

Chapter 2

The Conflict in Abkhazia: National Projects and Political Circumstances

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There are many different ways in which to contextualize - and explain - a conflict like the one in Abkhazia. In some cases pre-existent ("ancient") ethnic hatred, previously kept in check by an outside power but liberated by democratization, is seen as the cause of all the trouble; others see the conflict as a minority's reaction to an assault by a majority's nationalism; while instrumentalists prefer to look for elites who manipulate ethnic sentiments in their particular ("group") interests: once these interests have been exposed, the puzzle of the conflict may be considered solved. Still others tend to reduce the problem to a conspiracy by an outside imperial power which decided to play the divide et impera card once again. I believe that all the above factors were valid (to different degrees, of course), but that they could do no more than encourage a conflict which had its root causes elsewhere.

In my view, the conflict in Abkhazia is a conflict of political modernization. In the modern era, ethnic groups find themselves in a world where the political map is increasingly defined by nation-states rather than multi-ethnic empires, and where political power is legitimized by the will of peoples/nations rather than divine right of monarchs. In this new world, ethnic groups feel that they have to define their own political status as well. Empires may acquire the policies of "official nationalism", that is, they may try to assimilate minority populations into their language and culture (the Russification policy of the late 19th century is regarded as a classic example of this).^[1] Smaller groups that do not yet have separate political identities by the time the tide of political modernization reaches them find themselves in the situation described by some scholars as an "assimilation dilemma":^[2] either they have to acquire the national and political identity of a politically dominant - and usually more "advanced", that is, modernized - nation, which has already developed a statehood of its own, agree to reduce their native vernaculars to the status of "kitchen languages" and recognize the superiority of the ways of the powerful and "advanced" nation over their own traditional mores; or they have to acquire a distinct cultural and political personality and create ("invent", "imagine" - as modern students of nationalism like to say) their own programme for achieving proper political status which will represent and maintain this distinctness.

The problem is that history does not provide ready-made material for modern nations-to-be: different ethnic groups create a patchwork of languages, cultures and political traditions, which have to be reshaped to fit into the hard and fast lines of nation-states. Newly emerged nationalist elites take on this job of "reshaping" the pre-existent ethnic material so that it fits into the more rigid model of modern nationhood. I will call the basic pattern, on which the work of reshaping or reconstructing is based, a national project. A national project is an ideal construct which usually holds answers to at least several major questions: 1. "Who are we?", that is, how do we define the people

comprising our national "we"? 2. What is "our land" - how can we demarcate the territory that is our national home? 3. What political status would be appropriate for our group (are we eligible for fully independent statehood or is something more "modest" acceptable)? 4. What are we not - in contrast to whom do we define our identity (remembering the assimilation dilemma, this question can be reformulated thus: "who would we become if we chose to be assimilated")? 5. Who is our primary enemy? (this may or may not coincide with the group or state representing the threat of assimilation) - and who are our other enemies (usually seen as conspiratorial allies or puppets of the primary enemy)? 6. Who are our friends and relatives - who are our "natural" or provisional allies? 7. What is our civilizational orientation - what civilization are we part of (such as "Western", "Middle Eastern", "Latin", etc.)? 8. What kind of political and economic order do we want to have? (the late 20th century seems to provide few alternatives to "market democracy" - though in reality there is a choice, and it may be contingent on the answer to the previous question: for instance, nowadays a Western orientation provides stronger motivation for adopting a democratic system than do other cultural affiliations).

In an ideal world of utopian nationalism, every nation would have its own national project and national statehood in accordance with a certain idea of historical fairness; together, they would constitute a concert of humanity. In real life, however, the implementation of a national project may take place at the expense of one's neighbour: populations are mixed, the messages of history are vague, and there are no clear criteria for deciding who "deserves" what. Conflicts occur, grounded in clashes between different national projects.

The conflict in Abkhazia - or, to be more accurate, the conflict about Abkhazia - is a case of this generic type. I believe that, with the liberalization and further democratization of the Soviet Union, it was unavoidable. In saying this, however, I do not mean that the war in Abkhazia was unavoidable too. In order to understand the roots of the conflict, one has to describe and understand the national projects around which Georgian and Abkhaz nationhood, respectively, were constituted (or constructed - to use the more modern word); the particular political circumstances, however, will help us understand why the conflict unfolded the way it did.

Formation of the Georgian and Abkhaz National Projects

In describing national projects, I will have to refer back to some historical facts. Since history is often used by both parties in order to justify or denounce certain political claims, I want to make it clear at this point that I will only make my historical references in an attempt to understand why Georgians and Abkhaz developed the kinds of national projects they did, and why their visions came into conflict. In doing so, I will not question legitimacy of either group.

Modern Georgian nationalism began in the mid 19th century.^[3] Ilya Chavchavadze, who can be regarded as its founding father, tried to base a new vision of Georgia on European models of liberal nationalism. He formulated his slogan as Mamuli, Ena, Sartsmunoeba - "Fatherland, Language, Faith". This shows both continuity and a break with the medieval Georgian tradition. In the Middle Ages, "Georgian-ness" was equated with being an Orthodox Christian. The eastern Georgian kingdom of Kartli adopted Christianity in the 4th century, and from the religious split of the 7th century, when

Georgia became diophysitic (that is, shared Greek Orthodoxy, in contrast to monophysitic faith of the Armenian Church)^[4] until the late 18th century, when Russia became involved in the Caucasus, the Georgians were the only Orthodox Christians surrounded by a predominantly Islamic population. Those ethnic Georgians who adopted some other religion - even if they continued to speak the Georgian tongue - were no longer considered Georgians by others: they were called either Tartars (if they switched to Islam), Armenians (if they were baptized in the Armenian church) or even prangi, "French" (if they adopted Roman Catholic faith). On the other hand, the church used Georgian, so language became an important marker as well, though in conjunction with religion. In the mid 10th century, the Georgian hagiographer Giorgi Merchule formulated what became the medieval paradigm of what "Georgia" meant: "Georgia consists of those spacious lands in which church services are celebrated and all prayers are said in the Georgian tongue".^[5] Ilya Chavchavadze, by putting "Language" before "Faith", secularized Georgian nationalism, making it similar to other linguistic nationalisms of the 19th century, and opened it up to Muslim Georgians and Georgians of other denominations; in doing so, however, he could also appeal to the medieval tradition.

This way in which the modern Georgian national project reconstructed a medieval past will help us understand important aspects of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. In the words of Ernest Gellner,^[6] Georgians defined their country as the realm of Georgian "high culture", that is, the area where Georgian was the language of literacy and an elite culture. This area also included Abkhazia. The root of the conflict lay in a discrepancy between the high culture of Abkhazia and popular Abkhaz ethnic culture (we must remember that Gellner warned strongly against interpreting the term "high" in terms of value: it merely implies attribution to the "higher" classes of society). Ethnic Abkhazians are not ethnically related to Georgians - linguistically they are kin to the North Caucasian peoples (Kabardins, Adighe, etc.). But the medieval Abkhaz kingdom was part of the Georgian cultural and political realm. The Abkhaz, unlike the Georgians, had no alphabet, so Georgian was the language of the Abkhaz aristocracy. Whenever Georgia, or Western Georgia, represented a unified political structure, Abkhazia was part of it. In some periods, the whole of Western Georgia was unified under the name of Abkhazia (Abkhazeti), at other times, approximately the same territory bore the name of Egrisi (which means "land of the Megrelians" - a sub-ethnic Georgian group). When Georgia disintegrated into smaller princedoms, these cultural ties between elites were preserved. This history has led Georgians to believe that Abkhazia is a legitimate part of Georgia, despite the fact that, ethnically speaking, the Abkhaz are not related to the Georgians.

However, this inference from the way the idea of Georgia was reconstructed in the 19th century became important only later, when Georgian nationalism reached the stage of a political movement. In the beginning of the nationalist movement in Georgia, the national ambitions were still pretty timid, being mostly confined to issues of culture, the preservation of the native language and the like, and the idea of even limited autonomy within the Russian empire was not seriously entertained until the 1905 revolution in Russia. Georgian nationalism was not fully politicized until Georgia was pushed into acquiring full independence by the break-up of the Russian empire and, later, the failure of the Transcaucasian Federation in 1918. This was when the paradigm of Georgian political nationalism was formulated. This paradigm was re-invoked, almost unchanged, by the national liberation movement of the perestroika period. After the experience of brief independence in 1918-21 (interrupted by the Russian Communist invasion),

nothing short of full independence could satisfy Georgian political ambitions any more. In 1989-90, there was not a single political party or group in Georgia proper^[7] that did not include in its charter a demand for independence. Russia naturally filled the slot for "the enemy" (independence meant independence from Russia) and it also embodied the threat of assimilation. This did not mean particular emotional hostility to this country, much less to Russians as an ethnic group, but that is a different story: where the plan for independence was concerned, the major impediments were expected from the North. Turkey had been a threat in the period 1918-21, and recollections of medieval Muslim invasions were still strong enough to encourage mistrust, but since Turkey was a rival force to Russia, this made her an ally for Georgia.

However, neither Turkey nor any other regional country is the ally: the major protector and patron is seen - however realistically or otherwise - as "the West" in general. This is an extrapolation of the paradigm of medieval times when Christian Georgia, which felt itself under siege from Muslim countries, looked for help to the "big" Christian world. Culturally, Georgians have difficulty in saying "we are a Western nation", though some would say that typologically, in their essence, Georgians are Westerners who went astray under the influence of their non-Western neighbours. The fact is, however, that, in terms of orientation, since the 19th century the Georgian elite has been looking for models in the West. Democracy is considered to be the model of political order - not because Georgians are such committed democrats, but because nowadays there is no other way to be Western. Many supporters of the nationalist Georgian president Gamsakhurdia said that in the event of a contradiction, independence should take precedence over democracy - but, arguably, even this attitude does not contradict the "Western way" in principle: the nation-state is a Western idea as well, and Western nation-states have not always been democratic from the outset.

Since independence from Russia is the primary task of Georgian nationalism (and given the presence of Russian troops and the degree of Russian leverage on Georgia, many believe it has yet to be accomplished), all other adversaries are viewed in the light of this opposition. Minorities who are not loyal to Georgia therefore have to be conceptualized as accomplices of Russia. This is not to suggest that the Russians did - or did not - support Abkhaz or Ossetian secessionism; it merely explains why it is that, from the Georgian perspective, any conflict with minorities only makes sense in relation to its struggle for independence from Russia. This has seriously damaged the Georgian ability to assess the situation because, although Russian support for separatist causes within the "union republics" was indeed logical, these attitudes have prevented Georgian elites from seeing the interests of the Abkhaz or Ossetes in their own right.

