



Abkhazia: presidential election, political future

George Hewitt, 30th August 2011

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The Black Sea republic of Abkhazia has elected its third president since securing effective independence from Georgia in 1993. The tiny country faces economic and social difficulties, in part deriving from its lack of international recognition. But its democratic experience deserves more attention and respect than much of the world seems prepared to give, says George Hewitt in the capital, Sukhum.

About the author

George Hewitt is [professor](#) [14] of Caucasian languages at London's School of Oriental & African Studies (SOAS). His work includes (as editor) [The Abkhazians: A Handbook](#) [14] (Routledge, 1998)

The month of August tends to be an eventful one in the small Black Sea republic of Abkhazia. In 2011, the country was already set to mark a series of anniversaries connected to the events of the last two decades: the war for survival and independence from Georgia (August 1992 - September 1993), and - after fifteen ensuing years of *de facto* [sovereignty](#) [15] - the confirmation of its statehood following the Georgia-Russia conflict over South Ossetia in August 2008, a statehood which Russia itself (on 26 August) was the first [formally](#) [16] to recognise.

Then, an unexpected event changed the character of the season: the death at an FSB hospital in Moscow on 29 May 2011 of Abkhazia's president, [Sergei Bagapsh](#) [17], as a result of complications following an operation for a smoking-related complaint. The loss of Bagapsh, who had been re-elected for a second term in 2009 and was scheduled to hold the post until 2014, necessitated an election within three months (according to Abkhazia's [constitution](#) [18]) to choose a successor.

Three candidates competed for the post, two of whom resigned in July from their government posts in order to run their campaigns - Alexander Ankvab (the acting president following Bagapsh's death, who had also served as prime minister, 2005-10); Raul Khadzhimba (who had served as vice-president, 2005-09 following a dispute over the presidential election of 2004 in which he had run against Bagapsh); and Sergei Shamba (the serving prime minister until the election was announced, and Abkhazia's foreign minister, 1997-2010).

The election was held on 26 August 2011 and ended in a first-round win for Ankvab, whose receipt of over half the votes meant that no run-off was required. The official count [found](#) [19] that Ankvab received 54.86% of the votes, Shamba received 21.04% and Khadzhimba received 19.83%. The turnout of 101,192 represented 71.92% of the 143,000 eligible voters, according to the head of Abkhazia's central election committee, Batal Tabaghua.

The holding of [Abkhazia's](#) [20] fifth presidential election since the war of the early 1990s, in a manner that is both peaceful and (late complaints from the two losing candidates aside) free of



dispute as to procedure and result, thus becomes part of the [young](#) [21] state's accumulating democratic experience. But in the absence of widespread international recognition (so far only Nicaragua, Venezuela, [Nauru](#) [22] and [Vanuatu](#) [23] have followed Russia), in face of Georgia's official hostility to any expression of Abkhazian freedom from its rule, and in the context of negative attitudes towards Abkhazia at the heart of the [European Union](#) [24] and [Nato](#) [25], it is less clear how far the election will influence the country's [international](#) [26] position.

A broader picture of events in Abkhazia since 2008, with especial reference to recent developments (including the election campaign), may add understanding of both these aspects - internal and external - of the country's current situation.

The Sukhum prospect

An appropriate place to start is the reintegration of Abkhazia's own territory in the war of August 2008. Early on the morning of 12 August, the fifth day of the Russia-Georgia [conflict](#) [27] sparked by Tbilisi's bombardment of the South Ossetian capital of [Tskhinval](#) [28] (Tskhinvali), Abkhazian ground-forces advanced along the narrow, winding mountain-road into the upper Kodor (Kodori) valley, the only part of Abkhazia to remain in Georgian control after the 1992-93 [war](#) [29].

Their aim was to engage the Georgian forces infiltrated there in 2006 by Georgia's president, [Mikheil Saakashvili](#) [30]. To their amazement, they found that all opposing forces had elected not to offer resistance from the naturally advantageous high terrain but had simply fled, [abandoning](#) [31] in their haste all their equipment (weaponry, computers, and even passports).

The more intensive hostilities centred in and around South Ossetia were then moving to a climax, as a ceasefire between Russia and Georgia [brokered](#) [32] by Nicolas Sarkozy was to take effect later on the same day as the upper Kodor valley operation. Russia's official recognition of Abkhazia's independent statehood followed on 26 August. The incumbent Abkhazian president, Sergei Bagapsh, basked in the glory associated with achieving this long-desired goal, and went on to win a second term in the elections of 12 December 2009.

