
Was the West's Engagement with Abkhazia Doomed to Fail?

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Over the last five years, Abkhazia has received more international attention than ever before in its over two decades of *de facto* statehood. In 2009 the West launched an engagement strategy paralleling Georgia's own initiatives for dealing with Abkhazia. According to this strategy, Abkhazia was given the opportunity to engage with the West on a number of political, economic, social, and cultural issues, while leaving recognition as an independent state off the table. The overall aim was to maintain trust between the West and the local population, open a new international path that avoided leaving all Abkhazian eggs in the Russian basket, and support the idea of Georgia as a "role model" that would become a political-economic magnet for residents of Abkhazia.

Contrary to expectations, however, the implementation of this engagement strategy alienated Abkhazians. By contrast, Russian-Abkhazian relations reached a new level in November 2014, when the two parties signed a Treaty of Alliance and Strategic Partnership. This move was interpreted, in light of the Crimean annexation, as an attempt by Russia to annex Abkhazia and dismember Georgia.

In the end, the West's ability to engage with Abkhazia had serious limitations that would be very difficult to overcome. Although Abkhazians do not have any illusions of doing better under Russia, Western engagement remains an even worse option. And even if the United States and European Union were to improve upon their strategy in a way that better accommodated Abkhazia's concerns, engagement would still be unlikely to succeed, given Russian dominance in all possible spheres.

The West's Strategy of Engagement

Western engagement with *de facto* states like Abkhazia is perhaps surprising, given that the international community generally maintains respect for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of widely-recognized states. A readiness for engagement reflects an

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acknowledgement that previous policies of isolation have not been fruitful. Pursuing engagement means testing intentions, providing an opportunity to change course, reaching out to populations, and mobilizing international coalitions. With engagement, the West has sought to increase its leverage and footprint in conflicts that somehow affect Western interests. In the case of Abkhazia, in particular, proponents of engagement have also [noted](#) that “any strategy that does nothing with Abkhazia itself in the short term will only increase Russia’s links with Abkhazia and control over its territory. Though patience towards Abkhazia makes sense, it would be a serious mistake to isolate this breakaway region....”

However, engagement has its limits: it has been accompanied by a firm policy of non-recognition, with which the West conveys the message that international engagement by state and non-state actors should not be interpreted as “creeping recognition.” The Western political establishment refers to Abkhazia (and South Ossetia) as “occupied territory.” Officials have had little formal contact with de facto authorities outside of the Geneva Discussions, which were established soon after the August 2008 war to facilitate contact among the conflicting parties. The West has consistently urged the restoration of Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, albeit within the context of “[strategic patience](#).”

Engagement also follows the initiative of Georgia, which devised its own engagement strategy after the August 2008 war. The Georgian policy contained elements of isolation and engagement. This policy rested on a thick set of policies: the Law on Occupied Territories (2009), the Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement through Cooperation (2010), the Action Plan for Engagement on the Implementation of the Strategy (2010), and the Modalities for Conducting Activities in the Occupied Territories (2010). As analyst Sabine Fischer has [noted](#), though theoretically permissive, the engagement that Georgia promoted remained “very restrictive with regard to activities of international organizations and NGOs in the entities.” Tbilisi retained the wording of “occupied territories” and refused to interact directly with de facto authorities.

The Obama administration’s first public articulation of its regional priorities for the Caucasus was in June 2009, when Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs Philip Gordon toured the region. Among other items, U.S. policy included engagement of Georgia’s secessionist entities. According to leaked cables, U.S. ambassador to Georgia John Tefft reported to Washington that “U.S. long-term goals are better served with an active presence in Abkhazia....The devil really is in the details: choosing the right programs and getting them started without crossing political redlines on both sides will be at least as difficult as achieving the programs’ objectives.” A few months later, a delegation of State Department and Embassy officials made its first visit to Abkhazia. Subsequently, U.S. officials suggested that fundamental disagreements over status and recognition “should not become an obstacle to engagement” and found that their Abkhaz counterparts “expressed what seemed like sincere interest in

engagement activities with the United States” and were seeking to “identify activities that avoid the status question.”

Similarly, the EU in December 2009 adopted a policy of “non-recognition and engagement,” which sought to find pragmatic ways to influence conflict dynamics on the ground by disassociating them from the issue of status. Non-recognition in combination with engagement was seen as an [embrace of public diplomacy](#), in that it aimed to de-isolate the territories and offer an alternative to relations with Russia by interacting with populations in informal ways through civil society, people-to-people contacts, and economic ties.

These Western diplomatic efforts were aimed primarily at Abkhazia, which with a set of functioning civil society institutions, mass media, and political parties [was seen](#) as a far more viable entity than South Ossetia. The Western engagement strategy advocated the launch of programs that would offer genuine benefits to communities on both sides of the administrative boundary line and promoted increased contacts between communities while remaining politically acceptable to both sides. However, practical measures mostly failed to materialize. In broad policy language, Western authorities usually included a statement reaffirming their support for Georgian territorial integrity—a statement that many local Abkhaz organizations found objectionable, thereby discouraging their participation.

