

The Georgia-Abkhazia Conflict
Critical Factors Shaping the Present Stalemate

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ABSTRACT

Kyle Alexander Beaulieu: The Georgia-Abkhazia Conflict:
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On August 7th, 2008, Georgia attempted to militarily reassert control over South Ossetia, one of its separatist republics, thus provoking a massive Russian invasion and Georgia's rapid defeat. Russia used the opportunity provided by the Georgian provocation to consolidate its hold over Georgia's two breakaway regions, ultimately recognizing them as legitimate, sovereign states, and thus increasing its power and influence in the region. The West was left reeling, unable to stop Russia or persuade the separatist republics to reconsider federation; the conflict in Georgia has shelved any hopes of a peaceful solution that respected Georgia's "territorial integrity."

This conflict was neither random nor inevitable; rather, this thesis will argue that it was the result of a history of oppression by both Georgian and Abkhaz of the other, weak and corrupt states in Georgia and Abkhazia, the purposeful Russian destabilization of the region, and a significant refugee and demographic problem. This thesis will examine the impact that these factors have had on shaping the conflict situation, and it will seek to gain a better understanding of this suddenly unfrozen conflict, in the hope of successfully dealing with other conflicts in the former Soviet sphere before they erupt into war.

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INTRODUCTION AND OUTLINE

Introduction

A sprawling range of mountains sandwiched between two inland seas, the Caucasus is once again the scene of an international power struggle. Where once Alexander the Great fought the Persian Empire, and where Imperial Russia clashed with the Ottoman Turks, today's conflict features questions of geopolitical influence between Russia and the transatlantic alliance. The small nation of Georgia is the pivot around which this conflict revolves, and instrumental to the conflict in Georgia is the separatist republic of Abkhazia.

Georgia, newly independent as a result of the 1991 disintegration of the Soviet Union, continues to grapple with profound questions of territorial integrity, identity, democracy, ethnic unrest, poverty, and corruption. The separatist republic of Abkhazia attempted to secede from Georgia in 1992, provoking a war with Georgia that resulted in Georgian retreat, *de facto* independence for Abkhazia, and a highly influential role for Russia. For the next ten years, Georgia endured a bloody coup, a civil war, and a strong-arm president in the form of Eduard Shevardnadze. Nevertheless, Georgia has made remarkable progress towards democracy following its 2003 Rose Revolution, and its President Saakashvili enjoys warm relations with a number of Western leaders.

However, an increasingly hostile relationship with its northern neighbor, Russia, and a history of distrust between the Georgian state and its two separatist territories, finally culminated in war in August, 2008. Georgia's military incursion into South Ossetia provoked a massive Russian counterattack, resulting in Georgian defeat and Russian

diplomatic recognition of both of Georgia's separatist republics. Although the war lasted less than ten days, in that time tremendous damage was done not only to Georgian infrastructure, but also to any possibility of reintegrating the *de facto* independent republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the near future.

Working towards, let alone finding, a solution to the conflict is complicated by visceral distrust on all sides, by accusations of racism and attempted genocide, by a fear of revenge policies should Georgia regain control of the separatist republics, and by Western recognition of an independent Kosovo in February, 2008.

Thus a stalemate now exists across the Caucasus. Russian troops have withdrawn back into the separatist republics, and a badly beaten Georgian army eyes them warily. The murders of a Georgian mayor, Russian soldiers, and Georgian policemen are typical. Georgia has sued Russia in the International Court of Justice. The last vital bridge linking Abkhazia with Georgia (across treacherous geography) was bombed. Georgia has begun to construct emergency housing for the thousands of ethnic Georgians expelled from the republics, as winter is approaching quickly. This bloody status quo will limp on indefinitely until trust is rebuilt on both the Abkhazian and Georgian sides.

The main question I will address in this thesis is quite simply, "how did we get here?" There was a great deal of surprise among many in the international community upon the outbreak of violence in August. I think such a perspective is naïve; with all the volatile ingredients present in the region, the recipe for war was drawn up long ago. I will address the factors that have led to a situation where the transatlantic alliance appears to have practically no leverage whatsoever, aside from providing Georgia with a staggering \$4.5 billion in aid.

Thesis statement

This thesis will argue that the August war was essentially inevitable, and the present situation has arisen due to three contributing factors: Russian hegemony; ethnic tensions between Georgians and minority ethnic groups; and Western ambivalence. Once war finally broke out, it was far too late for the West to intervene. With no legitimacy in the separatist republics and no leverage over Russia, the West could do little but pontificate and await Russia's pleasure.

Outline

In order to make this argument, the body of this thesis consists of five chapters that address the factors I have just outlined. Chapter 1 gives a concise background and addresses the history and development of the conflict between Abkhazia and Georgia especially in regards to Tsarist Russia and the Soviet Union.

Chapter 2 examines the democratic institutions of Georgia and Abkhazia, and looks to the region for a sense of context. This chapter explains the contribution of weak central states to the outbreak of war.

Chapter 3 articulates the main factor presently shaping the outcome in Abkhazia: Russia. Russia has demonstrated conclusively in the past several months its desire to reassert control in its 'near abroad.' I will argue that Russia, through meddling, interference, coercion, and outright military action, has dispelled the illusion that it respects the sovereignty of its neighbors.

Chapter 4 tackles the ethnic tensions that exist between Georgia and its non-Georgian elements, especially in regards to the territory of Abkhazia and the refugee question. The history of tension between Georgians and Abkhaz, as well as the hundreds of

thousands of ethnic Georgian refugees expelled from Abkhazia at the conclusion of the 1992-93 war, shape the situation today, are fundamental in shaping the current conflict. Georgia once resembled the former Yugoslavia's patchwork of ethnic diversity, but is now trending towards a more modern Balkan outcome: ethnically homogenous units divided by ethnic cleansing and war.

Chapter 5 addresses the August 2008 war by explaining how the various parties view the conflict, and what points are still in contention. I will argue that the conflict did not, in fact, begin on August 7th, but rather Russia had been steadily escalating pressure for several months beforehand.

The thesis concludes by explaining how these factors shaped where we are today in Abkhazia, and that Russia's leverage appears uncontested within this specific conflict. However, I will argue that although Russia's position has been strengthened vis-à-vis Georgia's, I contend that Russia has in fact *lost* influence in its near abroad due to its lack of a coherent foreign policy.

A few clarifications need to be made before continuing. First, the use of "Russia" throughout this thesis refers to the Russian government and political elite, just as the use of "Georgia" or "Abkhazia" signify the respective institutions. On the other hand, the use of "the West" is less clear; for example, the United States and Germany tend to approach conflicts of this nature differently. When referring to "the West" I refer to the transatlantic alliance, and the principal partners in that alliance. Perhaps unsurprisingly, until very recently the approaches taken to this conflict have been relatively uniform across the spectrum of the transatlantic alliance, which is to say disengaged and lethargic.

This thesis focuses on Georgia's relationship with its breakaway republic of Abkhazia. My reasons for focusing on Abkhazia rather than addressing both separatist republics are several, aside from simple space constraints. The conflict in Abkhazia begs further study because of a number of interesting factors: first, Abkhazia and Georgia have a long history of jostling with one another while under the yoke of imperial overlords. Second, even with such a small population (190-225,000), Abkhazia still dwarfs the republic of South Ossetia, which is little more than a patchwork of Georgian, Ossetian, and mixed villages (total population, between 50-75,000), and thus it provides a better comparison to other separatist situations. Lastly, in addition to a reasonably functioning state and a history of relative tolerance towards most of its own ethnic minorities, Abkhazia has the capacity to be an economically prosperous state, due to its history as a vibrant tourist destination and productive citrus agriculture. South Ossetia lacks such an infrastructure and would be hopelessly dependent on outside aid if it truly achieved independence. With such factors in mind, I will focus on the Abkhazia-Georgia conflict relationship, to the exclusion of South Ossetia.