The [demise](#) [33] of Bagapsh meant that the atmosphere of "recognition day" (as 26 August is now known in Abkhazia) in 2011 was very different from that of previous years. The latest anniversary was marked not by a concert or firework-display in Constitution Square in the capital, Sukhum (Sukhumi), but by the equally civic if more sober event of a national election.

Bagapsh's six-and-a-half years in power had seen a steady growth in the region's prosperity, thanks largely to the change in policy introduced by [Vladimir Putin](#) [34] during his time as Russian president (2000-08) which lifted the blockade imposed in 1996 by his predecessor Boris Yeltsin and Russia's CIS partners - which had covered both Abkhazia's [border](#) [35] with Russia (marked by the River Psou) and sea-trade with Turkey.

But huge problems remain, even amid signs of affluence (such as the increase in top-quality cars, albeit often driven at crazy speeds by bad drivers along ever more tracks of asphalted road, with a consequent alarming rate of fatalities). Life for most people in Abkhazia is tough. Wages are low, and there is high unemployment, especially in the war-ravaged southeastern regions of Ochamchira, T'q'warchal and Gulripsh. Much of the housing-stock (even in the capital) is ruined, and swathes of fertile land are becoming overgrown wildernesses.

The damage and neglect are in great part a [legacy](#) [36] of the invasion and war of 1992-93 ([instigated](#) [37] by Georgia during the chaotic regime of Eduard Shevardnadze) which were for Abkhazia a socio-economic catastrophe for which no reparations have ever been offered or paid. Meanwhile Georgia, the aggressor in 1992, has enjoyed immense inflows of United States dollars (and European Union assistance), which have kept its economy afloat and allow Saakashvili to spend huge sums on his military and on various prestige-projects in Tbilisi and Georgia's next biggest cities, Kutaisi and Batumi.

The level of (Russian) tourism, especially in Abkhazia's northern [resorts](#) [38] of Gagra, Pitsunda and New Athos, has been reasonably [favourable](#) [39] for about a decade. Yet seasonal pressure on the



crossing-points can cause frustrating delays, and in the context of greater freedom for international travel, many Russians are said to prefer the lower prices and better service available in destinations such as Turkey.

Sukhum itself experienced a boost to its own tourism after 2008, but a strange dispute has had a negative effect this summer. A sanatorium-complex that includes a fine stretch of beach just southeast of the centre of the capital's beautiful bay, which provided employment for over 1,000 staff, was closed as the season was starting. The land belongs to Abkhazia, but the sanatorium was [supplied](#) [40] by Russia. The official excuse given is that the complex needs refurbishment, but rumours about nefarious deals are rife amongst an ever-suspicious population. This item will no doubt be high on the agenda of the new president.

The Bagapsh legacy

Sergei Bagapsh, after securing recognition from Russia in 2008, signed agreements with Moscow granting leases on Abkhazia's railway and airport (the largest in the whole Caucasus, near Dranda) and allowing its forces to secure the frontier with Georgia. These caused some discontent, voiced most loudly by the main opposition party under Raul Khadzhimba - though Bagapsh convincingly argued that Abkhazia had neither the wherewithal nor the manpower itself to carry out these essential tasks.

It now seems that a further range of agreements was signed during the last three years, though the content is known to only a small circle at the heart of government. It remains to be seen if transparency becomes a hallmark of the new administration.

An additional source of tension with Russia is a territorial dispute that arose in 2010 over the border-village of Aibga, now being claimed by Russia. It is interesting to note here that Abkhazia's traditional northern border lay along the River Mzymta; today this lies well within Russian territory on the way to Sochi, the [site](#) [41] of the winter Olympics in 2014, for which Russia would reportedly like to be able to use Abkhazia's airport (safer than Sochi's own at Adler, which in bad weather is too close for comfort to the mountains) and hotel-facilities. Maybe the raising of a counter-irredentist claim would help to dampen Russian enthusiasm for meddling with a border that has stood for almost a century!

In summer 2010, Bagapsh told me that there had been no sign of the implementation of the policy of "engagement without recognition", advocated the previous year by the EU's then special representative for the Caucasus, [Peter Semneby](#) [42]. But in spring 2011, he finally secured agreement for a successful [visit](#) [43] to the Abkhazian diaspora in Turkey, despite advance attempts by his local opponents to undermine his reputation among that community. More surprisingly, an invitation was received for him to address the Oxford Union (and even [Chatham House](#) [44]); the final touches were being put to his speech at the time of his death.