Two other features of Georgian nationalism which are relevant here are that it is non-assimilationist and non-imperialist. In relation to the first point, I will refer to a distinction frequently made between the French and German forms of nationalism. In the words of Roger Brubaker,^[8] the former is assimilationist (and ultimately universalist), while the latter is differentialist. The French pursue the project of assimilating their minorities, which makes them willing to accept them as "French" in so far as they adopt French culture and agree to forget (or at least give secondary value to) their own particular heritage. Atatürk's idea of Turkish nationalism also follows this pattern. The concept of Russian nationalism was never clearly formulated, but its mainstream is inclined towards the assimilationist model as well. In these cases, culture and language take precedence over "blood", that is, common ancestry. For the German type of nationalism, however, it is *jus sanguinis* - that is, the principle of blood heritage

- that matters most. Even in today's highly democratic country, this principle remains valid for the acquisition of citizenship, so that in recent decades culturally Germanized descendants of Turkish immigrants have had greater difficulty in acquiring citizenship than ethnic Germans from Russia or Kazakhstan who did not even speak the language but had documents to prove their ethnic ancestry. Following this classification, Georgians (like most other Caucasians, with the possible exception of the Azeris, who assimilate any Muslims easily) give preference to the exclusionist model. Though some representatives of minorities (especially Armenians and Ossetes) have been quite happy to assimilate and made their names sound more Georgian, most Georgians resist this and have difficulty in perceiving ethnic converts as "real" ones. Since Eduard Shevardnadze came to power in 1992, there have been some deliberate efforts on the part of non-governmental groups and Shevardnadze's party (the Citizens' Union of Georgia) to reinforce the sense of common citizenship rather than ethnicity, but they have not been particularly successful and never reached the stage of endorsing assimilationism: this would be rejected by both ethnic Georgians and minority communities.

Likewise, Georgian nationalism has never had imperialist/expansionist ambitions. This is obviously not how it appears from the Abkhazian perspective: the Abkhaz see Georgia as an empire which wants to conquer "foreign countries" (such as Abkhazia). In an interview, the Russian democrat and Nobel prize-winner Andrei Sakharov once called Georgia "a small empire", and this line is quoted in most Abkhaz and Russian accounts of the conflict. Of course, if one calls any state with a multi-ethnic population an "empire", then Georgia may also be called one (although in this case there would be very few states that are not empires). But if an "empire" is defined as a state whose national project is based on the idea of conquest and expansion (which would make more sense to me, and would correspond to the traditional use of the word), then Georgia hardly fits into that category. The national project of modern Georgia is that of a classical nation-state - it is based on the idea that "we only want what belongs to us, but what does belong to us, we will never give up". Abkhazia is Georgia, because it has always been part of Georgia when it was united. Georgians cannot see Abkhazia as a "foreign" land which was once conquered by them, and the accusation of imperialism usually makes them furious. They have a very clear idea of what "our land" is, even though it is now carved up by the borders of Soviet Georgia. (Most people believe that some land that was "historically ours" is now in Turkey, as well as in Azerbaijan or Armenia, but even the most radical nationalists understand that bringing this up would be impractical - so it is better to allow the Soviet maps to define the image of "our land").

It is obvious to any serious scholar of nationalism that the definition of "our land" is politically contingent, and that there are no universally valid criteria here. But this is not the point: once the definition is formulated, nobody would consider claiming any territory which is not "historically ours". Georgians sometimes profess to playing a special role in the Caucasus, and the Iberian-Caucasian idea (based on the alleged kinship between Georgians and many North-Caucasian peoples, including the Abkhaz) was indeed popular in Gamsakhurdia's times and may be seen as kind of proto-imperialism. But even the craziest Georgian nationalist would be unlikely to contemplate annexing Chechnya or Daghestan. In general, in so far as nationalism is centred around the idea of a nation-state, it is hardly compatible with the idea of empire. There are also other kind of distinctions: nationalists are usually selfish and self-centred, while imperialists are altruistic and cosmopolitan, care for the world and try to improve it

(although quite willing to impose happiness and progress by force). For good or ill, Georgians as a nation are not notable for the latter qualities.

As for the modern Abkhaz national project, its construction starts with the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.^[9] But the initial ethnic and historical setting in which the Abkhaz elite had to carry out its task was different from the Georgian one. Although Abkhazia had a history of statehood to which it could appeal, this history did not come with a corresponding "high culture", that is cultural traditions based on specifically Abkhazian writings.

Another feature of Abkhaz nationalism was that the national project of the Abkhaz was less about political independence than about survival as a distinct ethnic group. This appeared to stem from particular historical circumstances. Circassian tribes put up strong resistance to Russian domination, and "appropriate" repercussions followed. In the 1870s, the majority of the ethnic Abkhaz population was forced to move to Turkey (in what is called Mokhajirstvo). Even so, they were luckier than peoples like the Shapsughs and Ubykhs, their neighbours to the north of the Caucasus range, who were either slaughtered or driven completely from their land (survivors from the slaughter also took refuge in Turkey). Being few in absolute numbers, not protected by traditions of literacy, and gradually becoming minority in their own land, the Abkhaz faced the obvious danger of sweeping assimilation. It could be said that the emotional cornerstone of the Abkhaz national project is to avoid a repetition of the fate of the Shapsughs and Ubykhs.

Following the above-mentioned duality of the cultural and political tradition, the Abkhaz national project started developing in two versions. Since ethnically they were kin to the Circassian tribes, the logic of ethno-linguistic nationalism naturally pushed the Abkhaz to seek their identity within this realm, in the pan-Circassian movement which was forming on the century-old border. After the Bolshevik revolution this movement gave birth to the short-lived Republic of [Caucasian] Mountain Peoples. After the break-up of the Soviet Union, the same idea was revived in the form of a political movement, the Confederation of the Mountainous Peoples of the Caucasus (at some point, "Mountainous" was dropped).

On the other hand, it still mattered that the high culture and political traditions of Abkhaz statehood were traditionally Georgian (though Turkish and Russian elements were added later). The Abkhaz aristocracy was very close to the Georgian, and cultural ties were still considerable. In the administrative sense, Sukhumskiy okrug - that is, Abkhazia - was affiliated to Kutaiskaya guberniya, or western Georgia. This was the basis for another movement which sought the establishment of Abkhaz identity in close connection to Georgia, though retaining a special status. Of course, initially it was not about political status, because Georgian nationalism itself was still not politicized, but if translated into political terms, "special status within Georgia" would probably describe this trend. In both cases, however, the Abkhaz looked not for autonomy vis-a-vis Russia as a whole, but for some larger cultural entity (Circassian, Georgian) within which it would have a chance to retain its separate identity. In other words, the emerging Abkhaz nationalism did not define itself in terms of relations with Russia as a whole, but sought the locus of a separate Abkhaz identity within the western Caucasian region.

Both trends competed, the former one appearing to get upper hand. In the period of Georgian independence 1918-21, the ethnic Abkhaz elite was divided, with opponents of unity with Georgia in the majority, but the Georgian government was able to combine

an alliance with the pro-Georgian section of the Abkhaz elite with military pressure to keep the province within the newly independent Georgia.^[10] In the Georgian constitution of 1921, Abkhazia was defined as an autonomous unit within Georgia (this constitution was adopted, however, just four days before Georgian independence ended with the Russian invasion).

The attitude to the Soviet period differs radically in the Georgian and Abkhaz national visions. For the Georgians, the independence that was suspended in 1921 continued symbolically after the break-up of the Soviet Union. This means that nothing that happened during this period of suspension could be called legitimate: everything was imposed by the foreign occupying force. The same cannot be said of the Abkhaz. Since there was no time for the above-mentioned provision of the 1921 Georgian constitution to be implemented, one can only fantasize about what Abkhaz autonomy in an independent Georgia would be like. In reality, however, modern Abkhaz statehood (or, rather, its symbolic prototype) came into existence for the first time under Soviet rule. An administrative unit within the Soviet matryoshka system of nationalities (that is, one nationally-defined territorial unit containing another one) can hardly be called a real "nation-state", but a Soviet national-territorial unit still had many symbolically important features that contributed to the development of national/political consciousness: the territorial unit was actually called "Abkhazia", and the Abkhaz language was given official status - that is, it became a language of "high culture" with many consequences for bureaucracy, educational policy, literature in Abkhaz language and the like. Thus, unlike the Georgians, the Abkhaz legitimize their post-Soviet claims by referring to the Soviet period of their history (though not to it alone).

The major change that occurred during the Soviet period was that Georgia and Georgians exclusively filled the slot for "enemy image" in the Abkhaz national project. In addition, Russia became the chief protector against "Georgian imperialism". There were several reasons for this. Between 1921 and 1931, the administrative framework of nationalities in the South Caucasus changed several times and, with it, the status of Abkhazia. The Russian Bolsheviks encouraged ethnic minorities in Georgia to rebel against the central government, to make their own conquest of it easier, and they initially welcomed the proclamation of a separate Abkhaz Soviet Socialist Republic in March 1921 (when the military operation against Georgia was still under way). Later, Abkhazia was made part of the Transcaucasian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic - and, in 1931, an autonomous republic within Georgia.^[11] If the republic proclaimed in March 1921 is taken as the reference point, then becoming an autonomous unit within Georgia was a demotion. What was especially important about this, however, was that these events occurred when the Soviet Union was being run by Joseph Stalin, an ethnic Georgian, who was later joined in Moscow by his compatriot, Lavrenti Beria. This allows the Abkhaz to think that the demotion of their status was really an expression of Georgian imperialism: Stalin did it because he was a Georgian.

>From the Georgian perspective, however, the whole thing looks completely different. The Georgians' attitude to Stalin is quite controversial, but Georgian nationalists at least regard him as a Russian imperialist who actively sought to conquer Georgia in 1921 - and his actions afterwards can hardly be explained by Georgian patriotism either. No people as few in number as the Abkhaz were granted the status of "full" union republic in the Soviet Union. Abkhazia's becoming part of Georgia can be fully explained by the general logic of the clusterization of Soviet nationalities - why should one refer to a

specifically "Georgian" factor in this particular case? Georgians can also argue that if Stalin was responsible for subordinating Abkhazia to Georgia in 1931, then he was also responsible for the separation of Abkhazia from Georgia in 1921. Even if one insists that Stalin's actions were motivated by latent Georgian imperialism, Georgians in general can hardly be held accountable for Soviet nationality policies, whoever carried them out: they never elected those leaders, and were never consulted about what they did.

Apart from this demotion in status, under Stalin's rule the Abkhaz endured a period of Georgian demographic expansion, when some of the ethnic Georgian population was resettled from other parts of Georgia, and a period of a "Georgianization" policy in late 1940s and early 1950s, when the Georgian language was imposed on Abkhaz students in schools and the Abkhaz were forced to use a Georgian-based alphabet instead of a Cyrillic-based one (there exists a unique Georgian alphabet). These policies aroused in the Abkhaz the above-mentioned fear of extinction as an ethnic group, through forced assimilation. Again, these policies could be explained by the latent "Georgian imperialism" of Stalin and Beria or by another shift in the Soviet nationality policy. I believe that Beria, unlike Stalin, was more of a secret Georgian nationalist, and that that might have had some influence on his decisions regarding Abkhazia - though these kinds of policies were hardly unprecedented in the former Soviet Union. In any case, these changes in Soviet policy substantially increased Abkhaz animosity towards Georgians. The fact that after Stalin's death the policy changed again, this time in favour of the Abkhaz, only reinforced the Abkhaz belief that full responsibility for their deprivations lay with Stalin's and Beria's nationality.