This thesis, in addressing the factors that have shaped the current situation, seeks to enlighten the conversation surrounding the all too simplified rhetoric that this conflict has produced among politicians and the media. Statements like "We are all Georgians,"¹ made by Republican Senator John McCain, serve to inflame tensions in an already conflict-prone area. Understanding both perspectives on Abkhazia's future is fundamental, because while Georgia may view Russia's actions as an aggressive land-grab, Russia may view Georgia's relationship with Abkhazia as territorial aggrandizement. Based on my research into the

¹ Falcone, Michael. New York Times Online. August 15th 2008
<<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9D04E7D8153EF936A2575BC0A96E9C8B63&scp=1&sq=%22we+are+all+georgians%22&st=nyt>>

historical, situational, and political background of the conflict in Abkhazia, I will conclude that the Abkhazia question will only be solved by understanding how the three critical contributing factors: Russian hegemony, ethnic conflict, and Western inactivity, have led to the unfortunate stalemate that exists today.

CHAPTER 1

PAST AS PROLOGUE: HISTORY OF THE GEORGIA-ABKHAZIA CONFLICT

This chapter will examine the background to the conflict in order to better understand the historical relationships between the various parties. The saying “past is prologue” is fitting for this conflict, because much of the conflict revolves around Abkhaz resentment of Georgian domination, Georgian resentment of Russian domination, Russia’s dominant role in the Caucasus, and the inner political machinations that have shaped the present situation. This chapter forms the basis for later chapters, but it also articulates the past as a contributing factor in its own right. Georgia’s problems with Abkhazia are centuries old, and the conflict today is much the same as it was in 1925; two peoples, neither of whom have any other home on Earth, jockeying for power on a small strip of mountainous terrain. Such a history of contention contributes greatly to the present stalemate.

The history of the Caucasus is one of repeated conquests by foreign superpowers. The Abkhaz and Georgian people have alternated back and forth between ruling each other and being ruled by a host of empires. Both cultures have repeatedly sought home rule in the face of these repeated conquests.² The Abkhaz people in antiquity were ruled by a steady succession of foreign powers: the Georgian Kingdom of Colchis, then the Kingdom of Egrisi, then the Roman Empire, then a brief period of semi-autonomy before being absorbed

² Goltz 19

by the Byzantine Empire around the 5th century A.D.³ Christianity trickled in gradually, but it was introduced as the official religion in the 6th century. In the 780s, the Abkhaz king Leon II liberated the country from Byzantine rule and ruled over a united western Georgia, proclaiming the Kingdom of Abkhazia.⁴

In the second half of the tenth century, Abkhazia became part of feudal Georgia. With the decline of this feudal kingdom, Abkhazia broke free around the turn of the 16th century to become an independent principality. By the second half of the 16th century, Abkhazia, along with all of western Georgia, fell to the Ottoman Empire. The vast majority of Abkhaz converted to Islam while most Georgians preserved their Orthodox Christian heritage.⁵

Abkhazia first came under the dominion of Imperial Russia in 1810, as a separate territory from Georgia. Abkhazia administered its own affairs until 1864, when Imperial Russia finally defeated the last of the Caucasian mountain peoples and annexed most of the Caucasus to the Russian Empire.⁶ The Tsar reorganized the region into the Sukhumi Military District. Many Abkhazians refused to accept Imperial rule, and thus the majority were exiled into Ottoman lands in 1877, leaving the northwest Caucasus decimated of its native population. Abkhazian deportations to Ottoman Turkey continued throughout 1878, following the Russo-Turkish war.⁷ By 1886, out of a population of almost 70,000, and after numerous deportations, the ethnic percentages in Abkhazia looked like: Abkhaz 85%;

³ Ibid. 19-20

⁴ Ibid. 20-21

⁵ Ibid. 24-25

⁶ Normark 92

⁷ Goltz 30-31

Mingrelians 5%; Greeks 3%; Armenians 1%; Russian 1%, Estonians <1%; Georgians <1% and Others 1%.⁸

In November 1917, the local cadres of the Menshevik Transcaucasian Commissariat took power in Abkhazia. In March 1918, under Bolshevik leadership, an armed uprising was instituted, with, on April 8th, the taking of Sukhumi and proclamation of Soviet power. However, the Soviet commune of Abkhazia lasted only 40 days before it was annexed by Georgian Mensheviks, on May 17th, 1918.⁹ The Soviet Union did not reestablish power until 1921, with the formation of the Abkhazian Soviet Republic, subsequently recognized by Georgia's revolutionary committee on May 21st. A "contract of alliance" was signed by Abkhazia and Georgia in early 1921. Abkhazia and Georgia, together, entered the Transcaucasian Federation in 1922, and as part of the Transcaucasian Federation, Abkhazia joined the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics a few weeks later.¹⁰ On April 1st, 1925, the Abkhazian Constitution was adopted, legally guaranteeing its republican status as a part, and partner, of Georgia.¹¹

Abkhazia suffered greatly under Joseph Stalin (an ethnic Georgian) during the 1930s, as tens of thousands of suspected enemies of the people were arrested, convicted in kangaroo courts, and executed.¹² In 1931 Abkhazia was reduced to that of an autonomous republic within Georgia; thus moving the power center closer to Tbilisi. In 1937, the brutal head of the Georgian Communist Party, Lavrenti Beria, initiated a forced colonization by

⁸ Conciliation Resources Online, <<http://www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/georgia-abkhazia/chronology.php>>

⁹ Normark 92

¹⁰ de Waal, 310-311

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Goltz 36

thousands of non-Abkhazian, predominantly Georgian, working poor into Abkhazia.¹³ Beria took a far more active role in the Caucasus than Stalin had, by creating cadres, informant networks, and ensuring strict adherence to the party line.¹⁴ Under Beria, the Abkhaz alphabet was converted into a Georgian script, and in 1944-1945 all Abkhazian schools were closed and replaced with Georgian schools, that amounted to little more than indoctrination centers. Beria's Bolshevist attempt to Georgianify, and thus Russify, the Abkhazian people led to the banning of the language from administration and publication.¹⁵

Only in 1953, after Stalin had died and Beria had been denounced and executed, were the Abkhaz allowed to reassert some of their repressed cultural identity. A new script, based on Cyrillic, was devised; Abkhazian schools reopened; political administration was returned partially to Abkhazian control. Ethnic Abkhaz were even allowed over-representation in local offices in compensation for the cultural repression.¹⁶

The resulting three decades were relatively uneventful, as Georgia and Abkhazia were essentially closed off from the rest of the world outside the Soviet Union. Abkhazia, however, was an extremely popular tourist destination within the Union, which helps explain the affinity for Abkhazia that many Russians feel.¹⁷

In 1978, 130 Abkhazian intellectuals, exhausted by the cultural oppression, wrote to Brezhnev to request permission for Abkhazia to secede from Georgia and become part of Russia. Their request was denied, however, and all the signatories lost their jobs. Shortly

¹³ Pelkmans 104-5

¹⁴ Goltz 39

¹⁵ Ibid. 35-37

¹⁶ Ibid. 36

¹⁷ Goltz 57

thereafter the Abkhazian State University was opened in Sukhumi (with Georgian, Russian and Abkhazian branches) as the first place of higher education in western Georgia. There was a second petition ten years later, this time signed by 60 prominent Abkhazians. The petition detailed in 87 pages a list of complaints of how Abkhazia was being Georgia-fied by both Tbilisi and the substantial Georgian colonists in Abkhazia.¹⁸ The petition called for restoring Abkhazia's Union Republic status of the 1920s, alongside special treaty ties with Georgia, and thus a total renegotiation of the political framework.¹⁹

On March 18th, 1989, 30,000 people signed a petition at a mass meeting in Abkhazia, demanding the restoration of the sovereign status Abkhazia enjoyed before 1931. Georgia's official reaction was hostile and a number of measures were taken to consolidate Georgian power and influence in Abkhazia. Principal among these was the decision to open a branch of Tbilisi State University in Abkhazia's capital Sukhumi. This was aimed at undermining the official university, established in 1978. Ethnic clashes between students broke out, and these spread to the wider community in Sukhumi in July 1989.²⁰