No matter how history will finally evaluate the years of Abkhazia's second president, his [name](#) [45] will always be associated with the attainment of recognition from a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, which at last set Abkhazia on the (albeit slow) path to becoming a full member of the international community of states (see "[Abkhazia: two years of independence](#)" [46]), 13 August 2010).

The three contenders

A brief profile of the rivals to succeed Bagapsh indicate something of the character of Abkhaz domestic politics.

Aleksandr Ankvab, born in 1952, had been vice-president during Bagapsh's second term and [served](#) [47] as interim president after his death (a position then held up to the election by the [speaker](#) [48] of parliament, Nugzar Ashuba). Ankvab had been interior minister prior to the war with Georgia; after it, he fell out with Abkhazia's wartime leader and first president, [Vladislav Ardzinba](#) [49], and relocated to Moscow, where he made his fortune in business.



When Abkhazia's constitution was drawn up for ratification in 1999, the clause requiring presidential candidates to have been resident in Abkhazia for the five pre-election years was designed to exclude Ankvab's candidacy. By 2004 he was eligible, but withdrew on the grounds that it was insulting to have to undergo a test of his knowledge of Abkhaz, which led some commentators mistakenly to conclude that he does not speak the native language.

This time, however, he had no such compunctions and passed the oral exam along with his fellow-candidates. He had the support of Bagapsh's United Abkhazia party, the social movement Revival, and the war-veterans' (difficult to translate) organisation *Amtsakhara*. Ankvab's partner for the post of vice-president was Mikhail Logua, head of the Gulripsh district, southeast of Sukhum.

Sergei Shamba, born in 1951, trained as an academic (specialising in archaeology and history) but, like Ardzinba, moved into politics when abrasive Georgian nationalism (and thus the threat to the Abkhazians' very survival as a people) was on the rise in the late 1980s. He served long terms as an urbane and affable foreign minister under both Ardzinba and Bagapsh (and is, therefore, well-known outside Abkhazia); after Bagapsh's second victory, he became prime minister.

[Shamba](#) [50] seems to be very popular among younger voters (his running-mate, Shamil Adzinba, was head of the nation's youth league) and has spoken of the need for a pluralist Abkhazian society that is inclusive of the various ethnic groups that make up the local population.

The position of the largely [Mingrelian](#) [51] community that is concentrated in the southeastern-most Gal (Gali) district is especially sensitive, given that Mingrelians [live](#) [52] on both sides of the border and those who remained in Abkhazia after the war of 1992-93 (at the [end](#) [53] of which many others fled or were expelled) have in many cases close affinities with Georgians. Shamba enjoyed the backing of the Party for the Economic Revival of Abkhazia, founded by wealthy businessman Beslan Butba, who had himself stood in the previous presidential election; the Communist Party also supported him.

Raul Khadzhimba, born in 1958, has a background in the security services and was Ardzinba's last prime minister, standing in for the leader when a mysterious disease of the nervous system caused Ardzinba to [withdraw](#) [54] from public view. Khadzhimba - who ran for the presidency in 2004 and 2009, and whose running-mate in 2011 was Svetlana Dzhergenia, Ardzinba's widow - had the support of many members of the intelligentsia; but his campaign, though no longer imbued with the disturbing nationalist rhetoric (directed especially against the Gal [Mingrelians](#) [55]) that had marred his 2009 campaign, still had some nationalist overtones.

An episode in advance of the presidential election of December 2004 involving Khadzhimba is instructive as a case-study of Russia's attempt to [influence](#) [56] Abkhazian politics. Ardzinba's administration - and, indeed, Putin's - desired that Khadzhimba would win the election. Khadzhimba was initially declared the winner, but Bagapsh challenged the results, and they were overturned after an investigation. The tense stand-off between the respective camps was resolved with a [compromise](#) [57] whereby the two contenders stood on a joint ticket in a re-run of the election in January 2005. Bagapsh won clearly, and thereafter became president with Khadzhimba as his deputy, in an uneasy alliance that lasted until the latter resigned in 2009 to prepare for that year's [election](#) [58].

It has been concluded that the electorate resented Russia's attempt to engineer a victory for Khadzhimba and showed its defiance of Moscow's direction by delivering a mandate to Bagapsh. For his part, Putin did not visit Abkhazia until summer 2009 and did not allow himself even to be photographed with Bagapsh prior to this visit, though he did travel to Sukhum to pay his respects on the day of Bagapsh's funeral.