Nor did the system of Soviet ethnic quotas do much to help Georgian-Abkhaz relations. Certain bureaucratic posts were set aside for ethnic Abkhaz, and this, given that the latter comprised only a minority of the population of Abkhazia, was a serious impediment to the careers of the Georgians living in the autonomous republic. Georgians resented this. Some of them registered as ethnic Abkhaz, which increased the resentment of other Georgians even more. The Abkhaz, on the other hand, saw this system (introduced and maintained by Russians) as the main way of safeguarding their interests against the Georgian assault.

Soviet rule contributed in one more way to the deterioration of Georgian-Abkhaz relations. As I said, the Abkhaz aristocracy was more likely than other classes in Abkhaz society to envisage the future of Abkhazia in a union with Georgia. However, it was precisely this group that suffered most disproportionately from the Communist repression. It is difficult to detect here any intention to sever Abkhaz-Georgian relations, but the effect was the same.

Thus, by the end of the Soviet Union, there was only one element of the Abkhaz national vision which was quite unambiguous: Georgians were the enemy. The positive project for political status was not as clear. I see at least two reasons for this. First, as I said, the modern history of Abkhaz statehood started in the Soviet Union, which made the Abkhaz nationalist vision confined to their status within the Russian Empire/Soviet Union. Second, the Abkhaz had a much weaker starting-point than the Georgians: they were much fewer in absolute numbers, they were the minority in Abkhazia, and their status within the USSR was lower than that of Georgia. This meant that unlike the Georgians who (in practical terms, mistakenly) appealed to "international law" to uphold their right to restore full independence, annulled by the Russian/Soviet invasion, the only practical option for the Abkhaz was to appeal to Moscow and the Soviet past before 1931. In

saying this I am not repeating the one-sided (and humiliating) version promoted by many Georgians - that Abkhaz separatists are puppets of the Kremlin and have no agenda of their own; but the reality is that when formulating their demands the Abkhaz had to estimate in what circumstances they would have the greatest chances of support from Moscow.

As a result, the positive part of the Abkhaz political project changed with the circumstances, though two underlying ideas remained constant: 1. guarantees of security for the Abkhaz as an ethnic community - thereby preventing the Shapsugh and Ubykh scenario; 2. as much independence from the arch-enemy (Georgia) as possible. Different versions of how to achieve this goal might have been: a) having equal status with Georgia within the Soviet Union - which of course meant separation from Georgia; b) joining the Russian federation with the same status as Abkhazia had in Georgia; c) full independence; d) federal/confederal relations based on an equal treaty with Georgia, which would in fact mean something very close to independence. The first option is no longer feasible, while the other three are still being discussed within Abkhazia and in negotiations led by the Sukhumi government.

The role of chief political patron/ally is, logically, filled by Russia. This alliance is a purely pragmatic one, based on common interests: in so far as both see Georgian nationalists as the enemy, they have a reason for coordinating their actions. The Russians can use the Abkhaz against the Tbilisi government, while the Abkhaz do not have a wide choice of powerful allies other than anti-Georgian forces in Moscow. This is not a sentimental alliance, of course, and the Abkhaz can hardly forget their experience of Mokhajirstvo (which they cannot blame on Georgians) or the tragic story of the Ubykhs and Shapsugs (nor did the more recent experience of the Chechen war do much to strengthen their trust in Russia). It has become quite evident to the Abkhaz that Russia is simply making use of them without being in any way committed to their security. The sentimental allies are the blood brethren in the Northern Caucasus: ethno-linguistically related peoples who showed their solidarity by actually spilling blood in the war of 1992-93. These two alliances, however, contradict each other and often put the Abkhaz in an awkward situation. During the meetings of the "Confederation of the Mountainous Peoples", while everybody else was involved in intense Russia-bashing, the Abkhaz had to say that Russia was not as bad as all that and was sometimes "constructive". Since the Chechen Republic is now seeking active cooperation with Georgia and Chechen officials often publicly denounce Chechen participation in the war with Georgia as a "mistake", it is becoming evident that pragmatic considerations have to take precedence over a sentimental vision of pan-Caucasian ethnic solidarity. This means that as long as confrontation with Georgia continues, the Abkhaz still have no allies to rely on besides Russia.

The Abkhaz also have a dual cultural orientation. Their awareness of kinship with the Circassian peoples is the natural place for the Abkhaz to locate their cultural identity within the Caucasian realm. However, despite the undoubted popularity of the concept of a common Caucasian culture (and "Caucasian Home"), so far nobody has conceptualized this common-ness in a way that would make it fit into the modern world. "Caucasian-ness" is intuitively associated with ancient traditions of hospitality, highly ritualistic behaviour and a machistic glorification of militancy - something which has few chances of surviving the erosive forces of modernization. The Chechens have increasingly turned to Islam - but this is unlikely to happen with the Abkhaz: ethnic

Abkhaz include both Christians and Muslims, and most are hardly religious at all. Recently, an Abkhaz newspaper reported that the curriculum of the first private Abkhaz school in the capital, Sukhumi, would include a new subject: Christian ethics,^[12] something scarcely compatible with a Muslim-oriented culture. Abkhazia was very much Russified when in the Soviet Union: Russian was the lingua franca for its multiethnic population, and the domination of the Russian language was exacerbated by the fact that it was one of the most popular resort areas in the former Soviet Union. The Abkhaz elites are very Russified linguistically and, despite recent disappointments, culturally they remain very firmly oriented towards Russia (in contrast to the Chechens).

The attitude to political models and ideologies is also contingent on the political situation. In the final years of the Soviet Union, the Abkhaz sided with non-democratic forces standing for the preservation of the unified state. When Georgian troops entered Abkhazia in August 1992, they destroyed not only symbols of separate Abkhaz statehood, but statues of Lenin as well. Later, too, the Abkhaz tended to look for allies among Russian neo-Communists and nationalists. This does not mean that the Abkhaz are by nature less inclined to democracy than the Georgians. It just so happens that anti-democrats in Russia are more anti-Georgian (and hence pro-Abkhaz) than democrats. Many democratically-minded Russians also empathize emotionally with the Abkhaz cause but, as a political force, the Russian democrats (or "so-called democrats") still tend to respect Georgia's independence and territorial integrity more than their opponents.

While not as politically ambitious as the Georgian variety (that is, it does not insist on full independence), Abkhaz nationalism seems to be stronger and more intense. This is probably due to the fact that the Abkhaz face - or believe they are facing - physical extinction. While Georgians have a recent record of fighting not only with the Abkhaz and Ossetes, but also with each other, the Abkhaz have so far succeeded in keeping their political differences hidden (in the face of the "common enemy"). While Georgians have had their moments of weakness, and in the wake of losing the war in 1993 were close to giving up their independence (in return for favours from Russia), the Abkhaz have so far expressed much greater firmness in their stand.

Possible Scenarios for Conflict Development

I have taken all this time to describe both parties' different ways of viewing the political status of Abkhazia because I wanted to demonstrate two points. First, I wanted to show why it was that, once the cultural and political elites of both peoples felt free to express their visions (which started to happen around 1988), they would inevitably clash, and since it was these political visions of sovereignty that commanded human minds, there were grounds for a serious conflict. On the other hand, however, I do not think that this conflict was doomed to have the bloody consequences it did.

The conflict was unavoidable because each side had a radically different answer to the fundamental question: "What is Abkhazia?" For the Georgians, the answer was clear: "Abkhazia is Georgia". This was a slogan carried by demonstrators in March and April of 1989 when, for the first time during perestroika, the issue of Abkhazia became the subject of mass politics. It meant: "Abkhazia is an inseparable part of Georgia, just like any other historical Georgian province - Kakhety, Imerety, Samegrelo, etc." For the Abkhaz side it was equally clear that this answer was wrong. "Abkhazia is Abkhazia" - this is how Stanislav Lakoba, of the secessionist fraction of the Abkhazian parliament, entitled one of his articles published in the West.^[13] It should be pointed out that, during the war, this was

not the only Abkhaz answer: another influential representative of the Abkhaz nationalist movement, Zurab Achba, published an article in the Russian press entitled "Abkhazia is Russia". This was a clear attempt to attract Russian support and it may not have expressed the true feelings of the Abkhaz, but still, it was possible for a prominent Abkhaz nationalist to say this in print. At any rate, the bottom line was the same in both cases: "Abkhazia is not Georgia". This was a fundamental conflict, and though one could fantasize about how the history of Georgia or the Caucasus might have developed were it not for the Russian involvement, at the time the problem could not be explained away simply as a Kremlin conspiracy, or even as a clash between the selfish Georgian and Abkhaz "ethnocracies". The conflict was between the views of the overwhelming majority of Georgians and Abkhaz. It was the kind of issue on which it would be very difficult to reach a compromise. It was enough for the radicals on both sides to make the self-fulfilling prophecy that the problem could only be solved by bringing the prevailing power (Russian, Georgian or whatever) into the equation, rather than through agreement and compromise.

Still, I believe that if my above description of national projects is correct there was considerable space for compromise. Yes, the Abkhaz saw the Georgians as enemy number one. But they were not insisting on full independence. The basic Abkhaz concern was their fear of extinction as a separate ethnic community (the "Ubykh scenario"). Georgians could have taken this as a starting point in their attitude. A large majority of the Georgian elite recognizes the "autochthonous" status of the Abkhaz on their territory (a very powerful category in Caucasian politics - however illiberal and "non-constructivist" this may sound to many outsiders): it is widely accepted that the Abkhaz are the only ethnic group in Georgia (save for the Georgians themselves) who have no other homeland, so that it is legitimate for them to have some sort of special territorial and political arrangement which would guarantee the preservation of their identity. As I said, the constitution of the independent Georgia, adopted in 1921, also provided for that status. In the middle of the recent war, the Georgian parliament adopted a law which proclaimed the Abkhaz language to be the second state language on the territory of Abkhazia, and future new immigrants were to be given the option of studying either Georgian or Abkhaz in order to obtain citizenship.

Presumably, this contradicts a "pure" idea of the nation-state: if the Abkhaz are a separate nation, why not let them have their own independent nation-state? If Abkhazia is a legitimate part of Georgia, how come the Abkhaz are non-Georgians? Georgians usually appeal to the above-mentioned age-old tradition of political and cultural unity, and to the fact that ethnic Georgians have always lived in Abkhazia alongside the Abkhaz. Of course there were more radical anti-Abkhaz sentiments as well, including calls for abolishing Abkhaz autonomy, but never - even during the war - did they become official policy.^[14] To account for this inconsistency - and justify more radical claims - a different theory was invoked, based on the work of the Georgian historian Pavle Ingoroqua. According to this theory, the "real" or historical Abkhaz were a Georgian tribe, while in the 17th and 18th centuries Adighean tribes (known to themselves as the Apsua) resettled from the North Caucasus, assimilated the "real" Abkhaz and stole their name. This theory was never shared by the majority of Georgian historians, but in the course of the conflict it was widely propagated by such radical nationalist leaders as Akaki Bakradze, Zviad Gamsakhurdia and others. The theory made everything very simple: as Gamsakhurdia said at rallies, the Abkhaz claims to self-determination were justified, but the territory was wrong: let them return to the North Caucasus and we will support their struggle there (as, later, Gamsakhurdia actually did support the Chechen bid for self-

determination). In this way, the very existence of the Abkhaz autonomy was delegitimized.