As the Soviet Union began to fracture, nationalist sentiment skyrocketed in Georgia alongside hopes for independence from two centuries of Russian domination. A State Program for the Georgian language was published in November 1988 and was adopted by the Georgian Supreme Soviet in August 1989.²¹ The law, which made the teaching of the Georgian language obligatory in all schools, and which required Georgian language and

¹⁸ Conciliation Resources Online, <<http://www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/georgia-abkhazia/chronology.php>> October 24th, 2008

¹⁹ Akaba 85-86

²⁰ Lynch 129

²¹ Dale 122

literature tests as prerequisites for entry into higher education, raised fears of a renewed attempt at Georgianization among Abkhazians.²²

In August, 1990, the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet, in the absence of its Georgian deputies, declared the state sovereignty of the Abkhazian SSR. However, the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet emphasized its willingness to negotiate with the Georgian government with the objective being preserving Georgia's territorial integrity.²³ The following day the Supreme Soviet of the Georgian SSR declared the decision invalid. In December 1990 the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet elected historian Vladislav Ardzimba as its Chairman; he would govern Abkhazia for the next thirteen years.²⁴

A major catalyst of tensions between Abkhazia and Georgia was the March 17th, 1991 USSR-wide referendum on Gorbachev's Union Treaty.²⁵ While Georgia boycotted the vote, Abkhazia's non-Georgian population voted overwhelmingly, with 98.6% in favor, to enter the proposed Union of Soviet Socialist Republics. By participating, Abkhazia had effectively separated itself from Georgia's bid for independence.

In negotiations with the Georgian government of Zviad Gamsakhurdia, a virulent Georgian nationalist,²⁶ Abkhazian leaders proposed a two-chamber parliament for Abkhazia. One chamber would represent the entire electorate on the basis of proportional representation; the other would represent the various ethnic groups that constituted

²² Goltz 120-122

²³ Ibid. 123

²⁴ Ibid. 61-63

²⁵ Clines, Francis X. New York Times Online, July 25th, 1991
<<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9D0CE4DF1438F936A15754C0A967958260&scp=10&sq=gorbachev%20union%20treaty%20&st=cse>>

²⁶ Zürcher 102

Abkhazia. After protracted negotiations, the Abkhazian leaders agreed to a new election law in Abkhazia which allocated set numbers of parliament seats to each ethnic group. Of the 65 seats, 28 were reserved for Abkhazians, 26 for Georgians, and 11 for other nationalities. As an additional measure of protection for each of the minority groups, certain decisions were to be taken only with a qualified majority of 75%. In December 1991, a new parliament (though technically still a Supreme Soviet) was elected under this regime.²⁷

Unfortunately, within months the parliament was deadlocked, divided along ethnic lines: Georgian MPs on one side, and Abkhazian, Armenian, Greek, Russian, and other minority MPs on the other. Decisions taken by a majority were repeatedly rejected by Georgian MPs. This led to a walk-out, in June, 1992, the Georgians, who began meeting in separate quarters.

In February 1992, following the overthrow of Georgian President Gamsakhurdia in a bloody coup, the Georgian Military Council reinstated Georgia's 1921, pre-Bolshevik, constitution. In June of that year, Abkhazian President Vladislav Ardzinba sent a draft treaty to the Georgian State Council essentially calling for the creation of a confederative relationship between Abkhazia and Georgia, while preserving Georgian territorial integrity. The draft contained provisions for the guarantee of rights to all minorities in the territories under Abkhazian and Georgian jurisdiction, and for the rejection of the use of military force to resolve disagreements. However, the State Council of Georgia did not give a response.²⁸

Consequently, because no formal status was assigned to Abkhazia under the 1921 Georgian Constitution, in July 1992, Abkhazia reinstated its former constitution of 1925. According to Article 4 of the 1925 constitution, Abkhazia was "united with the Soviet

²⁷ Ibid. p 95.

²⁸ Haindrava 205-206

Socialist Republic of Georgia on the basis of a special union-treaty.” The 1925 Abkhazian Constitution provided for a federal relationship between the “two equal republics” of Abkhazia and Georgia. The Georgian Parliament immediately annulled the Abkhazian decision.²⁹

In August, 1992, the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet, again, sent an appeal to Eduard Shevardnadze (by now Chairman of the Georgian State Council) for negotiations on future federative relations between Abkhazia and Georgia. In the appeal, the Abkhazian leadership proposed that discussions should address both the extent of powers and responsibilities of separate Abkhazian and Georgian governments, and future joint (i.e. federal) bodies. However, these negotiations were overshadowed by the continuing civil war in Georgia. Supporters of Gamsakhurdia fought the Georgian government cabal, a four member Presidium of the State Council that featured Shevardnadze, two warlords named Kitovani and Ioseliani, and a Prime Minister by the name of Sigua, who was a backer of Kitovani.³⁰

Consultations between senior leaders of Abkhazia and Georgia continued, but were broken up, on August 14th, 1992 when Shevardnadze sent units of the Georgian National Guard into the region. The Georgian government claims that the Georgian troops entered Abkhazia in order to rescue hostages and to guard highways and railways, but since they met resistance from the Abkhaz militias, which they considered illegally armed brigands, it was logical for the government to try and suppress such an insurgency.³¹

The situation in Western Georgia along highways and railways truly was disastrous, owing to subversive activities by pro-Gamsakhurdia guerillas, and thus there was a

²⁹ Zürcher 93-95

³⁰ Goltz 65-68

³¹ Ibid.

compelling pretext for increased Georgian military deployment in the region. In any case, the Georgian National Guard quickly escalated from hunting supporters of Gamsakhurdia to a campaign of pillage³² to an outright war on Abkhaz separatists. This was confirmed a few days later, when the Georgian Defense Minister, Tengiz Kitovani, claimed that the reason behind the military operation was to put a stop to the secessionist Abkhazian administration of Vladislav Ardzinba.³³

On August 14, 1992, the Georgian National Guard occupied Sukhumi, igniting the long-simmering Abkhazian conflict. The Abkhazians, shored up by volunteers from the northern Caucasus as well as Russian forces and weapons, rapidly organized a far more effective resistance than the Georgians were prepared for. Meanwhile, Gamsakhurdia's forces in western Georgia were waging their own campaign. The Georgian National Guard faced a war on two fronts; Abkhazian and Caucasian forces to the north, and Gamsakhurdia's faction to the south. A year later the Georgian National Guard was finally forced out of Sukhumi by the Abkhazians, just as the National Guard was being bullied by Gamsakhurdia.³⁴

Shevardnadze was forced to appeal to Russia for military assistance in quelling Gamsakhurdia's rebellion. In less than two weeks, Russian troops defeated Gamsakhurdia's forces. As compensation, Shevardnadze was forced to end Georgia's boycott and join the Russian-dominated (in his view) Commonwealth of Independent States, as well as sign a number of security cooperation agreements. Georgia's indebtedness to Russia increased throughout early 1994, first signing a Russian-brokered ceasefire with the Abkhazians, and

³² Zürcher 127-145

³³ Goltz 65

³⁴ Ibid. 52-53

then agreeing, along with Abkhazia, to the deployment of Russian peacekeepers along the border between Abkhazia and Georgia.³⁵

The interim 16 years between the ceasefire and the August 2008 war witnessed a thaw in tensions in the late 1990s, with increased dialogue and relative calm between Georgia and Abkhazia, until the regional dynamic was substantially changed following the 2001 election of Vladimir Putin as the Russian President. However, chapter 3 will deal more thoroughly with Russia's contemporary role in this conflict, just as chapter 4 will examine the demographic aftermath of the 1992-1993 Georgia-Abkhazia war.

This section has attempted to explain the history of the complex, bloody rivalry between the Abkhaz and Georgian people, especially under Russian domination of almost two hundred years. With an understanding of this history in mind, we may conclude that such a rivalry over the course of generations doubtless contributes to the present situation. We shall now examine the region as a whole for a sense of context, as well as Georgia's peaceful Rose Revolution of 2003, which ushered President Mikheil Saakashvili into power.