Russia’s Strategic Partnership

When Russia supported the Abkhaz military insurgency against Georgia in 1993, it was deliberately asserting that Moscow retained deep strategic interests throughout the post-Soviet space. When it decided to recognize Abkhazia’s independence in 2008, it was less driven by sympathy for the self-determination of the Abkhaz people than by the geostrategic calculus that this policy would undermine Georgia’s chances to become a NATO member. The signing in late 2014 of the treaty on Alliance and Strategic Partnership, which many believe condemns Abkhazia to a role as Moscow’s geopolitical pawn, reflects this ongoing contestation between Russia and the West over spheres of influence.

Abkhazia’s “strategic partnership” with Russia has been controversial from the start. Early on, Russia secured its domination over Abkhazia’s economic and military sectors, provided passports and social allowances to its extraterritorial compatriots, and tightened a grip over local politics. Russian influence led to the ousting of the moderately pro-Russian president Alexander Ankvab by the fully pro-Russian Raul Khajimba. About 50-60 percent of Abkhazia’s state budget [comes](#) from Russia. Nonetheless, in light of heightened tensions between the West and Russia over their common neighborhood, and because of Georgia’s steady pro-Western course, the Abkhaz have been eager to accept this offer of implicit annexation by their patron.

The treaty on Alliance and Strategic Partnership is the most significant document of deepened cooperation between Russia and Abkhazia since 2008, when they signed a treaty on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance. The 2014 treaty foresees, among other things, a coordinated foreign policy; the creation of a common space in military and socioeconomic spheres; joint actions for combating organized crime; and the harmonization of customs regulations, welfare services and social insurance. As Abkhaz analyst Arda Inal-Ipa has [noted](#), the treaty reflects Abkhazia's clear subordination to Russia whereas the references to joint management and creation of supranational structures can be read as the latter effectively taking complete control over the former. The cost of implementation is [estimated](#) at an initial cost of around \$112 million in 2015, in addition to another \$89 million annually from 2015 to 2017. This might be usefully compared to the cost of the Western engagement strategy which, [according](#) to Abkhazia's former de facto president Alexander Ankvab in 2012, did not exceed \$15 million a year.

Was Western Engagement Doomed to Fail?

Contrary to the high expectations of engagement proponents, Abkhazia has not sought to seek a balance to Russian influence by dealing with the West. Indeed, despite Western attempts to engage de facto authorities and civil society in Abkhazia, the latter today is more dependent on Russia than it was before the August 2008 war.

What went wrong? Why is the West not a serious player in Abkhazia? Is there anything it can do to improve its standing?

De facto state engagement is a context-specific exercise where the notion of "one size fits all" generally does not apply. Contrast Cyprus, where Western policy has helped to improve bi-communal relations, with Nagorno-Karabakh, where Azerbaijan's insistence on a hands-off policy by the West has not only managed to isolate the region from the rest of the world but also gives Baku a chance to re-conquer its lost territories through war. Western engagement may succeed only if there is sufficient space for innovative maneuvering among facts and norms; if there is Western interest and capacity to pursue conflict management; if the parent state grants approval; if the engagement toolbox and implementation mechanisms look credible to de facto state authorities; and, finally, if all this does not inspire the patron state to introduce countermeasures.

What, then, explains the failure of the Western engagement strategy in the case of Abkhazia? First, the twin pillars of non-recognition and engagement did not support each other as readily as Western states may have hoped, given their willingness to follow Georgia's lead in setting the parameters of non-recognition. While stigmatizing contested territories as occupied and under the control of illegitimate regimes, Georgia enacted legislation that criminalized unauthorized visits and contacts with de facto state

officials and civil society organizations, thereby posing serious obstacles to confidence building.

Second, the West's commitment to implementing its engagement strategy has remained short of the requisite level. Abkhazia rejected the Western engagement strategy on the grounds that it offered merely a fraction of what it receives from Russia. The West's emphasis was more on humanitarian programs than on structural development. At the same time, all contacts and collaborative proposals with the rest of the world had to go through Tbilisi, and de-isolation became exclusively linked with resolution to the conflict. Western diplomats were never able to sort out the details of implementation: how to pay local implementers without making direct bank transfers, or how to decide which documents Abkhaz residents could travel with to participate in confidence-building programs abroad.

Third, the concept of an engagement strategy is a Western intellectual product. Abkhazia's adversary, Georgia, is a pro-Western country with strong ambitions to join transatlantic security structures and the European community. This contradicts the view of Russia, Abkhazia's hegemonic ally that claims prominence in the post-Soviet space. There is no reason to believe that Western ideas, which after all still back Georgia's territorial claims and make engagement conditional, can be fruitfully planted in Abkhazian ground. Moreover, Russia is closer to the Abkhaz in terms of language and culture than the West. When an engagement strategy stipulates the need to diversify Abkhaz foreign relations, Abkhaz automatically translate this into the language of increasing Western leverage, which again equates to meeting Georgia's demands.

Of course, none of this means that Abkhazia's "strategic partnership" with Russia better serves its interests as an aspiring sovereign state. Abkhaz leaders do not wish to recognize (or, perhaps, do not care) that whatever sovereignty they possess can easily melt away. At the same time, with the strong polarization that currently exists in Western-Russian relations, even if the West were now to modify its engagement strategy to fully accommodate Abkhazian interests, it would most likely still be unable to serve as a basis for conflict resolution.