This approach was frequently repeated by radical leaders and was often presented by the Abkhaz elites as the only Georgian position. Many Georgian leaders, however, did not take this attitude too seriously themselves, but thought it wise to adopt it in order to counter the claims made by the Abkhaz radicals. Gamsakhurdia himself frequently adjusted his assessment of Abkhaz history to the changing political situation.

On the Abkhaz side, strong anti-Georgian feelings certainly constituted a very important factor. But since they were mostly rooted in the recollection of the recent Soviet past, there was always a possibility of convincing the Abkhaz (however difficult this might be) that Stalin and Beria's policy had nothing to do with the will of the Georgian people. Anti-Georgian feelings among the Abkhaz were not countered by proportionate anti-Abkhaz feelings among Georgians, because the role of enemy had been taken by Russia, and Georgians felt threatened not by the Abkhaz per se, but by the prospect of the Abkhaz issue being used against them by Russia. Fewer than 100,000 ethnic Abkhaz could not on their own be considered a serious security threat to Georgia (at least, this was what Georgians thought), and introducing particular arrangements guaranteeing special rights for the Abkhaz as an ethnic community, as well as corresponding political status for Abkhazia as a territory - with the Abkhaz giving up their pro-Russian tendencies in return - would be quite acceptable to the Georgian public. It would probably cause some discontent among ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia, but a clear and firm stance by the Tbilisi government could take care of that.

Georgian willingness to accept special status and privileges for the Abkhaz was influenced by the fact that, in the Soviet Union, Abkhazian autonomy in practice meant not "Abkhazianization" but Russification. There was no conflict between the Abkhaz and Georgian languages in Abkhazia, it was Georgian and Russian that were really competing. In the late seventies, the Abkhaz university was opened in Sukhumi in response to Abkhaz demands, with Abkhaz and Georgian departments. The Abkhaz department, however, was really a Russian-language university (save for a few courses in humanities), while the Georgian department was Georgian-language. Not much Abkhaz was taught in secondary schools or other colleges either. Thus, to the extent that Georgians saw the problem in the context of relations with Russia, the "Abkhazianization of Abkhazia" - in so far as it would reduce the cultural predominance of Russian - would be an acceptable scenario to moderate nationalists.

There were projects to help the Abkhaz "Abkhazianize" by translating and publishing Abkhaz-language textbooks, etc. The more radically anti-Georgian Abkhaz saw in this a Georgian trick to alienate the Abkhaz from their Russian allies. With some reason, probably - but in that case, what was the real Abkhaz project? Of course, the Abkhaz were free to choose Russification as their national project, but then all the talk about their fear of an "Ubykh scenario" would lose credibility. The Georgians did seem to have a point here.

On the Abkhaz side, this compromise would have been difficult to accept, since the image of "Georgian imperialism" seemed deep-rooted enough. Certain tensions would have run for a long time. But, however much the Abkhaz might have resented the fact of Georgian plurality on Abkhaz territory as a result of the Georgian "imperial policy", it was now a reality they would have had to accept. It was not difficult to calculate that relying too

much on Russian help was not necessarily wise. And, if the real issue was to obtain guarantees that a separate Abkhaz ethnic identity would be preserved, then the Georgian argument that the Abkhaz would hardly be safer as part of Russia than part of Georgia was quite plausible: the fate of the Abkhaz' ethnic brethren in the northern Caucasus, as well as the fate of the Abkhaz themselves in the 19th century, were all too obvious evidence of this. Of course, there were many symbolical issues related to words: the Abkhaz happened to hate the word "autonomy", and the Georgians found it hard to comprehend how a "republic" could contain another "republic". But a certain amount of political cunning could have helped overcome these obstacles, so that a face-saving compromise could still have been achieved without any unravelling of the basics of each side's national project. It would not have been easy, and even in the best possible conditions it would probably have taken a long time to arrive at some kind of "finally acceptable" model - but interim solutions in the course of negotiations could have been even more important, because they would have stressed the possibility of a compromise between both parties.

Of course, this imagined scenario would have required a very big and problematic "if": the assumption of prudence, patience, rationality and sensitivity on the part of those directly involved in the conflict. The powerful third party (the Soviet "Centre", later Russia) would also have had to refrain obligingly from any attempt to manipulate the conflict in its own (real or imagined) interest. None of these preconditions was present, however. Indeed, it would require explanation if the new players, freshly emerging from political nothingness, actually had displayed such qualities.

Why the War?

I emphasize these factors to make my main point: the emergence of nationalism - that is, the idea of the nation-state - as the universal model of state-building, is in general responsible for the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. But why this conflict eventually led to ethnic violence is a different story, and one that requires different explananda.

These explanatory factors may be divided into two major categories: one set may be grouped under the heading of "political immaturity" or "lack of political skills"; the other would come under "specific circumstances". I will start with some of the features under the first heading (in a list which makes no claim to being exhaustive):

1. Giving precedence to ethno-historical rather than democratic legitimacy. Both sides sincerely believed in the fairness of their respective claims, founding them on their visions of history (which I have tried to outline roughly above). Although ethno-demographic changes had occurred following "illegitimate" acts of conquest or imperial conspiracy, the interests of the real people who might be living on a specific territory as a result of this policy, but who could not be held responsible for it, were easily discounted. This was the Georgian attitude to the Ossetians, who, thanks to the Soviet policy, had become a majority in the South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast, and especially its capital Tskhinvali. The Abkhaz viewed the Georgians living in Abkhazia in the same way. The Abkhaz problem has become an issue of mass politics in Georgia since February 1989, when the ethnic Abkhaz population of Abkhazia gathered in the village of Lykhny to declare their demand for separation from Georgia and inclusion in the Russian federation. It was taken for granted that the wish of the Abkhaz ethnic community could be presented as the wish of Abkhazia because, whatever the current ethno-demographic situation, the historical

rights of the Abkhaz community should take precedence over the will of the total population of the territory called "Abkhazia". Later, the Abkhaz leaders started to emphasize the multi-ethnic character of their national movement, but in reality this multi-ethnicism was a (reasonably successful) attempt to forge an "everybody against the Georgians" coalition.

Of course, Georgian nationalists, especially in Gamsakhurdia's era, were not exactly sensitive to minority issues either. According to many accounts, "Georgia for the Georgians" was Gamsakhurdia's slogan, though this in fact is not true - I personally never saw this kind of slogan at his rallies, nor have I seen anybody quoting any source on this - but it probably did express his true attitude. It is easy to find plenty of downright racist quotations from the Georgian press of that period. The difference here, however, is that at least Georgian nationalists could refer to the democratic legitimacy of majority rule in this case, which the Abkhaz could not.

2. The revolutionary, confrontational mood of early nationalistic movements. In its style, the Georgian nationalist movement was probably the most radical in the former Soviet Union, at least among the movements at Union Republic level. This radicalism was targeted primarily against the imperial "centre", not ethnic minorities. It implied a symbolic rejection of cooperation with the "occupying forces", and hence a refusal to take part in the "Soviet" elections. "Compromise", and even more so "concession", or even "realism", were dirty words, semantically associated with "cowardice" at best, at worst with "betrayal". Even though some Georgian nationalists did want to cut deals with rebellious minorities, they found it difficult to overcome this attitude and sell any compromise solutions to their supporters. Nor were the Abkhaz immune from this glorification of radicalism.

3. Simplistic approach: single enemy image as the exclusive point of reference. The world view professed by mass nationalism on its heroic-revolutionary stage is usually very simple: everything is reduced to the confrontation "our enemy versus us". For Georgians, therefore, the Abkhaz problem did not exist in its own right: it was merely a corollary to the problem "Empire vs. Georgia". Whenever the Abkhaz raised any claims that were not acceptable, they were to be treated merely as puppets willing to be manipulated by the Russians. The fact that the Abkhaz did in fact seek an alliance with Russia lent credibility to this image. But it would have been in the Georgian interest to win over or "seduce" the Abkhaz by proposing them a better deal, rather than portraying their claims as inspired by Russia in the first place. However, the art of political seduction was not something the Georgian radicals had mastered - or even thought it necessary to learn. Many Abkhaz, in turn, seemed blinded by the single enemy image of "Georgian imperialism" or "Georgian fascism" and made little effort to look beyond it.

4. Lack of will to take responsibility for the problem, expressing itself in appeals to the third party. Simplistic images of the world promoted by radical nationalist ideologues are the result not only of their simple-mindedness, but of their reluctance to take responsibility for real problems. Using the Russian conspiracy theory to explain away the very existence of the Abkhaz problem and portraying Abkhaz nationalists as nothing more than Russian puppets was a way of avoiding reality. But, for obvious reasons, the refusal to face a problem dramatically reduces the chances of solving it. After the end of the war, the Georgian government changed its policy, trying to deal with the Abkhaz problem through cooperation with Russia; this in principle implied greater political pragmatism (the necessity to reach some compromise with the Russian power was acknowledged), but the

old pattern of avoiding the problem still continued. The deal with Russia, as seen by the ruling part of the Georgian political elite, may be summarized as follows: we will accept the disgrace of giving up substantial elements of our sovereignty, but you solve the Abkhaz problem for us. Georgians did not seem to think too much about how, specifically, this would happen: if the Russians were able to create the mess in the first place, they should know how to clean it up.

The Abkhaz did not have the luxury of blaming the Georgian problem on somebody else: "Georgian fascism" was an evil in itself and they had to deal with it. But they also found it difficult to accept that they had to deal with it on their own. Many steps taken by the Abkhaz government, especially before the war, were reckless and obviously provocative to the Georgians, and it is hard to imagine that they would have been able to take them without the hope of Russian help.^[15] Arguably, their gamble paid off, but there were no guarantees of this in the beginning, even though what was at stake was the very physical existence of the Abkhaz nation.

5. Anti-political mood and lack of confidence. This factor may be regarded as the base from which all the above may be deduced - though it is not easy sum it up briefly. While expressing their readiness to fight and make sacrifices in order to achieve independence, Georgians were at the same time deeply sceptical about government (even if it was their own). An anti-political attitude is hardly confined to the Caucasus, and it is far beyond the scope of this paper to judge how much this is the Zeitgeist of our times or how much the alienation of the people from politics is the legacy of Communist totalitarianism. It is clear, though, that recent Georgian history presents numerous examples of this trend. In the military domain, it was expressed by the total inability to build a viable regular army, so that the outcome of the war - and the fate of the country - depended on the enthusiasm and political preferences of irregular voluntary groups, which it was hardly possible to control. With an "army" like this, any military operation would soon degenerate into a spree of abuse, looting and also ethnic violence - as was the case in many post-Communist countries.