³⁵ Aves 30-31.

CHAPTER 2

STATE WEAKNESS AS A CONTRIBUTING FACTOR

It is vital to understand the state of freedom and the strength of democratic institutions in Georgia and Abkhazia for a host of reasons. The scarcely democratic histories of both republics do not lend themselves to compromise or consensus-based solutions to conflict. In fact, Barbara Christophe argues that one of the primary failures of Georgia in the early 1990s was that they were never able to replace the well-entrenched patronage networks based on personal trust with a more modern, impersonal state bureaucracy, and that failure was one of the major factors in preventing a more democratic solution to the Abkhazia question.³⁶ I would argue that the lack of a culture of democracy, party competition, and negotiation leads to a situation in which the two republics are less inclined to trust one another and indeed their many differences are amplified rather than ameliorated.

I will now outline the general state of freedom and democracy in Georgia and Abkhazia, in order to understand the institutional context in which this conflict takes place. I will do this by examining “country reports” and “nations in transit” analyses from Freedom House. Freedom House³⁷ is a highly respected nongovernmental organization; it is one of the most prominent NGOs dealing with democracy promotion and campaigns for human rights. Freedom House is particularly known for its analyses and reports on the state of freedom around the world, and thus it is an essential source for any discussion involving democratic institutions in a given country.

³⁶ Christophe 193-207.

³⁷ Freedom House Online <<http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=1>> October 29th, 2008

Georgia

The figure below is taken from Freedom House's 2008 Nations in Transit profile of Georgia,³⁸ edited by Ghia Nodia, a noted and accomplished Georgian scholar, author, and political scientist. This figure gives the Freedom House scores for a range of government and democratic institutions within Georgia, indicating the degree to which Georgia is succeeding, or failing to succeed, in the implementation of liberal democracy.

Figure 1

Nations in Transit Ratings and Averaged Scores

	1999	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008
Electoral Process	4.00	4.50	5.00	5.25	5.25	4.75	4.75	4.50	4.75
Civil Society	3.75	4.00	4.00	4.00	3.50	3.50	3.50	3.50	3.50
Independent Media	3.75	3.50	3.75	4.00	4.00	4.25	4.25	4.00	4.25
Governance*	4.50	4.75	5.00	5.50	5.75	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
National Democratic Governance	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	5.50	5.50	5.50	5.75
Local Democratic Governance	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	6.00	5.75	5.50	5.50
Judicial Framework and Independence	4.00	4.00	4.25	4.50	4.50	5.00	4.75	4.75	4.75
Corruption	5.00	5.25	5.50	5.75	6.00	5.75	5.50	5.00	5.00
Democracy Score	4.17	4.33	4.58	4.83	4.83	4.96	4.86	4.68	4.79

* With the 2005 edition, Freedom House introduced separate analysis and ratings for national democratic governance and local democratic governance to provide readers with more detailed and nuanced analysis of these two important subjects.

NOTE: The ratings reflect the consensus of Freedom House, its academic advisers, and the author(s) of this report. The opinions expressed in this report are those of the author(s). The ratings are based on a scale of 1 to 7, with 1 representing the highest level of democratic progress and 7 the lowest. The Democracy Score is an average of ratings for the categories tracked in a given year.

³⁸ <<http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=47&nit=452&year=2008>> October 20th, 2008.

As is clear from a cursory glance at the table, despite the supposed democratization of Georgia, especially in light of the Rose Revolution, Georgia has made relatively little progress over the past ten years, and indeed, has slipped slightly in several categories. Why is it then that the Monitoring Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe remarked in September 2007, “In a remarkably short time, Georgia has made stunning progress in carrying out substantial economic, judicial, and state reforms. It has laid the foundations that should allow Georgia to become a prosperous liberal market economy and a fully fledged democracy governed by human rights and the rule of law.”³⁹

There are two reasons for the discrepancy between the numbers and this encouraging evaluation of Georgian progress towards democracy. The first is that the Rose Revolution dramatically altered conditions in Georgia. Indeed, the Rose Revolution even helped trigger the other “color revolutions” in Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan.⁴⁰ The revolution refers to the peaceful resignation of President Eduard Shevardnadze following massive protests over rigged parliamentary elections in November, 2003. The revolution ushered into power a group of young, pro-Western reformers led by the charismatic Mikheil Saakashvili. Although he was inexperienced and faced opposition within parliament, Saakashvili has had substantial success in rooting out mass corruption, strengthening public institutions, and promoting robust economic growth.⁴¹

³⁹ “Stunning Progress achieved in Georgia is an example for the whole region and beyond,” Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE), September 19, 2007, <http://assembly.coe.int/ASP/NewsManager/EMB_NewsManagerView.asp?ID=3177>; also Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, <http://www.mfa.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=496&info_id=5086>

⁴⁰ Legvold 31-32

⁴¹ <<http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=47&nit=452&year=2008>> October 20th, 2008.

The second reason is best illustrated by Freedom House’s “map of freedom”⁴² depicting the region:

Figure 2



Simply put, Georgia’s success in democratization stands in marked contrast with its former Soviet neighborhood. On this map, green represents “free,” yellow represents “partly free,” and blue represents “not free.” Of the entire former Soviet Union, only Ukraine, aside from the small Baltic states, has managed to achieve a “free” rating from Freedom House. What this means is that Georgia’s efforts towards democratization are successful in their own right, especially considering Russian efforts to reassert influence in its Near Abroad. Within its region, Georgia is best compared to Armenia: a small, Eastern Orthodox country in a geostrategic location with a long history of Russian domination. The ratings Freedom House assigns Armenia are almost identical to those Georgia receives.⁴³ Contrast this status with oil-rich Azerbaijan’s rating of “not free,” or Turkey’s of “partly free,” although Turkey

⁴² <<http://www.freedomhouse.org/uploads/MOF2008.pdf>> October 21st, 2008

⁴³ <<http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=47&nit=444&year=2008>> October 21st, 2008

enjoys a better evaluation from Freedom House than either of the former Soviet republics. This contrast illuminates an unsurprising pattern: the closer a regime is to Russia, the more likely that regime is to be rated as “not free.” Thus, because of their closer orbits with Russia, states like Azerbaijan, Belarus, and virtually all of the –stans are “not free.”

Georgia's hybrid political system guarantees major political and civil rights and provides for pluralism institutionally, along with a free press. There is an unhealthy degree of dominance by the executive branch of the legislative and judicial branches, along with other state agencies, as well. In addition, the opposition movement is weak, thus preventing Georgia from achieving the status of a truly free, consolidated democracy. Ghia Nodia observes that “The effectiveness of the government has increased considerably since the Rose Revolution, especially in attracting public revenue and providing public goods. However, the fact that opposition protests led to a political crisis ending in a nine-day state of emergency exposed the vulnerability of Georgia's democratic institutions.”⁴⁴ In early 2007, President Saakashvili made the controversial claim that the existing Georgian “Constitution requires fundamental improvements in terms of democratization” and he then expressed an intention “to create a new constitutional commission to write a new Georgian Constitution in the coming years.”⁴⁵

He soon recanted, claiming that any new constitution must await the conclusion of separatist disputes and the complete territorial integrity of Georgia. Although immensely popular among many Georgians, as well as in the capitals of the West, Saakashvili is considered by many analysts and members of the opposition to have somewhat autocratic

⁴⁴ <<http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=47&nit=452&year=2008>> October 21st, 2008

⁴⁵ Ibid.

tendencies.⁴⁶ During the protests in November, 2007, that Nodia spoke of, the opposition used the slogan “Georgia Without a President,” implying the introduction of a European-style parliamentary democracy upon Saakashvili’s ouster.