The Georgia connection

It was evident during the campaign that the candidates' room for diversity and manoeuvre is limited in conditions where Georgia is still viewed as a dangerous neighbour; Russia is the main ally and chief source of investment; and most of the international community is content to ignore the Abkhazians' determination to defend and carry [forward](#) [59] their hard-won independence. All three



contenders promised increased prosperity, improvement of medical services and educational opportunities, a crackdown on lawlessness and corruption, a war on drug-taking, support for the Abkhaz [language](#) [60], and correct (not subservient) relations with Russia (and other states willing to have them).

The question is to what extent election promises can be fulfilled in the still constrained circumstances in which the young Republic of Abkhazia exists and will have to continue existing. The circumstances will persist as long as powerful states (principally the [United States](#) [61] and the European Union) continue the futile pro-Georgian policies they have adopted since the collapse of the Soviet Union - policies designed to bring Abkhazia back within the Georgian fold that have served only to achieve the [opposite](#) [62], and drive the republic further [into](#) [63] Moscow's welcoming embrace.

The position of these western states may fuel the delusion of Georgia's leadership that it is moving closer to its goal of reintegrating Abkhazia by (for example) introducing resolutions that declare Abkhazia to be a (Russian) "occupied territory" or proposing to issue special international travel-documents for Abkhazians. Such exercises in abstract politicking may win favour among a handful of quite extraordinarily ill-informed western politicians (such as [John McCain](#) [64] in Washington, and [Denis MacShane](#) [65] and [Bruce George](#) [66] in London); but they are irrelevant to the Abkhazians, who will have nothing to do with a Georgia that seeks to undermine their hard-won sovereignty.

The mindset of Georgia's [president](#) [67] serves to reinforce Abkhazia's own stance. When [opening](#) [68] a summer-camp in August 2011 at Anak'lia, just south of Abkhazia on the Black Sea coast, Saakashvili [referred](#) [69] to those living in Abkhazia in the following terms: "There are barbarians there and civilisation here. There they have mongoloid brutality and ideology while here we have the true, the oldest Colchis Europe, the most ancient civilisation".

For those who wish to see beyond such attitudes and the political sophistry that would finesse them, it may be noted there are no restrictions on travel to Abkhazia; any parliamentarian is welcome to visit to see for themselves the extent to which Abkhazia is "occupied", with visas provided by Abkhazia's representatives in Britain, Germany, Greece, and Turkey (as well, of course, as in Russia).

The campaign highlights

The outcome of the election of 26 August was, quite correctly, uncertain until election-day, though various [predictions](#) [70] were made. In a small society where so many people are related and know (or think they know!) something about the candidates, manifestos are perhaps not as important as in other countries.

The state television service was careful to allot equal time to each [candidate](#) [71] and their campaigns. It was notable that when live interviews were broadcast (with questions submitted by viewers, albeit vetted in advance), Khadzhimba and Shamba each appeared with four supporters; Ankvab, however, chose to field all questions by himself, explaining that each candidate has his own style (though some might be led to wonder how receptive Ankvab would be to taking advice from others).

Election meetings were held across the country, with electoral materials issued early by the Shamba and Khadzhimba camps (more belatedly by Ankvab's team) and actually delivered by volunteers to the doors of voters. Russia, whose (temporary?) embassy in Sukhum is in the final stages of having its perimeter secured, learned enough from its embarrassment in 2004-05 to keep its own counsel, though there was a sense that Shamba might have been viewed in Moscow as the most accommodating of the three. Indeed, Shamba's headquarters looked to be the most active and best funded.

In the countdown to election-day, many people expressed a desire for a leader who could establish and maintain law and order, and Ankvab was regularly mentioned as the one most likely to deliver this desideratum. Khadzhimba's energy and personal integrity earned him respect, though not all in his close circle were mentioned in the same vein.



All changes of post-communist leaders in Abkhazia have been entirely constitutional (unlike Georgia, where Zviad Gamsakhurdia [1992] and Eduard Shevardnadze [2003] were [ousted](#) [72] in coups. Though many might perhaps have favoured a new face among the candidates in this year's unanticipated election, the process to produce Abkhazia's third president again underlined the democratic nature of Abkhazian society, as noted on election-day in interviews with many of the host of observers (from such countries as Russia, Poland, Ukraine, Switzerland, Italy, San Marino, France, Latvia, and Japan). This, like the Abkhazians' single-minded drive to achieve self-determination in the [face](#) [73] of an insouciant (or downright hostile) world, should be given the credit it deserves.

The final two weeks of campaigning were somewhat marred, it has to be said, by what was condemned as an infringement of the [undertaking](#) [74] made by all three candidates at the start not to engage in dirty tactics.