The deficit of political confidence stemming from lack of experience in managing one's own affairs is another possible explanation for the same phenomenon. The Georgians were fervent nationalists, but at the same time not overly confident in their ability to build a state and pursue their objectives through consistent political work oriented towards long-term objectives. This lack of confidence showed itself, especially at the first stage of the independence movement, in the propensity to impulsive and theatrical actions rather than systematic efforts. In this, Georgia presents a stark contrast to the Baltic states, whose people showed a much greater capacity for organization and orderly political action. A higher political culture in a normative sense - whether to be explained by different civic culture in general or by the more recent experience of political independence - may account for the success of Baltic political elites in preventing their "ethnic conflicts" with the Russian population from degenerating into violence.

It must be pointed out that, under traditions and circumstances which foster anti-political sentiments, the smaller group in the conflict - which feels that its very existence is threatened (Abkhaz, Chechens, Kosovo Albanians, etc.) - has paradoxical advantages: in the absence of state-political traditions and the respect for formal order and discipline that comes with them, ethnic solidarity and a siege mentality fill the gap.

Nevertheless, these factors, based on the communist legacy or political culture, should not be treated as constants. On both sides, neither the political elite nor the public was fully devoid of common sense, and they could also learn from political experience. Georgian nationalists understood quite clearly from the very beginning that internal conflicts in Georgia diminished the chances of their movement in its fight with Moscow for independence, and at least some factions within it tried to avoid direct confrontation with minority separatist movements and/or tried to find some compromise with them - albeit not always skilfully enough. Some politicians, like Gamsakhurdia, willingly played the ethnic card because it brought political dividends. But other leaders sharply criticized him for that and even pointed to his methods of arousing ethnic sentiments as proof that he was a "Moscow agent".

But when the same Gamsakhurdia actually became leader of Georgia, he grew much more pragmatic. Shortly before the elections of 1990 he even reversed his demand for the abolition of the South Ossetian Autonomy, although (unlike in the case of Abkhazia) most of the Georgian public did not regard this autonomy as legitimate. Here it proved to be too late: the Ossetians held elections just a few days after the Georgian ones and proclaimed their independence, so Gamsakhurdia could think of nothing better than to abolish Ossetian autonomy, thereby exacerbating hostilities in the region. But with Abkhazia he was much more cautious. Once in power, he never questioned the Abkhaz right to autonomy and, in 1991, actually did reach a compromise with the Abkhaz leaders, making concessions which were quite substantial from the Georgian perspective. This agreement was based on an electoral law which introduced de facto ethnic quotas. The Abkhaz ethnic community (17% of the population) received 28 seats in the 65-seat Abkhaz parliament, while ethnic Georgians (46%) took 26 seats. The rest of the population, i.e., 37%, were represented by the 11 remaining seats only. A two-thirds majority was required for making decisions on constitutional issues, which meant that agreement between the two communities was necessary. This system was introduced for the parliamentary elections in the autumn of 1992.

This agreement later proved not to work, and was hardly viable in the long run. In Georgian society especially, it was later very strongly criticized as an "apartheid law". But the fact was that the Georgians and the Abkhaz, represented by such strongly nationalist leaders as Gamsakhurdia and Ardzinba, did reach this compromise, and they did so without any direct external pressure or third-party mediators (perhaps it was precisely the mess in Moscow after the August putsch that allowed them to do this). The agreement was based on exactly the same political principles as the ones outlined above: the Abkhazian side agreed to have its fate resolved within the framework of the Georgian state, while Tbilisi recognized the special rights of the Abkhaz as the only ethnic minority in Georgia that was "autochthonous" and had no other homeland elsewhere. Nobody was completely happy about the arrangement, but this can be said of all political compromises. The ethnic Georgian community in Abkhazia had a particularly strong reason to be unhappy as they were under-represented.

If Abkhazia, with its ethnic demography of 1991, had been a really independent country, this Lebanese-type arrangement would probably have led sooner or later to a similar conflict between ethnic communities seeking a re-distribution of quotas for government office. But Abkhazia was not, and in the event of "normal" developments in Georgia proper, there would have been no need to unravel this agreement. The central government in Tbilisi, which had a clear interest in stability in one of its provinces and in legitimizing

the agreement it had itself signed, could have played the game of limiting the discontent of the ethnic Georgian community in Abkhazia, thereby eventually gaining greater trust from the ethnic Abkhaz community. Once the first tide of particularly intense nationalism were over, the government would have been able to afford this kind of game.

To be sure, this rosy scenario can no longer be checked (while this author is exposed to possible accusations of "unscientific" fantasizing). Objections may be raised that the fragile 1991 agreement was doomed to end in a bloody clash anyway. Although not a fan of political arrangements based on ethnic quotas, I still think that the symbolism of having reached an agreement was in itself very important, and could provide a solid basis for further work - though this would be difficult work. But the reality was that the developments in Georgia were far from "normal" (and this was what I meant by "special political circumstances"). As a result of the December-January coup of 1991-92 the authoritarian, allegedly mentally unstable and obviously politically incapable President Gamsakhurdia was deposed by a strange coalition of nationalist military insurgents, liberal democrats and Communist nomenklatura. This led to a long period of political uncertainty and disorder in the country. A couple of month after the coup, the former Communist leader of Georgia and former foreign minister of the Soviet Union, Eduard Shevardnadze, was invited to help put Georgia straight. He was reasonably successful, but it took a good deal of time and, amongst other things, it cost him Abkhazia.

Whatever the reasons for the Georgian turmoil,^{[116](#)} it endangered the volatile political balance in Abkhazia as well as in relations between Tbilisi and Sukhumi. There were several reasons for and aspects to this:

1. The new Georgian authorities had no interest in promoting the legitimacy of the Georgian-Abkhaz agreement reached by Gamsakhurdia. The delegitimization of Gamsakhurdia was the most urgent political task facing the new authorities, and since the ousted president was accusing Shevardnadze of being Moscow's man, Shevardnadze's supporters had to counter these accusations by showing that it was Gamsakhurdia who was not really ardent enough about safeguarding Georgian national interests. The Georgian-Abkhaz agreement, which discriminated against ethnic Georgians on the "apartheid" basis, was the obvious target. It was not officially said that the agreement should not actually be honoured, and the new government was not at all more anti-Abkhaz or anti-minority than the previous one (quite the reverse, it also accused Gamsakhurdia of "parochial fascism" and wanted its minority policy to be much more liberal and citizenship-oriented), but the criticism of the agreement in fact eroded the basis of its legitimacy.

2. While Gamsakhurdia's credibility as a nationalist leader had allowed him to make concessions such as those in the Abkhaz case, the legitimacy of the new Georgian authorities was founded on a much narrower base, especially before new elections were held in October 1992. Moreover, though Shevardnadze was the national leader, he did not really control the government or, especially, the armed formations. So the new government could not make any important decisions on Abkhazia, much less reach important compromises, as it was afraid of jeopardizing the fragile pro-Shevardnadze coalition.

3. Most of the ethnic Georgian population in Abkhazia supported Gamsakhurdia rather than Shevardnadze. Moreover, several districts adjacent to Abkhazia were actually

controlled by pro-Gamsakhurdia groups openly hostile to the new government (the population of these districts, as well as most ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia, are Megrelians, which is a distinct sub-ethnic group in Georgia to which Gamsakhurdia also belonged and which was more supportive of him). This, naturally, seriously diminished the chances the Tbilisi government had of making an impact on Abkhazia and, on the contrary, gave the ethnic Abkhaz faction in the Abkhaz government more room to manoeuvre. The Georgian faction in the parliament, though for the most part loyal to Tbilisi, was also confused and did not know how to deal with the situation. The Abkhazian parliament divided into two factions, pro-Abkhaz and pro-Georgian (34 and 31 MPs respectively, after the third-party deputies chose to join one of the two ethnic factions), each one unwilling to cooperate.

4. The open challenge to the Georgian-Abkhaz agreement came, however, not from the Georgian but from the Abkhaz side. Apparently, the ethnic Abkhaz faction of the Abkhazian leadership, under Ardzinba, saw a window of opportunity in the breakdown of authority and legitimacy in Georgia. Georgia was weak and divided, its new government lacked both popular and formal legitimacy, and Abkhazia was separated from the territory under the control of the Georgian authorities by what the Abkhaz strategists called the "Megrelian pillow" (regions controlled by pro-Gamsakhurdia forces). They also felt that they had to seize their chance while they had it, because the situation in Georgia could eventually improve. The ethnic Abkhaz faction, with its small majority, decided to forget the agreement and ignore the ethnic Georgian faction in the Abkhaz parliament altogether (the latter's leadership displayed no political skills and could not think of anything better to do than to boycott sessions - but it did not have too many options anyway). The ethnic Georgian Minister of the Interior was forcibly removed from office and replaced by an ethnic Abkhaz (the distribution of major positions in the executive had also been part of the agreement). In July came the most provocative decision: the ethnic Abkhaz faction of Abkhazian parliament, using its slim majority, restored a 1925 constitution for Abkhazia, according to which it was not part of Georgia (the text adopted was actually a draft that had been rejected in 1925, but this is a detail). The legal pretext for this was the fact that in February 1992 the Georgian Military Council formally restored the powers granted under the 1921 constitution, thereby allegedly abolishing Abkhaz autonomy. The decision taken by the Georgian military authorities was certainly not very far-sighted: it was designed to appease radical nationalist groups who wanted symbolically to emphasize legal continuity with the Georgian Republic of 1918-21, but this constitution did also make provision for Abkhaz autonomy. The declaration by the Military Council also stipulated that the 1921 Constitution was reinvoked "without changing existing borders or territorial/administrative arrangements (the status of the Abkhazian and Ajarian autonomous Republics)". In any case, by taking this step the ethnic Abkhaz faction brought on the final collapse of the Georgian-Abkhaz agreement of 1991, the essence of which was that the Abkhazian parliament could make no constitutional changes by a simple majority, i.e., without the consent of the two communal factions (the arcane Abkhaz justification for this step was that it was only adopting a new constitution, not restoring the old one, that called for a two-thirds majority).

This open rebuttal of the 1991 agreement by the ethnic Abkhaz faction implied a de facto restoration of the concept that the historical right of the ethnic Abkhaz community took precedence over the democratic rights of the current Abkhaz population. It amounted to a latent declaration of war on the Georgian community in Abkhazia and on Tbilisi, and significantly strengthened the position of those factions in the Georgian leadership who believed that military methods were best in dealing with Ardzinba. This is not to imply

that starting the war was a good idea on the Georgian side, but simply that an extremely dangerous gamble by Ardzinba's government lent an important element of legitimacy to the Georgian military effort.

To what extent can one say that Ardzinba deliberately tried to provoke a violent reaction from the Georgian side? One can find some logic to such provocation if it is remembered that the pre-war ethnic and demographic situation in Abkhazia - i.e., the fact that the ethnic Georgian population outnumbered the Abkhaz by about two and a half to one - was something that concerned Abkhaz nationalists more than anything else, and was considered to be the most dangerous legacy of "Georgian imperialism". War was the only way to change that. If post-communist ethnic wars are about ethnic cleansing, then in this case it was the Abkhaz side that needed it (in the South Ossetian case, according to the same logic, it was the Georgian side that needed the change in the ethno-demographic balance, and hence had a vested interest in starting the war). An assurance of military help from Russia would make the project look promising. If Ardzinba really believed that the Georgians were as inherently genocidal a tribe as he often portrays them, then living together with the Georgian plurality was certainly a bleak perspective for his people. This makes a desperate gamble, which would bring neither final victory nor final destruction, psychologically understandable.