On the other hand, Georgia’s post-Rose Revolution leadership has made strides towards consolidating political power in Tbilisi at the cost of alienating the separatist regimes further than they were under Shevardnadze.⁴⁷ Continuing in this vein, Bruno Coppieters, a Eurasian studies expert, observes that “Georgia is a weak state in a fragmented region,”⁴⁸ and he describes Georgia as striving to “resist its peripheral status vis-à-vis Moscow by claiming membership in Western organizations. It strives for a change of status from dependency on a single center (Moscow) toward interdependency with a multi-tiered network of centers within a larger Euro-Atlantic environment.”⁴⁹ This gravitation towards the West is deeply unsettling to many Abkhaz, who maintain strong ties with Russia, which is hostile to NATO’s continuing encroachment toward its borders.

The Georgian state’s relative weakness, along with rash decisions by Saakashvili, contributed seriously to the outbreak of hostilities. A more seasoned politician might have seen the writing on the wall, and understood that using the Georgian military to regain South Ossetia was a sizable risk. Thus, Saakashvili was at times his own worst enemy in preventing himself from realizing any significant breakthroughs on the peace/reintegration process with the separatist republics. Instead, given the Russian support of the republics,

⁴⁶ Bilefsky *International Herald Tribune*. Sept.8th, 2008.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* 368-369

⁴⁸ Coppieters, 2005, 339

⁴⁹ *Ibid.* 351

and a relatively weak power broker in Tbilisi, the separatists were less likely to attempt negotiations in good faith,⁵⁰ because they could easily rely on their Russian protector.

Abkhazia

On June 7th, 2008, I conducted a two-hour interview in Berlin with a senior member of the Heinrich Böll Foundation,⁵¹ a German Green Party-affiliated foundation that promotes democracy and cross-cultural understanding. The gentleman with whom I was meeting preferred to speak off the record, due to the ongoing second-track negotiations he was with which he was involved. Speaking from over a decade of experience in the Caucasus, he explained that Abkhazia, unlike any other separatist movement in the former Soviet or Yugoslav sphere, has actually succeeded in building a working government and a decent civil society. This success was achieved in spite of the loss of a quarter of a million people following the civil war in the early 1990s. Such success might indicate why Freedom House gives Abkhazia a rating of “partly free,” just like Georgia, with scores that are only slightly behind its much larger neighbor.⁵²

The Heinrich Böll official contrasted Abkhazia to Kosovo, which he argued was essentially run by the mafia, and the West’s support of Kosovo’s independence thus enabled such criminality. He also outlined the other so-called “frozen conflicts,” in comparison with Abkhazia: Moldova’s Transdniestria, hopelessly corrupt and incredibly dependent on Russia; South Ossetia, far too small and poor to ever be independent, which is why many of

⁵⁰ In 2005, to the U.S. and the EU’s delight, Saakashvili extended a very generous offer to the President of South Ossetia, Eduard Kokoity. However, Kokoity, in Moscow, rebuffed Saakashvili’s offer. The Russians did not try to persuade him otherwise.

⁵¹ <<http://www.boell.de/>> November 2nd, 2008

⁵² <<http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=22&year=2008&country=7530>> November 2nd, 2008

the key figures in its government are Russian nationals; finally, Nagorno-Karabakh, the claimed Armenian exclave within Azerbaijan, a much bloodier history here, and Azerbaijan is markedly less free than either Georgia or Abkhazia.

The official detailed that the Abkhaz desired complete independence, not Russian domination, and he pointed to the Abkhazian election of Sergei Bagapsh in 2004, over the heavily Kremlin-backed Raul Khadjimba, as proof of their independent streak. Nevertheless, Abkhazia is not nearly as independent as it might like to be. It remains highly dependent on Russian largesse, whether consumer goods, expertise, and weaponry. An ideal case in point is the Russian “passportizing” of the Abkhazian people, the practice by which Russia grants passports to all Abkhazians, and then claiming the right to protect its citizens. Of course, Russia chose to do this as retaliation for the ongoing Georgian blockade of Abkhazia, and the fact that Abkhaz are allowed extremely limited movement outside of their own territory.

Abkhazia’s governmental structure divides power between a president and a parliament equally, in theory, but in practice, much like Georgia, the president exercises extensive control. The president and vice president are elected for five-year terms. The parliament, or People’s Assembly, consists of 35 members elected for five-year terms from single-seat constituencies, much like Georgia’s system.⁵³ Despite the presence of democratic institutions, and the several elections that have taken place so far, the Abkhazian government is rife with corruption, as well as a kind of parochialism that results in the old patronage networks being preserved, all the while the Georgian leadership is doing its best to dismantle such patronage networks within its own borders.

⁵³ Ibid.

Abkhazia is as yet unable to stand on its own. Because it prefers Russia to its erstwhile confederate partner, Georgia, and because the Abkhazian state itself is a weakly functioning institution, the seeds were sown for any Georgian military provocation to result in a massive Russian invasion, and the occupation of Abkhazia, if only to ensure the safety of the “Russian” citizens there. Russia’s role within the region must now be examined, in order to gain an understanding of this resurgent power.

CHAPTER 3

RUSSIA – THE KEY PLAYER AND MOST CRITICAL FACTOR

Russia is without question the most important factor shaping Georgia and Abkhazia; Georgia's independence in 1991 did little to throw off almost two hundred years of domination by its powerful northern neighbor. The collapse of the Soviet Union precipitated a tremendous crisis of identity within Russia itself. This crisis featured some of the more nationalistic Russian leadership viewing the demise of the Soviet Union as a form of liberation for Mother Russia, while others lamented the loss of superpower status. In any case, the poverty-stricken, civil war-wracked Russia of the 1990s bears little resemblance to the oil profits-engorged, autocratically consolidated, assertive Russia of today.

This chapter will discuss Russia's role in the Caucasus in regards to the conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia within the past two decades. Where chapter 1 outlined the approach taken by the various Soviet governments to the region, this chapter shall analyze the post-Soviet Russian approach. However, there has never been a clear distinction between Soviet and Russian involvement in the Georgian-Abkhazia conflict.⁵⁴ This lack of a distinction creates a series of problems, not least of which is an absence of a change in policy in the Caucasus. In fact, as the Russian scholar Dmitri Trenin observes, Russia has essentially *no* coherent foreign policy in the Caucasus.⁵⁵ This is due partially to the fact that until Putin's consolidation of the Russian state, beginning in 2000, there were at least six competing centers of foreign policy influence within Russia. These were:

⁵⁴ UN Document S/1997/827 (28 October 1997)

⁵⁵ Trenin, 1996, 91-102

1. Boris Yeltsin and the Russian executive branch
2. The Foreign Ministry
3. Gazprom, Lukoil, and Transneft, as well as other energy conglomerates affiliated with former Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin
4. The Defense Ministry
5. The Atomic Energy Ministry
6. The Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations⁵⁶

However, even in the face of such a multitude of actors, Bruno Coppieters argues that,

the various foreign policy players on the Russian domestic scene share, despite the variety of their actual policies, common geopolitical and geo-economic interests or at least have to take these general interests into consideration when attempting to influence Russian policies. It is, therefore, possible to speak of Russian position, even if various actors on the Russian domestic scene pursue their own particular foreign policy agendas.⁵⁷

Thus we may hypothesize that the often contradictory and haphazard Russian foreign policy nevertheless has an element of consistency to it. Putin's consolidation of power, which enables him to more effectively wield the state apparatus, has proven this theory, as now all of these formerly competing interests now look to the Kremlin.⁵⁸ Why then is Russia's foreign policy in its "near abroad" still so contradictory and incoherent? I will argue that Russian foreign policy is quite rational, if poorly implemented, especially when one considers their strategic interests and constraints.

I will also outline Russia's rationale for recognizing Abkhazia on August 26th and discuss the steps the Russian government has taken to increase its influence. From increasing the number of "peacekeepers" to offering generous deals in terms of goods and resources, Russia has established itself as the central motivator for the development of this conflict, and the most vital actor to involve in negotiating any outcome.