An interview was [published](#) [75] in a Russian newspaper (*Moskovskaja Pravda*) with Tengiz Kitovani, who had [led](#) [76] the Georgian troops into Abkhazia on 14 August 1992, thus initiating the war. In it Kitovani stated that Ankvab had known in advance of Georgia's plan to invade Abkhazia but did not inform his colleagues; and that, if Ankvab were to become Abkhazia's third president, he would probably align Abkhazia with Georgia, specifically in respect to Georgia's aspirations to join Nato and the EU.

This interview was [circulated](#) [77] by the Shamba camp, and a meeting called to debate the matter outside Sukhum's Philharmonic Hall at which clips from the original video-interview were shown. This was obviously manufactured to harm Ankvab's reputation, and there was an initial impression that the ruse might have succeeded; but it soon backfired on Shamba's campaign, though Shamba himself disavowed responsibility.

Two other factors undermined Shamba's image: an interview he had earlier given to another central Russian newspaper in which he claimed excessive credit for certain achievements of the Abkhazian national movement; and his implication, based on a personal identification with the people, that he would not accept a result that failed to reflect the people's will.

There remains a conundrum with regard to the Kitovani interview, namely why anyone should have thought that the words of one of Abkhazia's principal hate-figures would ever be likely to be given credence by Abkhazian [voters](#) [78]. Nevertheless, an interview from 2003 with Abkhazia's first president, Vladislav Ardzinba, was unearthed (from the local paper *Respublika Abkhazija* 56, 27-28 May) in which he too laid similar charges against Ankvab.

[Ankvab](#) [79] did not deign to respond in detail to the accusations, probably because he had published his defence in a strongly worded [interview](#) [80] on 28 July 2003; this in turn raised serious questions about what Ardzinba had known, when he knew it, and why he behaved as he did in the middle of August 1992.

The Ankvab smile

On the evening of election-day, both the Shamba and Khadzhimba camps lodged complaints that had to be dealt with before the results could be announced, which happened on midday of 27 August. At this time the chairman of the central electoral commission, Batal Tabaghua, stated that the challenges had been investigated and dismissed. He then declared the provisional results that made Ankvab the clear winner.

Khadzhimba had already offered his congratulations in the early hours, when the nature of the voting pattern was beyond doubt. In the early afternoon, Ankvab appeared at a forty-five-minute press conference, attended by local and foreign journalists along with a selection of the observers. He began by saying that his mood reflected the day's wonderful weather and thanked the voters for their wisdom; revealed that Shamba too had called to congratulate him; and noted that, with the universal approval of the foreign [observers](#) [81], it was possible to conclude that the election had been held according to the highest international standards, thereby demonstrating Abkhazia's commitment to building a democratic state.



In answer to a question about his reputation for being a strong man with an iron hand, Ankvab promised that all his actions would conform to the constitution and law-code of the republic. After all questions had been answered, he thanked the journalists and observers who had travelled from overseas for their interest in Abkhazia and their exertions on voting-day, all of which helped to demonstrate the legitimacy of the entire process. There was even a [flash](#) [82] of that very rare thing (at least in public) from this least effusive of politicians: a smile.

Abkhazia is a long [way](#) [83] from full recognition of its independent statehood. This, however, remains the unbending ambition of its political elite and people alike, and is the foundation for progress on the issues that divide it from its Georgian neighbour. In the meantime, there is much work in Abkhazia to do. How the presidency of Aleksandr Ankvab will affect the country and the wider region, the next five years will show.

Sideboxes'Read On' Sidebox:

George Hewitt ed., [The Abkhazians: A Handbook](#) [84] (Routledge, 1999)

[Abkhazia, ministry of foreign affairs](#) [26]

Stephen D Shenfield, [Origins and Evolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict](#) [37] (*Abkhaz World*, October 2008)

BBC - [Georgia-Russia conflict](#) [85]

[Republic of Abkhazia](#) [86]

[Conciliation Resources](#) [87]

[Radio Soma, Sukhum](#) [88]

[ApsnyPress](#) [89]

[Abkhaz World](#) [90]

[Heinrich Böll Foundation](#) [91], South Caucasus

Vicken Cheterian, [92] [War and Peace in the Caucasus: Russia's Troubled Frontier](#) [93] (C Hurst, 2009)

[Civil Georgia](#) [94]

Thomas de Waal, [The Caucasus: An Introduction](#) [95] (Oxford University Press, 2010)

[Institute for War and Peace Reporting](#) [96]

Sidebox:

George Hewitt is [professor](#) [97] of Caucasian languages at London's School of Oriental & African Studies (SOAS). His work includes (as editor) [The Abkhazians: A Handbook](#) [98] (Routledge, 1998)

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