

---

# Recognition Without Independence

## ABKHAZIA'S INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo No. 245  
September 2012

Sufian Zhemukhov

*Institute for International Education/Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies\**

Abkhazia has enjoyed the status of a de facto independent state since it won a secessionist war with Georgia in 1992-1993. Six countries, all members of the United Nations, later recognized Abkhazia's independence after the Russia-Georgia war of 2008 (see **Table 1**). However, Abkhazia lacks broad international recognition. It is instead an object, not a subject, of negotiations between other states, mainly Georgia, Russia, the United States, and the European Union.

Indeed, Abkhazia's status has not developed as the result of a consistent foreign policy but rather via a series of accidental international events unconnected to each other. Ethnic Abkhazians themselves have been inconsistent about their desire for independence. In fact, Abkhazians applied several times to become a part of other countries; they opted to remain in the USSR when Georgia separated from it two decades ago and have twice applied to join the Russian Federation.

This does not mean that Abkhazians do not have comprehensive interests, however, or that they do not use their own methods to pursue them. Abkhazian foreign policy matters to some degree, at least to the extent that Abkhazia has occasionally been able to improve or worsen its international position. While independence is very important for Abkhazians, however, it is not the only driving force for their foreign policy. Economic and social interests are equally important motives that have helped determine the preferences of Abkhazia's elite.

This memo focuses on the policy that Abkhazians have pursued to achieve independence and on the kinds of support and challenges they have encountered from

---

\* The author is affiliated with the Institute of International Education and is a Charles H. Revson Foundation Fellow at the Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

the international community. On this basis, we try to answer a question: What actions would help Abkhazians effectively develop their position in the international context?

### **Abkhazia as a De Facto Independent State**

From the beginning of their struggle for independence, Abkhazians had only a few allies and were connected with them either temporarily or informally. In 1990-1991, the Abkhazian separatist movement received considerable support from Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev, who tried to use it as an instrument to block Georgia's first steps toward independence. Abkhazians boycotted Georgia's referendum for independence and announced their decision to remain in the USSR, participating in the referendum for the latter's preservation. In June 1992, in response to Georgians' revival of their 1921 constitution, Abkhazians revived their own Soviet-era constitution of 1925, when Abkhazia was united to Georgia in more equal confederal fashion before being formally subordinated to Soviet Georgia in 1931.

In 1992, Abkhazia became a member of the so-called Commonwealth of Unrecognized States (CUS), an analogue of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Abkhazia established relations with other unrecognized states, including Serbian Krajina in Croatia, the Republika Srpska in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Transdniestria, Nagorno-Karabakh, and South Ossetia. After Georgia rejected CIS membership (it only joined at the end of the Georgian-Abkhazian war), Abkhazia separately applied for membership but was not admitted.

Moscow's support ended with the fall of the USSR. Gorbachev's former opponents-turned-presidents of Russia and Georgia, Boris Yeltsin and Eduard Shevardnadze, supported each other. When, in August 1992, Georgian troops moved to restore control over Abkhazia, Russia supported Georgia's territorial integrity.

Abkhazians are considered part of the Circassian world, with its homeland in the Russian Caucasus. The Abkhazian language belongs to a branch of Abaza-Circassian languages. For that reason, Abkhazia gained a new ally, the Circassian community, in Russia and in a diaspora that exists across 50 states. There was a dramatic response from this community to the 1992-1993 Georgian-Abkhazian war. Over 1,500 Circassian volunteers participated in the war. The five-million strong Circassian community in Turkey organized several meetings. A delegation from Circassian NGOs met in September 1992 with the prime minister of Turkey, Süleyman Demirel, who agreed to cooperate to stop the conflict, although his government later supported Georgia. The Circassian Benevolent Association (CBA) in Jordan visited and appealed to the government of Jordan and embassies of the United States, France, Germany, and Great Britain. In January 1993, a freight carrier from the Jordanian air force landed at Nalchik airport in Kabardino-Balkaria in the Russian North Caucasus with 17 tons of humanitarian aid from the CBA and Jordanian Prince Hassan. Chechen separatists also supported Abkhazia, and a Chechen volunteer battalion fought alongside the Abkhazians and Circassians.

The Abkhazians' September 1993 victory did not bring recognition, and the war's legacy determined Abkhazia's problems for years to come. The war claimed about

10,000 lives and caused several hundred thousand refugees to flee Abkhazia, among them more than 200,000 ethnic Georgians, who had made up over 45 percent of Abkhazia's population to the ethnic Abkhazians' 18 percent. After the war, about 50,000 refugees returned to their homes; however, some 30,000 of them had to flee again during a renewal of hostilities in 1998.

Russia actively participated in postwar negotiations and gradually gained a central role in the region. In 1995, the Abkhazian parliament applied to become part of the Russian Federation. However, Russia did not accept it. The following January, Russia agreed to impose a CIS-wide economic blockade against Abkhazia. Other countries, including Turkey, supported it.