⁵⁶ Freeman 6

⁵⁷ Coppieters, 2000, 41

⁵⁸ Cornell 25-27

Strategically speaking, Russia faces serious challenges in the Caucasus, which account for its often controversial and contradictory foreign policy. In formulating this foreign policy in the immediate post-Soviet era, Russia assumed that if its southern neighbors, Georgia and Azerbaijan, were allowed to have their own way, they would try and conduct a sovereign foreign policy and look for alternative partners and alliances rather than choosing to partner exclusively with Russia. Russia found such an outcome unacceptable, and thus began to take steps to reassert control over the Southern Caucasus.⁵⁹

Russia's strategy towards Georgia specifically tended to play Georgia and its separatist regions (Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and, before Saakashvili brought it back into the fold, Adjara) off one another, a tendency that Russia continues into the present day. It is no coincidence that Russian peacekeepers have been present in the region for over 14 years,⁶⁰ and yet have made no concrete contribution to peace other than preventing the outbreak of full-scale war. I will argue that Russia views preserving the status quo as ultimately preferable to any kind of a resolution to the conflict.

Traditionally Georgia has always looked to the West, even while its history is a thoroughly Caucasian one.⁶¹ Azerbaijan on the other hand saw its independence as a chance to establish a close partnership with (Muslim) Turkey as well as Western oil companies like BP and ExxonMobil. Russia's options for dealing with such wayward trajectories in the 1990s were few, because it was still far too weak and internally divided to attract its former constituent states. Only a sizable military presence would guarantee clout in the region, but Russia was grappling with so many internal problems that projecting that kind of military

⁵⁹ Cornell 18-19

⁶⁰ Antonenko 220-221

⁶¹ Goltz 27

power appeared untenable.⁶² Therefore, it appears that Russia concluded that the most efficient way to maintain influence throughout the Caucasus would be through meddling in the ongoing conflicts there, in order to exacerbate their internal difficulties. If these countries themselves were struggling with conflicts, then they might have to rely on Russia's assistance, whether mediation, intervention, or otherwise.

Svante Cornell, author of a comprehensive evaluation of the challenges facing a post-Rose Revolution Georgia, remarks that, "the evolution of Russian policy in the former Soviet space is relatively clear. From 1999 onwards, Putin's Russia increasingly has moved in a nationalistic direction, and sought to prevent Western encroachment in what it views as its backyard."⁶³ He expands this idea further, stating,

Moscow blatantly has interfered in the internal affairs of these countries, utilizing their economic dependence on Russia and manipulated territorial conflicts to undermine the stability, independent policy formulation, and development of these countries. The purpose of the policy seems obvious: to maintain the dependence of the CIS countries on Russia, making Russia the primary and ideally sole arbiter in the international politics of Eurasia.⁶⁴

Russia thus became a kind of provocateur to the various conflicts in the region: Transdnistria, the Crimea, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh, etc.⁶⁵ Russia's primary mode of expressing this influence was naturally the sizable military presence left over from the Red Army in the Caucasus. Before Putin's consolidation, the Russian military

⁶² Cornell 30

⁶³ Ibid. 31

⁶⁴ Ibid. 31

⁶⁵ Ibid. 20-21

had a tremendous degree of political power, and was instrumental in shaping policy in the near abroad.⁶⁶

Of course, Russia had very practical reasons for attempting to reassert control over its periphery. The northern Caucasus is part of Russia, and the *oblasts* of Karachaevo-Cherkessia, Kabardino-Balkaria, North Ossetia, Ingushetia, Dagestan, and of course, Chechnya, all have been jostling to one degree or another for greater autonomy, or even independence.⁶⁷ However, Russia's involvement in the Georgia-Abkhazia war of the early 1990s, and Russia *was* heavily involved, would appear to be contrary to Russian interests. After all, although Russia initially supported Georgian territorial integrity (looking to its own ethnically fractious Caucasus), Russia soon shifted to heavy support for the Abkhaz insurrection: arms, equipment, logistics, soldiers, irregulars, even officers were dispatched to help Abkhazia break away from Georgia.⁶⁸

How could Russia make the case that it supported the right of a people to self-determination in one instance, on a neighbor's territory, and in another, a few hundred kilometers away, that principle had vanished? They did it ingeniously. The Russian generals who co-opted Russia into the war were responding to the threat from within the Caucasus that if Russia didn't stick up for the Abkhaz, then, according to the leader of the Confederation of the Peoples of the Caucasus,⁶⁹ the various peoples would begin to follow the Chechen strategy and seek independence with guns. So for once, self-determination was a single-edged sword.

⁶⁶ Antonenko 236-237

⁶⁷ Normark 93

⁶⁸ Cornell 20

⁶⁹ Goltz 60

The 1992-1993 war in Abkhazia coincided with a sharp polarization within the Russian political elites, the “democrats” led by Yeltsin on one side, and the neo-communists and nationalists on the other. Thus, the conflict in Abkhazia became highly politicized. Generally speaking, Yeltsin’s side supported Shevardnadze’s government, that is, they recognized Georgia’s territorial integrity in principle, and on the other hand, the communists/nationalists openly supported the Abkhaz and called for Russia to annex Abkhazia.⁷⁰

The opposition nationalists/communists backed the Abkhaz openly and consistently while the government was practically incoherent. This led to Yeltsin doing very little to keep his military in Abkhazia in check; although he would occasionally voice a vague statement of support for the “territorial integrity of Georgia.”⁷¹ The simple fact that both sides in the Abkhaz war, as well as all the sides in all the Caucasian wars, were supplied with arms from the Russian military can be explained by the fact that the Russians wanted to keep the war going because of their goal to destabilize neighbors to keep them weak and in check, along with the fact that they could not stop the lucrative arms trade which enriched the military,⁷²

However, since Putin’s election almost nine years ago, Russia has been far more assertive, both on the world stage and around its periphery. Despite Medvedev’s election this past spring, there is no question as to who is really in charge of Russia. One of Putin’s most “effective” reforms was essentially the abolishment of Russian federalism by reigning

⁷⁰ Cornell 19

⁷¹ Potier 279-280

⁷² Cornell 20

in the regions.⁷³ Putin dismantled the old Soviet ties to faraway states like Cuba and Vietnam, preferring to focus resources on the near abroad.⁷⁴ With that refocusing complete, Putin began using the Russian state in ways that were all too familiar to Soviet Union oppression. After Georgia arrested four Russian officers on suspicion of spying,

Moscow broadened this to a full embargo, banning all transport and postage links with Georgia as well as trade. Flush with petrodollars, Moscow has poured millions of dollars into anti-government media and political figures in Georgia, ... Moscow has turned to pogrom-like harassment of ethnic Georgians living in Russia, closing down shops and restaurants and deporting ordinary people. Most worrisome has been the Russian government's decision to force Russian schools to register and report all children with Georgian surnames, a blatant and obviously unconstitutional form of ethnic discrimination.⁷⁵

Russia's strategy is remarkably simple: keep everyone off balance, so that Russia is needed as a peacekeeper, as a mediator, and as a partner. Russia is terrified of the countries on its periphery going their own ways, because in all likelihood, virtually all of them would drift westwards quickly. Thus, Russia is forced to adapt and utilize a strategy that in the short term makes its neighbors do its bidding, but over the long term I believe it is pushing its neighbors further and further away.

⁷³ Ibid. 25

⁷⁴ Ibid. 25

⁷⁵ Ibid. 29

CHAPTER 4

THE REFUGEE AND DEMOGRAPHIC QUESTION

This chapter will argue that because of the continuing ethnic tensions within Georgia and among the separatist republics, the likelihood of an ethnic conflict, and the lack of a speedy resolution to it, were quite likely. This chapter will concisely examine the two main components to the question of refugees and demographics in Georgia-Abkhazia: first, the issue of Internally Displaced Persons, and second, the demographic shift that took Abkhazia from a small number of Abkhaz before the civil war to a sizable plurality today.

