The cities they founded still survive. In the Abkhazia region, for example, Dioskuras is the forerunner of present-day Sukhumi, which the Abkhaz call "Sukhum" (the terminal "-i" being a syntactical Georgianization.)

The principality of Abkhazia was established in 1325, becoming part of the Ottoman Empire in the late sixteenth century. In the early nineteenth century, Russia occupied Sukhumi and declared Abkhazia a protectorate, incorporating it into the Russian Empire in 1865. Abkhaz secessionists refer to a short-lived, inde-

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Self-Determination

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pendent Abkhazian state that existed in 1918 before becoming part of the Georgian Democratic Republic. The 1921 constitution of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (GSSR, itself a part of the Transcaucasian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic until the latter's abolition in 1936) recognized the autonomy of Abkhazia, which became the Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the GSSR in 1931.

In 1988 an organization called the Abkhazian Forum proclaimed Abkhazia independent from Georgia, provoking military clashes. In 1990 the Supreme Soviet of Georgia overruled a formal declaration of independence adopted a few days earlier by the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia. In 1992 the latter re-adopted Abkhazia's 1925 constitution, claiming that its language referred to a treaty between equals, implying in turn that Abkhazia had then been independent and therefore became again so. This effective redeclaration of independence from Georgia was the cause of the immediate eruption of the present conflict in July 1992.

The Abkhaz rebellion festered through the fall and winter of 1992-1993, during which time Eduard Shevardnadze won a landslide presidential victory in Georgia. Disputes over the possession of former Soviet military equipment following the withdrawal of the Russian army exacerbated relations between Russia and Georgia during the autumn, when the Russian military was already ill-disposed toward Shevardnadze, whom they blamed personally for complicity in the disintegration of the Soviet state.

A UN Special Envoy was appointed in May 1993. The UN made preparations in summer 1993 to dispatch military observers to the Abkhazian theater, from which Shevardnadze, in late July, against much domestic opposition, had signed an accord providing for a ceasefire and the removal of heavy weaponry. In August the UN Observer mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) was created. In mid-September, after UN monitors began to arrive, the ceasefire was massively violated

to the advantage of the Abkhaz, with strong evidence of complicity by Russian military staff. Significant moral, diplomatic, and military support from Russia as well as from various peoples in the North Caucasus enabled the Abkhazian side to emerge victorious from heavy fighting. Ethnic cleansing of the ethnic Georgian (and other non-Abkhaz) population of Abkhazia during and after the fighting created nearly 300,000 internally displaced persons in Georgia.

A Memorandum of Understanding between Georgia and Abkhazia was agreed to in Geneva in December 1993. An April 1994 "Declaration on Measures for a Political Settlement of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict" is the only document that discusses constitutional arrangements and power-sharing. After the latter document's signature, and on the basis of the former, UNOMIG began monitoring the ceasefire and observing the CIS Peacekeeping Force (CISPKF), which consists of variously between 1,200 and 3,000 troops exclusively from the Russian Federation.

In November 1997, under the UN's aegis, the Coordinating Council of the Georgian and Abkhaz Parties was created, with participation by the OSCE and the Russian Federation. It comprises three working groups: military security, refugee problems, and economic cooperation and development. Since then a modus vivendi has been achieved where the status quo is the basis for working toward a political settlement. That was the basis of the situation until October 2001, when it has begun to change day by day. (See, for example, the FPIF Global Affairs Commentary "Abkhazia Again: The UN Helicopter Shootdown" at <http://www.fpif.org/commentary/0110abkhaz.html>.)

Profiles of Major Organizations

In 1992 the Russian Federation mediated the first unsuccessful ceasefire agreement. Under the terms of international

arrangements agreed to by the parties, Russia has the authority in Abkhazia to convene meetings with the conflicting sides and motivate the activities of multilateral forums at the United Nations and the Commonwealth of Independent States, as well as the Friends of the UN Secretary-General for Georgia (FOG). FOG comprises France, Germany, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. It is now charged with drafting ideas for a division of constitutional responsibilities between Georgia and the Sukhumi authorities. These activities are coordinated by Dieter Boden, the UN Secretary-General's Special Representative for Georgia. The United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) monitors the activities of the Commonwealth of Independent States Peace-Keeping Force (CISPKF) as described above (see History).

Role of United States

U.S. diplomacy has strongly supported the integrity of the Georgian state and provided much technical assistance, as part of its repertoire of programs to post-Soviet states seeking to improve their general functioning and efficiency. The negotiation and construction of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline has been important in view of

the anticipated significant contribution of transit fees to Georgia's state budget. However, in terms of a diplomatic settlement to the Abkhazia conflict, the United States has relied upon multilateral institutions. To this end, it has supported efforts by the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe to monitor the situation and the offices of the UN Secretary-General to resolve it. The U.S. is a member of the FOG grouping (Friends of the UN Secretary-General for Georgia, see above) to promote movement toward a settlement.

Proposed Solutions and Evaluation of Prospects

Tbilisi insists that the persons internally displaced as a result of heavy fighting in the early 1990s must return to their homes before Abkhazia's status can be addressed. Sukhumi fears that their return will put the ethnic Abkhaz back into a minority, weakening their negotiating power. The Sukhumi authorities have never backed off from their demand that Georgia recognize Abkhazia's independence as a precondition for any formal negotiations, which they say should result in Abkhazian sovereignty in an equal federation with Georgia. Meanwhile, Georgia has refused to consider any settlement

other than an Abkhazia within Georgia. Thus, while Georgia is willing to grant Abkhazia (in Shevardnadze's words of October 2001) "the broadest possible autonomy" within a federal Georgia—exceeding even the degree of Tatarstan's autonomy within the Russian Federation—the Abkhazian leadership insists on negotiating nothing other than the details of independence.e.

Various alternative proposals have been floated, taking such forms (not always well-defined in practice or in detail) as a "common state," "asymmetric federalism," "the highest possible autonomy," "confederation," or some sort of loose federation. However, without a comprehensive settlement, no one has been able to sort out how to coordinate policymaking—whether horizontal or vertical—in such fields as foreign policy, border control, customs, transport and communications, energy and environment, and guaranteeing human and civil rights—including those of national minorities. Meanwhile, as in a "Catch-22," a comprehensive settlement awaits clarification of these very issues.

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Sources for More Information

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