The Circassian world remained Abkhazia's only real supporter for half a decade after the war. Recognizing the importance of the Circassian community in its affairs, Abkhazia established relations with the Circassian republics of the Russian Federation. In 1997, Abkhazia even risked alienating Russia when, following the example of regional parliaments in Kabardino-Balkaria and Adyghea, it recognized the 19<sup>th</sup> century genocide the Russian Empire committed against the Abkhazian people. Meanwhile, Abkhazia was passive during two Chechen wars and thus lost the support of the Chechen separatist movement.

After a national referendum, the Abkhazian parliament declared independence in October 1999. Russian policy toward Abkhazia changed after 2000, when Russia eased the blockade against it, unofficially allowing imports and exports. In 2001, Abkhazia once more applied to become part of Russia, this time as an independent associated state, but again Russia rejected its appeal. Abkhazia developed relations with other unrecognized states on post-Soviet territories. In November 2006, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Transdniestria, and Nagorno-Karabakh simultaneously recognized each other, although they lacked instruments of mutual support.

Circassian NGOs responded to the August 2008 war with statements in support of Abkhazia. A meeting took place on Abkhazian Square in Nalchik on the day Russia recognized Abkhazia's independence two months later. Afterwards, delegations from all parts of the Circassian world met in Sukhum(i) to celebrate Russia's recognition.

**Table 1. States that Recognize Abkhazia**

<b>Date of Recognition</b>	<b>State</b>
August 26, 2008	Russian Federation
September 5, 2008	Republic of Nicaragua
September 10, 2009	Bolivarian Republic of Venezuela
December 15, 2009	Republic of Nauru
May 23, 2011	Republic of Vanuatu
September 18, 2011	Republic of Tuvalu

### **Losing Support from the Circassian National Movement**

The Circassian national movement lauded Abkhazia as the first territory in the Circassian-Abaza family to become independent. In October 2008, an Abkhazian

delegation participated in Circassian Day at the European Parliament. Gem Ozdemir, an influential German politician of Circassian origin, organized a meeting with 30 members of the parliament. Influential Circassian organizations lobbied for the economic and political interests of Abkhazia in Turkey. In 2011, Abkhazian President Sergey Bagapsh visited Turkey, but he was unable to meet officials.

At the same time, problems between Abkhazia and Circassians have arisen as a side effect of Abkhazian demographic policy. To resolve the country's demographic problems, the Abkhazian parliament issued a law allowing all people of ethnic Abkhazian origin to become citizens. Over several years, ethnic Abkhazians finally reached 50 percent of the total population (see **Table 2.**) Nonetheless, this is a fragile figure, considering the existence of some 200,000 Georgian refugees and their descendants who demand a right to return.

**Table 2. Ethnic Statistics in Abkhazia**  
(Censuses of USSR 1989, Abkhazia 2003 and 2011)

	1989		2003		2011	
		%		%		%
<b>Abkhaz</b>	93,267	17.8	94,606	43.8	122,069	50,71
<b>Georgians</b>	239,872	45.7	45,953	21.3	46,367	18,26
<b>Armenians</b>	76,541	14.6	44,870	20.8	41,864	17,39
<b>Russians</b>	74,913	14.3	23,420	10.8	22,077	9,17
<b>Total</b>	525,061		215,972		240,705	

The Abkhaz immigration policy alienated Circassians, who were generally not included in the favorable category allowed to become Abkhazian citizens. Circassians hoped that Abkhazia would develop a friendly policy for the mass immigration of diaspora Circassians, descendants of those expelled from the Caucasus during the Russian conquest of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. However, Abkhazia only made a preference for some Circassian sub-ethnic groups, claiming that they belong to the Abaza branch like Abkhazians. The Abkhazian government included into this group Abazins from Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Ubykhs from Turkey, and Shapsugs from the Krasnodar region, Turkey, and Syria. Circassian activists viewed such differentiation as a calculated attempt by Abkhazians to separate themselves from the Circassian-Abaza brotherhood at the expense of dividing Circassians.

In the meantime, Russia and Georgia, for their own reasons, have been equally interested in spoiling Circassian-Abkhaz relations. Several conferences were held in Moscow with the participation of Abkhazian experts but not Circassians that discussed sensitive topics like the denial of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Circassian genocide. Some participants denied the fact that Sochi was part of historical Circassia, claiming it as Abkhazian territory because the Ubykhs that lived in the area supposedly belonged to the Abaza subgroup. The Abkhazian government never made any official statement about these

issues. Nonetheless, these individual statements, which the Russian media publicized, had a negative impact on Circassian-Abkhazian relations.