Internally Displaced Persons

First, the thorny and oft-overlooked (at least, outside of Georgia) issue of the quarter of a million displaced persons who fled Abkhazia following the conclusion of the Georgia-Abkhazia War in 1993.⁷⁶ Having fled eastwards to Georgia, these IDPs (Internally Displaced Persons, as the UN calls them) are a loud and powerful voting bloc, and maintain a militant view on solutions to the separatist issue, because of the fact that tens of thousands of ethnic Georgians were killed in ethnic cleansing by the Abkhaz separatists during the 1992-1993 war. Many want to go home, but absolutely refuse to live under Abkhaz rule. Many no longer wish to return, they simply desire suitable compensation for what they lost. Any solution to the conflict necessarily must take the IDPs and their property claims into serious consideration, because when they were forced to flee, many left everything behind; houses, cars, valuables, all appropriated by neighbors and the irregulars that came into Abkhazia to fight.

⁷⁶ Potier 122

They have been living as IDPs for approximately 14 years now, just as 250,000 people is a tremendous number in a country of only 4.5 million. The IDPs tend to take a very hard line approach to the separatist republics of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia,⁷⁷ and their decades-long agitation to “do something” about the stalemate likely contributed to the present predicament by causing Saakashvili to overplay his hand, just as their lack of searching for a compromise has doomed them to the status of internally displaced persons.

The next section discusses this in greater depth, but there is little reason to suppose that Abkhazia would willingly drown itself by welcoming back a quarter of a million Georgians, especially when the memory of “the burning by the Georgian military of the Abkhazian State Archive and the Abkhazian Institute of Language, Literature and History and the desecration of memorials to Abkhazian writers and educators,”⁷⁸ still lingers on.

The demographic shift in Abkhazia

Prior to the flight of those 250,000 ethnic Georgian refugees, Abkhazia was home to a scarce 18% ethnic Abkhaz population; the majority population was ethnically Georgian.⁷⁹ Recall in chapter 1 the discussion of Beria’s forced resettlement into Abkhazia of foreigners; that action was designed for just such an outcome: the Abkhaz as a minority on their own land. Were even a small fraction of the Georgian IDPs to actually return, Abkhazia would quickly become a territory with at least a plurality of ethnic Georgians, which for many Abkhaz represents a daunting apartheid-like situation. After Russian annexation, tens of thousands of Abkhaz fled the ancestral homeland (fearing persecution

⁷⁷ Antonenko 221-226

⁷⁸ Akaba 86.

⁷⁹ Conciliation Resources Online, <<http://www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/georgia-abkhazia/chronology.php>>

for their Islamic faith) for the Ottoman Empire, resulting in a vacuum in Abkhazia that was filled by immigrants from within the Russian Empire, mostly Caucasian in-migration, and mostly Georgian.⁸⁰

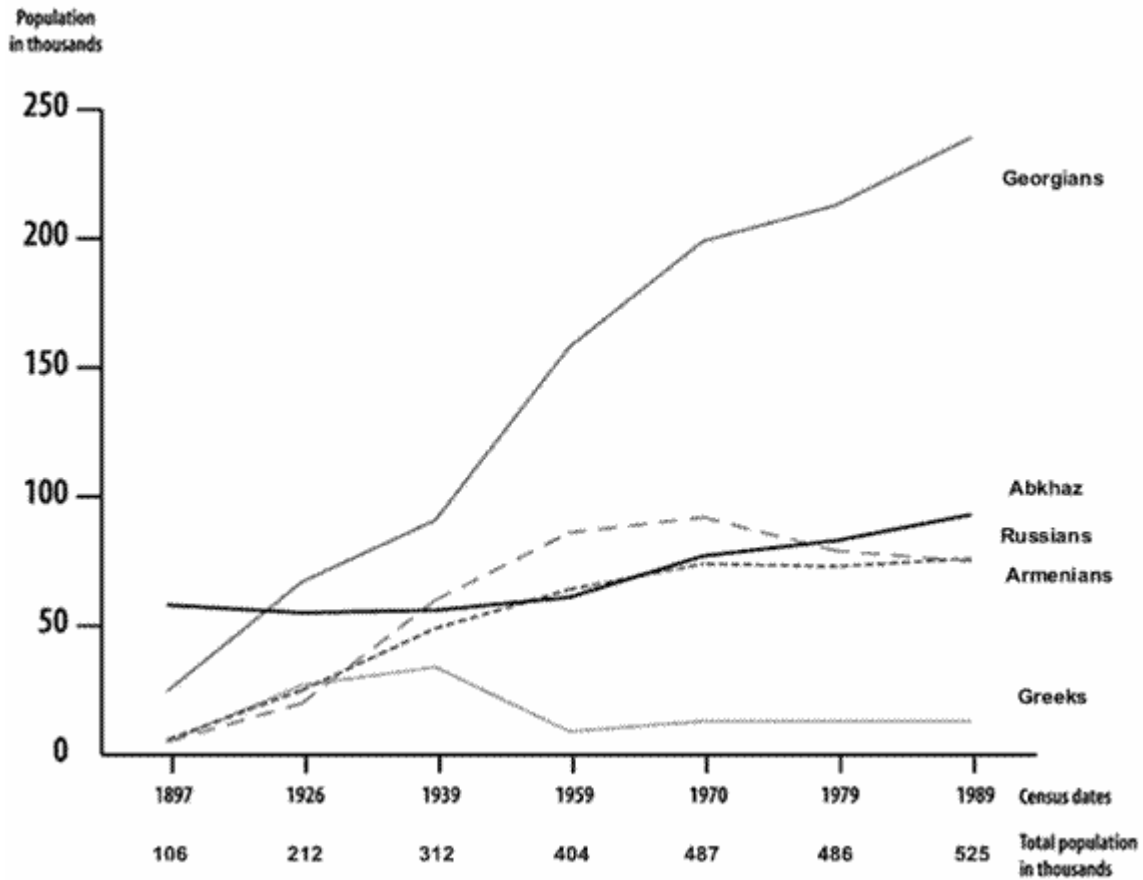
Given Russian recognition of Abkhazia as an independent state, Abkhazia is now refusing to allow more Georgian refugees to return home, because Abkhazia recognizes that without proper constitutional safeguards admitting more refugees would be inept. Abkhazia thus clearly has a strong incentive for keeping the refugees out, despite the legitimate claims of many of them who want to return home. This incentive without question causes Abkhazia to drift closer towards Russia and Russian protection, and for that reason, this particular factor certainly impacted the Abkhazian decision-making process at the outset of hostilities.

At the 1989 Soviet census, Abkhazia was only 18% ethnically Abkhaz; clearly there is no desire to return to the previous status quo. Thus the demographics of Abkhazia now represent an aberration in the past two centuries of Abkhazia's history. The graph on the next page illustrates the demographics over the course of a century up to the "present" of 1989, when the last Soviet census was completed. Since that time, Abkhazia has witnessed a sea change in its demography, moving from a very multiethnic society to one in which it appears that the ethnic Abkhaz are trying to create their own nation state.⁸¹

⁸⁰ Goltz 61-62

⁸¹ Rondeli 114

Figure 3



Even without the quarter million refugees, Abkhazia is still ethnically divided among Abkhaz, Mingrelians, Greeks, Armenians, and others. Reconciling these competing interests will have a profound impact on any settlement. As an ethnically heterogeneous territory with an unclear system of power-sharing between the Greeks, Armenians, Abkhaz, it is still unclear what power-sharing mechanisms would protect the “new” minorities, especially given the fact that Abkhaz separatists ethnically cleansed communities of Georgians, Armenians, Greeks, and even Russians during the civil war in the 1990s.⁸²

⁸² Antonenko 215

Accurate modern demographic data for Abkhazia is difficult to come by, but a 2003 disputed census indicates that the Abkhaz have a plurality of approximately 44%, Georgians are second at 21%, Armenians third with 21%, Russians at 11%, and Greeks with less than 1%.⁸³ As stated, the Russian-operated census is disputed, but the general figures are probably close.

Thus I believe that the ethnic tensions on the ground, inspiring animosity and distrust for the Other, have played an important role in getting us to the situation that the South Caucasus is in today, because it is very easy for Russia to exploit the already present animosity between the two sides, and thus it's likely that the new Russian tanks will be based in the separatist republics indefinitely.