However, a really confident answer to this question would require a much more thorough knowledge of the situation in Abkhazia and the mood of the Abkhaz leadership before the war. My preliminary hypothesis is based on my observation of other post-communist leaders: a clear and coherent calculation of different possible scenarios resulting from their actions is not one of their more striking characteristics. The theory of rational choice is not necessarily applicable here. The crisis in Georgia may have created a mood of "now or never" among the ethnic Abkhaz leadership, and their actions seem to have been quite compatible with this mood. Instinctively, they may have been driven to the violent outcome, which is not the same as saying that they had a clear and coldly calculated plan to provoke a war.

The War and its Results

How and why the war in Abkhazia started in August 1992 and why it ended the way it did in September 1993 is a big topic which has many political and military aspects. Many events are hidden and a number of mysteries may remain unsolved for a long time to come, if not for ever. I will only share observations on some key points.

The beginning of the war is one of them. According to the official Georgian version, the Georgian troops entered Abkhazia to guard highways and railways, but since they met with resistance from the Abkhaz militia, which was an illegal armed formation, it was natural that the government troops should try to suppress this resistance and also depose those who inspired it - the separatist Abkhaz government led by Ardzinba. Even if this official reason for the military operation was just a pretext, it was a pretty good pretext: the situation on the railways and highways really was desperate, owing to subversive activities by pro-Gamsakhurdia guerrillas, and since some of them also operated on the territory of Abkhazia the military operation had to comprise Abkhazia as well.

The question is, however, what one is to understand by the "Georgian government" or the "Georgian army", and who really controlled what. The real decision-making body in Georgia at that time was the four-member "Presidium of the State Council", consisting of Shevardnadze, two warlords (Kitovani and Ioseliani) and Prime Minister Sigua, who routinely sided with Kitovani. We are unlikely ever to find out exactly what happened at those meetings - and whether or not the actions of specific leaders followed collective decisions taken there. Shevardnadze's supporters always maintained in private that he really did not want this war, that it was the result of unauthorized actions by Kitovani, which he later had to legitimize. Shevardnadze's public speeches are not always models of lucidity and consistency but, especially since Kitovani and later Ioseliani were removed from power and eventually put in jail, the Georgian president retrospectively tends to attribute to them the responsibility for starting the Abkhaz war.

There are serious reasons to believe that Shevardnadze did not want the war to start. He is an extremely able political schemer, but strategic military planning is hardly his strong point, as was revealed during the war. The war situation strengthened the warlords, thereby diminishing his personal power. He put the war in South Ossetia to an end as soon as the level of his limited power allowed him to do so (in July 1992) - thereby creating almost open discontent among some military leaders. During the Abkhaz war, he pushed for cease-fires and agreements even though they later proved to be militarily disastrous for the Georgian side. Some neutral observers who saw him in the early days of the war testify that he was personally devastated.

This seems to be contradicted by the fact that on the eve of the Georgian military operation Shevardnadze went on Georgian television to announce the plan. Of course, he only spoke about guarding highways and railways, which was a perfectly constitutional matter, and his threats could have been interpreted as being aimed at the Zviadists (Gamsakhurdia's supporters) rather than the Ardzinba government. But he certainly understood that military resistance by the Abkhaz was quite possible. He claimed that the plan for the Georgian military operation had been cleared with Ardzinba, which the latter denies (again, who can check?), but even if Ardzinba had accepted the plan, how could he be trusted? And, on the other hand, how could his own warlords be trusted?

I can only build a hypothesis based on the general situation at the time and on my understanding of Shevardnadze's character and priorities. His attitude was really ambivalent. He did not want a war in Abkhazia, but he was in a desperate situation in western Georgia where Zviadist militias humiliated the government, virtually controlled the railway and had taken several high-ranking officials from Tbilisi as hostages, with no prospect of improvement in sight. He had to do something resolute about it. And he was also under strong pressure from the military leaders, who were demanding firm action against the Zviadists (who also operated on part of the Abkhazian territory). At some point, he yielded to this pressure, and he probably had some promise from the military that they would not become involved in direct hostilities with Ardzinba and his forces. It might have been reckless to believe this promise, but it was hardly in his power to stop them if both military leaders supported the military action. The only other option would have been resignation - which would have been a noble but extremely irresponsible act at that point.

Once the military operation started, he lost all control over it, at least for a period. Later, however, he tried to regain control and stopped Georgian troops from attempting to take Gudauta, where Ardzinba's government had taken refuge. Later, Kitovani, the head of the

military operation, openly complained that "the parties" (his euphemism for civilian politicians supporting Shevardnadze) "tied his hands" and would not let him march on Gudauta. Shevardnadze had two different explanations for why he prevented this: first he referred to humanitarian considerations, because if troops occupied Gudauta, the region most densely populated with ethnic Abkhaz, it would indeed be a humanitarian disaster. Apart from that, he also understood that, even if Gudauta were taken, there would be continuous guerrilla warfare which he wanted to avoid, and at the time he may have believed (erroneously) that some kind of deal with the more moderate Abkhaz leaders was still possible. The second explanation is simpler: the Russian military detachment stationed in Gudauta openly threatened Shevardnadze that they would stop Georgian troops, and Shevardnadze backed off. These two explanations are not mutually exclusive.

Of course, once the war was under way, Shevardnadze tried at least to take advantage of the situation in his fight against the "Zviadists". His success in this was only partial: Megrelian regions too far away for Shevardnadze's propaganda to reach still supported Gamsakhurdia, although when Georgian television broadcast meetings of North Caucasian leaders discussing giving military help to the Abkhaz against the Georgians, with Gamsakhurdia taking part in the discussion, viewers naturally did start to question Gamsakhurdia's patriotism.

Shevardnadze's ambivalent attitude towards the war continued throughout it and constituted, I think, one of the reasons for Georgia's military defeat. The Georgian leader displayed great personal audacity in showing up at the most dangerous spots and gaining popularity among the soldiers. He probably did what he believed was best for what he repeatedly called a "dignified end to the war". But he also saw that the war situation was strengthening the warlords, thus endangering not only his own personal position, but also prospects for enforcing law and order in the country. It is debatable whether or not he was actually afraid of strengthening the army, but the fact is he did not try too hard to mobilize the country's resources to that end. On the other hand he, like most Georgians, believed that the war was really with Russia, and he reiterated that its fate would be decided in Moscow. Hence he did not really believe in Georgian military efforts because he did not believe that Georgia could win the war with Russia: the war in Chechnya had not yet happened, and a - partly irrational - awe of Russian military power was still intact. He saw the war effort as doomed and wanted to pull out of it as soon as possible, though cutting some deal involving Russian guarantees (which is why he preferred to speak not about "victory" in the war, but about its "dignified ending" - whatever that meant). He wanted this so much that he deceived himself into signing agreements that proved disastrous for Georgia. The September 1992 agreement with the Abkhaz brokered by Russian President Yeltsin, though it seemed to be so favourable to the Georgian side, ended up losing it the northern part of Abkhazia - and thus control over the border with Russia - while another agreement, in July 1993, resulted in the loss of Sukhumi and the rest of Abkhazia. With all due respect to the heroic efforts of the Abkhaz militias and their supporters, their two most important military successes (taking Gagra and Sukhumi) only occurred after Shevardnadze had put his trust in Russian guarantees and ordered the withdrawal of most of the Georgian forces from those cities.

It would be unfair to put all the blame on Shevardnadze personally. The belief that the war was really a war with Russia was shared by the great majority of Georgians, who were also mesmerized by Russian military power, imagining it to be infinitely superior to their own. What was called a Georgian army was really a bunch of self-ruled (that is, quite

unruly) poetically named "battalions" comprising both romantic patriots and thugs, whose activities were only loosely coordinated, and which were sometimes capable of heroic deeds but would not carry out orders they did not like. Their continuous abuse of civilians (and not only Abkhaz) alienated the local population (Georgian included) and significantly reduced any international support Georgia might otherwise have had. But many post-communist wars are fought by spontaneously created militias, they are never nice and noble, and some parties are still victorious. As in most wars (the Russian-Chechen war is the best example), losing the war depends on losing your nerve. He who blinks first loses. In this war, it was the Georgians who were the first to lose their nerve.

Though the Abkhaz side was objectively in a more difficult position, especially at the beginning of the war, it did not blink. Although its role is often overestimated by the Georgian side, Russian military support did count for a great deal, but it would not have been enough on its own. The Abkhaz saw their very existence as a nation at stake, and that became a basis for enormous consolidation. Most neutral observers with whom I have had a chance to talk agreed that the military detachments fighting on the Abkhaz side were much more organized and combat-ready than the Georgian ones. However paradoxical it may sound, even the Russian military seemed to be more motivated when they fought for the Abkhaz than when they fought in Chechnya.

Something should be added here on the public attitude to the war. Unlike the situation in the Russo-Chechen war - when a substantial part of the Russian public did not support the war and after the defeat would probably agree to getting rid of Chechnya altogether - for the Georgian public fighting a war to retain Abkhazia as part of Georgia was clearly a legitimate exercise in itself, and efforts to regain Abkhazia continue to be an important item on the national political agenda. This difference may be explained by the fact that popular attachment to Chechnya as Russian territory is not much - if at all - stronger in Russia than was the attachment to Estonia or Georgia ("if we gave up Estonia and Georgia, why can we not give up Chechnya?"), whereas the Georgian public regarded Abkhazia as an "inalienable" part of Georgia for which it would only be natural to fight. Few liberal-pacifist voices were audible.

The only significant opposition to war came from the supporters of the ousted President Gamsakhurdia, for whom Shevardnadze was a Russian agent and the war a Russian provocation aimed at taking Abkhazia away from Georgia (the results of the war quite reassured them in their belief). These same people, though, ardently supported the war and later opposed the peace in South Ossetia (because the war was started under Gamsakhurdia and stopped by Shevardnadze), and would probably have endorsed a military operation in Abkhazia if it had been Gamsakhurdia's idea.

While the legitimacy of the war in principle was very rarely questioned, its expediency was, especially down the road and, naturally, after the defeat: yes, in principle it was right to fight the war for what it considered to be an inalienable part of Georgia, but was it necessary? Was it not a miscalculation? Most people now believe it was a mistake, but this was not so at the outset.

Whether people actually wanted to go to war and fight is a different matter altogether. As I said, most of the ethnic Georgian population of Abkhazia supported Gamsakhurdia and thus did not believe in the war. This led to the paradoxical situation where those Georgians for whom most was at stake and who had to fight for their own homes (and actually lost

everything as a result of the war) did not want to fight at all. Here, Gamsakhurdia's propaganda worked too: as many refugees later testified, he sent a message that, following his agreement with Ardzinba, his supporters would not be touched. To the majority of those people who did fight, the territorial integrity of Georgia was a matter more of political principle than personal interest. But, because of the anti-political mood described above, moral obligations imposed by nationalism did not translate into the specific duty of military service. Many young Georgians were responding to a romantic patriotic urge in going to war in the first place, but they considered that whether to go and stay was a matter of personal choice rather than obligation. In practice, loyalty to their friends and particular commanders mattered much more than abstract patriotic duty. An attempt to build military detachments through a regular draft brought almost no success. Moreover, the ambiguous and half-hearted attitude of the Georgian government itself (which I tried to explain above) did little to boost patriotic enthusiasm. Many fighters questioned: is this war real? Does our government really want us to win it? (This was often reported by the Georgian media, and I was involved in such conversations myself.)