Georgia's pathbreaking recognition of the Circassian genocide in 2011 revived Circassian-Georgian relations while weakening Circassian-Abkhazian relations. Abkhazia supported the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, the last capital of Circassia. The fact that Russia will hold the Olympics on former Circassian lands without acknowledging Circassian history and sensitivities has upset members of the Circassian national movement. In 2011, realizing the danger of losing support from the movement, Abkhazians started to commemorate their Day of Genocide jointly with the Circassians on May 21 (abandoning their traditional May 31 commemoration). This, however, did not remedy the situation. In May 2012, Circassian organizations did not attend Abkhazian meetings in Kefken, Turkey, commemorating the Circassian genocide, a gathering they always used to organize together.

### **What Drives Abkhazia Away from Georgia and Toward Russia?**

The international community is concerned about Georgian territorial integrity and Russian involvement in Abkhazia. The U.S. government considers Russian actions to be an "occupation of the Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia." Many analysts argue that while gaining de jure recognition of its independence by Russia, Abkhazia is becoming de facto more part of the Russian Federation. Abkhazia has also allowed Russia to increase its military presence. Abkhazia has its own problems with Russia, including tensions over border disputes and extensive Russian property purchases. Recently, Russian security services claimed that there is an Islamist extremist group in Abkhazia connected to North Caucasian extremists. In response, Sukhum(i) rejected the possibility of introducing Russia's infamous anti-terrorist methods into Abkhazia. It is obvious that only the restoration of Abkhazians' relations with Georgia will help them counterbalance the heavy Russian presence in Abkhazia.

What drives Abkhazia away from Georgia and toward Russia? The three main issues that define Abkhazian policy toward Georgia are the legacy of the 1992-1993 war, Georgia's refusal to allow Abkhazia to trade directly with outside states, and the problem of Georgian refugees. The war traumatized Abkhazians and alienated them from Georgians. After the war, Georgia took some steps to try and compel Abkhazia to return to Georgia's orbit. But the deep crisis the blockade caused for the Abkhazian economy was alleviated by the opening of the Russian-Abkhazian border and direct Russian financial subsidies into the Abkhazian budget. This doubled the dependence of Abkhazia on Russia and brought Sukhum(i) under Moscow's control.

The 62<sup>nd</sup> session of the UN General Assembly recognized the right of all refugees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and their descendants, regardless of ethnicity, to return to Abkhazia. However, the Abkhazian government fears that the return of refugees/IDPs would significantly increase Georgian involvement in Abkhazia's internal affairs and that 200,000 returning Georgians would overtake the 100,000 Abkhazians in elections, creating a pro-Georgian government in Abkhazia. There is also the issue of refugee/IDP property, distributed among Abkhazians after the war.

Redistribution would lead to socioeconomic destabilization. The Abkhazian government thus seeks ways to secure itself from Georgians' proper but impossible demands. Russian investments in Abkhazia became the solution they needed. It is more convenient for the Abkhazian government to let Russian companies buy former Georgian properties from new Abkhazian proprietors than to return them to their original owners.

There is a way to resolve the refugee problem to the satisfaction of both sides. They could agree to use the Georgian model of repatriation of Meskhetian Turks, who were deported from Soviet Georgia under Joseph Stalin. This program has provided Meskhetian Turks with Georgian citizenship and reimbursed them for their property, but it does not guarantee their return to the same area they lived in before their deportation. Abkhazians could similarly allow the IDPs/refugees to return to Abkhazia, while Georgia would recognize that in the 1992-1993 war, residents left their homes in Abkhazia because of a situation that Georgian policy itself helped create and to reimburse them for lost property.

### **Conclusion**

Recognition of independence opened new challenges and opportunities for Abkhazia. Engagement with Europe, the Circassian-Abkhazian diaspora, and Russia became three main dimensions of Abkhazia's new foreign policy. Although highly restricted in its possibilities, Abkhazia nonetheless could make some real steps to resolve its main problems and promote its international status. Relations with Russia will remain the priority in Abkhazians' foreign policy. Alongside this, Sukhum(i) should develop relations with the capitals of the Circassian republics in the North Caucasus, Nalchik, Maykop, and Cherkessk, which would help restore Circassian-Abkhaz relations and strengthen the pro-Abkhazian lobby inside Russia.

Over the long term, Abkhazia would benefit from the return of Georgian refugees. This would end Georgia's blockade, help normalize Georgian-Abkhazian relations, and allow for the opening of relations with foreign states. Georgian involvement in the Abkhazian economy would also balance the Russian presence. Return of Georgian residents to Abkhazia would be the crucial step toward building new relations. That could be based on a compromise – Tbilisi should reimburse them for their lost property and Sukhum(i) should allow them to resettle in Abkhazia. Abkhazia could also develop a new policy toward the diaspora, positioning itself as an Abkhazian-Circassian country and allowing Circassians from the diaspora to become citizens. Such a policy would help counterbalance the demographic problems of Georgian return and strengthen relations with the Circassian international movement, which has been Abkhazia's only real ally during its struggle for independence. Such steps would transform certain obstacles into instruments for normalizing the situation in Abkhazia and developing its international status.