⁸³ Conciliation Resources Online, <<http://www.c-r.org/our-work/accord/georgia-abkhazia/chronology.php>>

CHAPTER 5

THE AUGUST WAR AND CONCLUSION

Where a few months ago the West was by and large disinterested in the conflict, recent events and great power politics have led to a great deal more interest in this “quarrel in a far-away country between people of whom we know nothing,” to borrow Chamberlain’s line.

Although it is certainly not the case that the West hasn’t been involved in attempting to mediate the conflict, for that would be disrespecting the efforts of capable diplomats, NGOs, and the UN and OSCE monitors, the fact is that until the war broke out in August, the West was largely disinterested in the “frozen conflicts.” President Saakashvili and President Bush enjoy a friendship, but there was no engagement in Georgia, by way of the U.S.A. or the EU that would indicate it was an important strategic interest. Instead, it appears to me that both the EU and the U.S. have been deferring to Russia’s whims when it comes to the former Soviet sphere of influence, which I would argue was a dangerous path to walk. For better or for worse, Russia’s actions in Georgia this past summer have gotten it a great deal of attention.

Regardless, on August 7th, 2008, a couple days into the Olympics, war broke out in the Caucasus. Within a week, most of the main fighting was concluded, President Nicolas Sarkozy having negotiated a ceasefire. That is about all that everyone can agree upon. Georgia and Russia give staggeringly different accounts of the events during that week in

August, as well as different accounts of the months leading up to the outbreak of violence. What is generally agreed upon, however, is this:

Throughout 2008, tensions were steadily escalating between Georgia and Russia, especially following the West's recognition of Kosovo against Russia's wishes. Georgia accused Russia several times of flagrant violations of its sovereignty, as well as attacking several of its unmanned airplanes. A UN report concluded in May that a Russian fighter plane had indeed shot down a Georgian UAV. Tit for tat rocket attacks occurred throughout June, July, and the first few days of August, but the West did nothing substantial to intervene, and the Commonwealth of Independent States (read: Russian) peacekeepers took no actions to halt the shelling.

Late at night on August 7th, 2008, Georgia launched a ground and air based assault on South Ossetia's capital of Tskhinvali. Russia responded almost instantly by invading Georgia proper, flooding South Ossetia with troops and bombing targets farther into Georgia. What started as an incident in South Ossetia quickly morphed into what can be considered Russia's desire to completely break the Georgian warfighting capability. What angered most observers was the vastly disproportionate response to Georgian provocation given by Russia. In the ensuing weeks, Russia drove Georgians entirely out of the separatist republics, and Russia soldiers maintained their hold on some of the smaller towns that were well outside of the separatist republic's jurisdiction. At present an uneasy impasse exists, while irregular violence occurs all too frequently along the borders of the separatist republics. Russia recognized the republics as sovereign states towards the end of August, sparking another round of displeased discourse among Western capitals.

Although Russia halted its attack months ago, Russian forces continue to occupy parts of Georgia that they are not supposed to be on. Russia has failed to satisfy its stated obligations in the cease-fire agreement signed by Russian President Medvedev. Russia's recognition of Abkhaz and South Ossetian independence, taken immediately after cessation of hostilities and as the conflict's embers were still smoldering, suggests that Russian aims toward Georgia were not limited to merely restoring the prewar status quo, but rather, their aims were making a substantial adjustment in their near abroad.

Nevertheless, at present a strange stalemate exists between those countries. In order to better understand the dynamics at play here, I interviewed several ranking diplomats to get their take on the development of the crisis.

For this chapter, I interviewed the Georgian ambassador to Austria and the OSCE, Ilja Giorgadze; a very senior American diplomat affiliated with NATO; and a midlevel Russian diplomat, both of whom preferred speaking on condition of anonymity.

On October 28th I met with the Georgian ambassador to Austria and the OSCE, and we discussed the August war, the aftermath, and Georgia's prospects in the near future. The most interesting thing that Ambassador Giorgadze discussed was an argument that the conflict did not begin on August 7th, but had rather started months ago when Russia increased its cross-border shelling and shot down Georgian planes. I found this line of argument compelling, especially since the UN has released a document concluding that it was indeed a Russian plane.⁸⁴

Of course, the Russian diplomat I met with told me the total opposite, that this was an unprovoked attack on South Ossetia, and Russian peacekeepers were endangered, and thus Russia had to go into South Ossetia to guarantee their security. When I asked him why

⁸⁴ Al Jazeera Online

Abkhazia, too, he responded that Russia had to be sure Georgia would not try anything over there, either. Clearly there is a profound need for an independent commission to figure out what exactly went on in Georgia a few months ago. The New York Times reported on November 7th, 2008, that perhaps Georgia's version of events did not stack up against the forensic evidence.⁸⁵

When I discussed this possibility with the senior American diplomat, his response was, "so what?" and he proceeded to tell me that the far more important question is not how many mortars Georgia lobbed into its own territory, but rather, was the Russian response grossly disproportionate? Does Georgia have a right, as a sovereign country, to determine whether it wants to become part of NATO or not? The diplomat also explained the U.S.'s thoughts on Georgia becoming part of NATO: that NATO will be there for Georgia when Georgia is ready.

All three gentlemen were positive about working with either American presidential candidate, and all agreed that whether Obama or McCain won, dealing with the "frozen conflicts" ought to be a significant point on his agenda, although their opinions on NATO expansion differed significantly.

I would like to conclude by stating that I believe that the events of this summer have made it next to impossible that Abkhazia would choose of its own free will to become a part of Georgia again in the foreseeable future. The Russian recognition of Abkhazia on the other hand has made it more difficult for Europe to become directly involved with Abkhaz and South Ossetians diplomatically, though in order to be a broker, that is vital. There need to be direct talks with the officials involved, and not just between Russia and Georgia; the

⁸⁵ Chivers *New York Times*

Europeans (and maybe the Turks or the UN) seem to be the only possible mediator of such talks.

I do not see Abkhazia returning to the Georgian fold any time soon, but an unexpectedly overzealous event or action taken by Russia could open the door to either asymmetric federation (Abkhazia could have great autonomy, like a German Land, but is subordinate to united Georgia in questions of treaties, etc.) or a Swiss-style confederation. Saakashvili's unitary government is untenable at best.

The problem is that in order for any negotiations to be successful, one needs some amount of confidence building on both sides, both of whom feel an essential/existential threat (Georgians from Russia, and Abkhaz from Georgia). But to achieve that, the events of this summer have set progress back some years. So long term involvement and facilitation of confidence building measures might be one possible step for Europe to take.

Above all, there needs to be clarification of what happened during the first two hours of the conflict. This is still completely unclear, and all sides are creating their own histories of that crucial time, reinforcing their stories of victimhood. I would recommend an independent UN task force to look into this.

At the beginning of this thesis I asked the question "how did we get here?" and I explained that there were several factors that have resulted in the present stalemate in the Caucasus. First, the long history of distrust and jockeying for power that exists between the Georgians and the Abkhaz. Second, the weak state institutions on both sides do not lend themselves to solving big problems. Third, Russia is reasserting its hegemony in the region, and is back to being as interventionist as it ever has been. Fourth, the difficult question of what to do about the refugees and how to respect the Abkhaz desire to have favorable

demographics. These four factors are intertwined, and together they created a rather perfect storm for this conflict to break out in, which is to say that without any progress towards ameliorating any of these factors, I believe that the conflict we witnessed this summer was inevitable. So, in that sense, Georgia and Abkhazia wound up where they are now as a result of consistently making decisions *not* to engage one another, *not* to try and compromise, *not* to seek consensus; instead they are both effectively under the thumb of Russia because they viewed their conflict as a zero-sum game: if some Georgian refugees come home to Abkhazia, then that *must* mean that the local Abkhaz lose.

Such a mode of thinking is a real shame, and represents a tremendously squandered opportunity. I can only hope that Moldovans and Transdnistrians, Ukrainians and Crimeans, and Azeris and Armenians in Nagorno-Karabakh, have all been watching this conflict and how it has played out very carefully.

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