I have much less information to enable me to judge about the Abkhaz side, but it seems that the level of consolidation in Abkhaz society precluded any discussion on the legitimacy of the war. Ardzinba's leadership portrayed it as a war for the physical survival of the Abkhaz nation, which ruled out any chance of taking an ambiguous stand. It is widely known that at the beginning of it, however, ethnic Georgian and Abkhaz communities living in the same or adjacent villages made a kind of "separate pact": this war was started by politicians who have disagreements with each other, they said, but we have lived peacefully together for a long time and we should not take part in it. As the war continued, though, and mutual atrocities or rumours of atrocities increased, these kinds of pacts fell apart. A large number of Abkhaz left (mostly for Russia), but one can only guess as to whether they simply fled for their lives or whether a disagreement with Ardzinba's radicalism was involved (I am not familiar with any attempts to research this).

The main result of the war was not just the fact that the Georgian army was defeated and driven out of Abkhazia. The dramatic change in the ethno-demographic balance was an even more important outcome. Although a very small number of Georgians stayed behind (mostly Gamsakhurdia's supporters), this was a politically insignificant amount. More than two hundred thousand Georgians were driven out. Statistics on both sides are quite unreliable and it is not completely clear whether the ethnic Abkhaz are now a majority in Abkhazia or not, but the ethnic element that was considered to be the most dangerous is not there any more (except in the Gali district in the south, but this area is quite isolated from the rest of Abkhazia).

Russian Involvement

This is perhaps the most controversial aspect of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. Obviously, careful analysis should find a middle ground between the extremes of explaining away all the problems of the Caucasus by a malevolent Russian conspiracy, and saying that the Russian impact on South Caucasian matters was only marginal, or even stabilizing. But where exactly does this middle ground lie?

One can say for sure that Russia has been, and still is, the Abkhaz' most important (though not necessarily most reliable) ally in this conflict. Although the Abkhaz may be far from happy with Russia's behaviour at particular times, they do not have any other politically important ally to turn to. So, even after the CIS agreed in March 1997 to change the

mandate of the Russian (formally CIS) peace-keepers in the conflict zone, contrary to Abkhaz demands (this could obviously not have been done without Russian consent), Ardzinba still had to reiterate that he accepted Russia as the chief peace-keeper and agreed that Russia should continue its mission (presumably, within the old mandate).

The real question is, what are the Russian motives and what kind of support do they have. I will begin by repeating a now almost commonplace phrase, that Russia has no coherent policy in the Caucasus.^[17] In part, this is due to the fact that there is no single centre in the Russian government that could define Russian policy in this region (as it is often said, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence have different agendas, while economic interest groups such as those represented by people like Chernomyrdin or Berezovski have other interests again, etc.).^[18] On the other hand, it must be admitted that Russia faces objective difficulties and challenges in the region which in fact account for its controversial and contradictory policy there.

Where there is no coherent and rational policy, however, instinct takes over, and instinctual behaviour may be quite consistent in its own way. In relation to the Caucasus, the Russian instinct was to retain as much power and influence as possible and the military presence was believed to be the major means of doing this. It was correctly assumed by Russian strategists that, if Russia's southern neighbours - Georgia and Azerbaijan - were allowed to have their own way, they would try and conduct an independent foreign policy and look for alternative partners and alliances rather than choosing an exclusive partnership with Russia. Georgia usually looks to the West, while Azerbaijan saw its independence as a chance to establish a close partnership with Turkey, but also with Western oil companies. How could Russia counter these tendencies? It was too weak and internally divided itself to become a strong point of attraction for its new neighbours ("near abroad"), or at least it did not believe in its ability to become such a magnet without some kind of military pressure. The most efficient way to maintain influence in the Caucasus appeared to be through the manipulation of ongoing conflicts there, so this became the main direction taken by its policy in the region. The only way to stop these countries from drifting away was by exacerbating their internal difficulties: being weak and divided, they would have much less real ability to resist Russian influence.

The main material expression of this influence was seen predominantly in Russia's military presence there. It is also widely known that the military were extremely influential in defining Russian policy in the "near abroad"; in the first few years after the break-up of the Soviet Union, a de facto division of labour was established: the Foreign Ministry would deal with the "real" abroad, while relations with the countries of the former Soviet Union would be taken care of chiefly by the Ministry of Defence. Many Russian civilian politicians, not necessarily of the extreme nationalist variety, also shared this attitude to the Caucasus.^[19]

On the other hand, however, Russia had more "real", rational interests as well. The North Caucasus is part of Russia, for which maintaining stability in this region was and is a vital necessity. The Chechen problem was already there, and in 1992 there were serious fears in Russia that the Chechen precedent could have a domino effect leading to a further disintegration of the country. In this context, instability in the South Caucasus, particularly in Georgia, was not necessarily in Russia's best interests. The Abkhazian problem was legally analogous to the Chechen case, and supporting separatist tendencies in Abkhazia was not a logical thing for the Russians to do. Violence in the South Caucasus could have

a spillover effect in Russia, at least in the form of a flood of refugees. There was also a contradiction between geopolitical and economic interests, which fully manifested itself in relation to the problem of Azerbaijani oil: while the Ministry of Foreign Affairs tried to prevent Azerbaijan from extracting oil from the Caspian (through challenging the legal status of the Caspian Sea and not recognizing Azerbaijan's right to control its off-shore oil-fields), business circles politically represented by Prime Minister Chernomyrdin looked for their share in the oil business (later, shares were acquired by the Lukoil company). But in relation to the Abkhazian problem, this kind of contradiction did not play much of a role - the Abkhazian region was economically less important.

The war phase of the conflict in Abkhazia also coincided with a sharp polarization within Russian political forces between the "democrats" led by President Yeltsin and the neo-communists/nationalists ("red-brown coalition") who vehemently opposed him. The conflict in Abkhazia became one of the arenas in which these two forces came face to face. In general, Yeltsin's side tended to support Shevardnadze's government, that is, they recognized Georgia's territorial integrity, at least in principle; the communists/nationalists, in turn, openly supported the Abkhaz and issued appeals to Russia to annex Abkhazia. In his turn, throughout the war Shevardnadze emphasized the difference between "democratic" and "reactionary" Russia and used every opportunity to express his support for Yeltsin.

The line dividing "democratic" from "reactionary" Russia, however, was not as hard and fast as Shevardnadze would have liked it to be. Minister of Defence Grachev was Yeltsin's man, but by and large the Russian military sided with the Abkhaz. Obviously, good relations with his own military was much more precious to Yeltsin than the support of Shevardnadze or Georgia's territorial integrity (whatever the repercussions for Chechnya), so he would not risk his own position by restraining the military too much. And since keeping the South Caucasus under control was considered to be an important priority across the political spectrum, there was no pro-Georgian consensus within the government either. The Russian political elite did not take the Georgian state seriously, so they found it difficult to put the Abkhaz and Chechen problems on the same level: Russia, they believed, would eventually resolve the Chechen problem without much effort, so why not manipulate the Abkhaz conflict in order to restrain Georgia? They would probably not have supported open military intervention in Georgia and were not happy about their own military showing too much independence from the civilian government, but the independence-minded stance taken by Georgia, which did not even want to join the CIS, was vexing for them too. At the same time, a number of liberal politicians and intellectuals (such as Galina Starovoitova and Yelena Bonner) considered Georgia to be a "small empire" and chose to support Abkhazia on moral grounds. If Russia let Georgia go, they argued, why should not Georgia let Abkhazia go as well?

One more "objective" reason why the Russian government was reluctant to stop support to Abkhazia was the fear of alienating other North Caucasian autonomies. Paradoxically (and maybe unexpectedly for the Russian politicians themselves), the crisis in Abkhazia helped redirect the growing energy of nationalist sentiment in the North Caucasus which could otherwise have exploded in Russia's face (or so Russia feared). The leader of the Confederation of the Peoples of the Caucasus, Musa Shanibov, openly threatened the Russian authorities that, if they supported Georgia in the war against Abkhazia, the North Caucasian republics would follow the Chechen lead and seek independence from Russia.

So, while the nationalist/communist opposition backed the Abkhaz openly and consistently, the government and their supporters in the democratic camp were much less coherent. In practice this meant that Yeltsin did little to try and keep his military in Abkhazia in check, while occasionally reiterating general political support for the "territorial integrity of Georgia". The obvious fact that both sides in the Abkhaz war (as well as all the sides in all 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, that they could not stop the lucrative arms trade which enriched their military, that different political or military groups supported different parties, or that the Russian government could not make up its mind whom to support and changed its attitude from time to time. None of these explanations contradicts any of the others.

The Russian attitude to Abkhazia may be considered a particular instance of its attempts to use internal conflicts in its "near abroad" to its own advantage. But there were some specific reasons as well. Abkhazia was one of the most popular resort areas in the former Soviet Union, so many Russians, especially in the elite, had personal sentimental recollections of it. This made the idea of annexing Abkhazia to Russia, or at least maintaining Russian control over Abkhazia in some form, especially attractive and meaningful. Moreover, some representatives of the Russian elite - including some generals, and various Russian agencies - owned property there, which created specific economic interests. And the Russian military's personal hatred of Shevardnadze for his role in dismantling the Soviet Empire is a specific - but possibly a quite important - motive.[\[20\]](#)

How decisive for the Abkhaz victory was Russian military and economic support? The answer to this question requires greater military expertise and, in any case, any assessment would be hard to verify. Since the Chechens defeated the Russians on their own, it has become more conceivable in principle that the Abkhaz could also beat the Georgians without any help, especially bearing in mind what has been said above about how disorganized the Georgian troops were and how their political leadership lacked unity and confidence. However, the help - and considerable help it was too - was there. Without claiming to give any final answer, I will just make several points:

1. The Chechens did indeed shatter the myth of the invincibility of the Russian army in the Caucasus. But during the Abkhaz war this myth was still very much alive. The very fact that Russian officers (whether retired or not) fought on the Abkhaz side, and Russian planes shelled Georgian positions and civilians (and these two facts can hardly be disputed) significantly eroded the morale of the Georgian army and convinced the political leadership that the war was unwinnable.

2. It is true that, overall, both sides fought with Russian arms, but it is also evident that the Russian military empathized with the Abkhaz rather than the Georgians. This suggests that the Abkhaz would have got preferential treatment when it came to arms supplies. In so far as arms supplies were politically dictated, Russia could supply the Georgians with enough arms to keep the war going and weaken Georgia still further, but never enough to actually win.

3. It should not be assumed that the military prowess of the Chechens may be transferred to the Abkhaz. The Chechens are a mountainous people with very strong military

traditions, which is not true of the Abkhaz. The latter are largely urbanized, and a widespread involvement in the tourist industry hardly develops military skills.

4. I have already made a paradoxical assertion: that the morale of the Russian military in Abkhazia seemed to be higher, perhaps even considerably higher, than in Chechnya. Many of those Russians who actually took part in combat operations were retired officers, people with high qualifications, in contrast to the inexperienced youngsters who did not know why they were in Chechnya. Financial interest was evidently part of their motivation, but as far as one can judge from their interviews in the Russian media, idealistic considerations also played a major role. All of them believed they were fighting for Russia's national interests and were taking revenge on Shevardnadze, who had betrayed these interests (Shevardnadze was a much more obvious target of their anger than people like Dudaev or Maskhadov); while at the same time fighting together with the "oppressed" Abkhaz against "Georgian imperialism" relieved them of any imperial guilt. The logistical and material support provided by regular Russian detachments, combined with this professionalism and strong motivation, was capable of making an important difference.

5. Russian support was a great boost to Abkhaz confidence, not only during the war but also before and after it. A big question (to which, of course, we will never know the answer) is: would Ardzinba have conducted the same risky and confrontational policy before the war without the hope of Russian support? The hope that Russian nationalists and communists - who were much friendlier towards the Abkhaz, at least while in opposition - would come to power in Moscow made the Abkhaz government much less likely to accept any compromises after the war.

The Current Situation and Prospects for a Settlement

The humiliating defeat in the war - which was primarily considered to be a defeat at the hands of Russia - made Georgia dramatically change its stance in relation to its northern neighbour. Joining the CIS was now perceived by Georgians to be a symbol of capitulation, of the disintegration of the national project (we can say with hindsight that this was a gross overestimation of the significance of the CIS, but symbols have always played extremely important role in Georgian politics). In return, the people expected to be rewarded for this act of capitulation by peace, stability, better living conditions and a solution to the Abkhazian problem that would be in their favour.

Initially, Georgia did benefit from this step: the Zviadist insurrection in western Georgia was swiftly and relatively painlessly defeated, and this marked a return to greater stabilization. The Russian military barely took part in the hostilities, but their show of support for Shevardnadze's government was enough to guarantee it a sweeping victory. Such a simple solution to the Zviadist problem, which had been haunting the new authorities for almost two years, looked like a miracle - and created an expectation of further miracles. Getting a chance to reverse the military defeat in Abkhazia was one of the major hopes - or illusions - of the new policy. This reversal would take the shape of a deal known informally as "bases for Abkhazia". Georgia agreed to legitimize the Russian military presence in Georgia in three forms: 1. as peace-keepers in Abkhazia; 2. as border troops on the Georgian border with Turkey; 3. in several military bases deployed in different parts of Georgia. As compensation, Georgia expected Russia to "return Abkhazia", that is, to help Georgia restore de facto control over the breakaway region. This provision was never written into any official agreement, of course, although the

version of the agreement on Russian bases initialled by defence ministers in spring 1995 included an appendix saying that the treaty would not be valid until the restoration of Georgian jurisdiction over Abkhazia. This phrase was no longer there when Shevardnadze signed an agreement in October later the same year, but he has reiterated in public many times that recovering Georgian territorial integrity is implied in it (the treaty still has to be ratified). Nor was it spelled out in any detail just how the actual restoration of Georgian control would take place, but the mass return of refugees under the protection of the Russian army was assumed to be the first step. Russian Defence Minister Grachev made informal and sweeping promises in front of witnesses.^[21] On several occasions there were serious expectations, shared by people close to the Georgian government, that "something" was about to start. The last diplomatic victory scored by the Georgian side was at the March 1997 CIS summit, when the area of the peacekeeping operation was extended deeper into Abkhazia, so that the conditions for the return of Georgian refugees at least to the southern part of Abkhazia could be secured. The Abkhaz leadership, however, rejected the new mandate - changed without their consent - and threatened to demand the withdrawal of the Russian troops altogether. As a result, by the end of May nothing had happened beyond consultations on how to implement the results of the CIS summit.

And nothing ever did happen. The Russian attitude continues to be ambiguous. It seems obvious that, for Russia, supporting Abkhazia was just an instrument to punish - and influence - Georgia; now that Georgia had agreed to be influenced, why not reward her by reversing this support? This is logical, but too simple. The experience of the last three years has shown that Russia is really neither willing nor able to change the situation dramatically. First, attempting to change something would involve much greater effort and risk than it would like - or could afford - to take. Second, Russia is reluctant to help Georgia resolve the Abkhaz issue because it is afraid of losing leverage. Russian politicians think - correctly - that Georgia will never agree to be in the zone of exclusive Russian geostrategic domination unless strong enough pressure is exerted at all times. Keeping the Abkhaz issue unresolved seems to be the only way of keeping Georgia more or less in check. With regard to the Abkhaz, although they have no alternative but to seek Russian help, they are not Russia's puppets either, and purely political or economic pressure would scarcely be sufficient to force them into a compromise. Since the war in Chechnya, even the most naively pro-Russian Georgian politicians understand that spilling Russian blood in Abkhazia for the sake of legitimizing Russian bases in Akhalkalaki or Batumi is inconceivable (and without spilling blood, dramatic change is unlikely to be achieved). Another type of "final solution" - annexing Abkhazia to Russia - can only seem a realistic option in the imaginations of the most extreme Russian nationalists.

In short, the current situation in the Georgian-Abkhaz crisis may be characterized as an impasse of volatile stability. Both Georgia and Russia persist with futile attempts to outsmart each other in pursuing the unattainable "Abkhazia for bases" deal (a situation increasingly reminiscent of the negotiations between two crooks in a popular Russian comic novel "12 Chairs": "Money first, then chairs" - "No, chairs first, then money"). Both of them cannot have their own way, but neither can give in to the other: the Georgians are afraid that Russia will lift all restrictions on Abkhazia and become openly pro-Abkhaz, which will make the Abkhaz even less inclined to compromise, while Russia is afraid that Georgia will start to oppose the Russian military presence openly. Georgia occasionally makes noises about the military option for solving the Abkhaz issue being open, but is not

really trying to create a viable army, and would hate to be involved in another uncertain adventure. Every time the mandate of the Russian peace-keepers is extended (which happens twice a year), this heightens the pressure and kicks off a new round of fruitless negotiations. The Abkhaz have no option but to wait, worry about a possible Russo-Georgian deal at their expense and try to enjoy their de facto independence in the meantime. Nobody is happy, but nobody is terribly unhappy either, and life goes on - Georgia builds an oil pipeline from the Caspian, the Abkhaz have elections and state holidays, Russia signs partnership agreements with NATO, and things could continue in this way for a long time (the "Cyprus model" is a popular phrase when talking about the Abkhazian situation). Any resolute attempt by either of the parties to change the situation dramatically in its favour could undermine the existing - if fragile - balance and boomerang on the initiator, so everybody is cautious. The only people who are really unhappy are the refugees, but as we know from the Middle East and many other places, refugees may have to wait.

What could be the way out of the impasse? What kind of change can one think of that would be profound enough? To list some feasible options:

1. Dramatic change in the Russian position. Russia may accept the reality that there is no way of keeping Georgia and Azerbaijan within the area of exclusive Russian domination. Insisting on keeping Russian border guards on the Georgian-Turkish border and military bases elsewhere is an unreasonable waste of economic resources and political capital - both of which are in rather short supply. The pending reform of the Russian army requires a focusing of resources, which is hardly compatible with paying the Armenians and Georgians who comprise the bulk of the notionally "Russian" military personnel in the South Caucasus. The popular Russian argument that, were it not for Russian military involvement, the South Caucasus would be in constant turmoil, thus undermining the stability of the North Caucasus, might have seemed plausible in 1992-93, but it is no longer. Georgia and Azerbaijan are unlikely to become Russia's open adversaries and try to undermine this stability: they have enough common interests even now, and if the Russian economy starts to pick up it will become an extremely strong magnet for the South Caucasus. So far, the policy based on military pressure not only did not help Russia to achieve its objectives, but was counterproductive: Abkhazia is the best example of how Russia cut itself off from the South Caucasus economically. If Russia needs stability in the South Caucasus - an item on the list of her national interests which deserves only respect - then increasing Western involvement in the region has a stabilizing effect, and its expansion can only be welcome. If I were a Russian political strategist, I would advise President Yeltsin to start the programme for the withdrawal of Russian troops from the South Caucasus, starting with Georgia (the Armenians genuinely want the Russian troops to stay, so that is a different issue). I would say that this would make Georgia much friendlier towards Russia overnight and eventually even increase Russian political and - even more so - economic influence. The military would not be happy, true, but the majority of the Russian public would support this idea.

Is this realistic? I believe what I say is rational from the position of Russian national interests. I am not Hegelian enough, though, to believe that whatever is reasonable will necessarily become real, and Russians themselves love to say that reason does not always apply to them ("You cannot understand Russia by reason" - this phrase by the Russian poet Tiuchev is quoted all the time). But I can claim that this is conceivable in principle, especially if, when Russian foreign policy objectives are being defined, greater weight is given to economic considerations. What would be the repercussions of this change for the

Georgian-Abkhazian problem? I will leave this question open for the moment, saying only that the Georgians and Abkhaz do not appear to have even considered this option. Both have been used to living within the Russian political universe for too long, so it is hard even to imagine how any decisions could be made that are not directly imposed by the powerful third party. But I think it makes a great deal of sense for both the Abkhaz and the Georgians to take this option seriously.

2. Closer involvement by the West and international organizations. Shevardnadze's strategy has always been to attract as much Western involvement as possible in the attempt to find an Abkhaz settlement. The Abkhaz have been very suspicious of this, because the West recognizes the territorial integrity of Georgia and because their major allies were anti-Western Russians, but this does not mean that the Abkhaz are basically ill-disposed towards the West. Georgia's main motivation for getting the West and international organizations (it never really distinguished between the two) more closely involved was to counterbalance the exclusive Russian influence, and in this regard its efforts are of course understandable and legitimate. So far, its success has been very limited. The UN Security Council refused to grant the CIS (in fact Russian) peace-keepers UN status, but otherwise accepted the exclusive Russian participation in the peace-keeping operation, with the function of the UN military observers (UNOMIG) being reduced to monitoring the situation and reporting back to UN headquarters. Otherwise, Western involvement is confined to the humanitarian level. Nothing remotely reminiscent of NATO's role in the former Yugoslavia has been seen here, nor is it expected in the future.^[22]

The Georgian leadership occasionally expresses the hope that, once the West is less busy with the former Yugoslavia, it will devote more attention and resources to solving problems in the Caucasus. I think that first, this is unrealistic, and second, the West's ability to solve these kinds of problems is also greatly overestimated. Russia is hardly objective and may be pernicious, but at least it has real interests in the region and can be ruthless enough to enforce its will if it is ready and able to do so (it is often observed that the Russian language does not distinguish between peace-keeping and peace-making - the literal translation of the word most often used, *mirotvorchestvo*, is "peace-making"). Western countries, and especially the highly bureaucratized international organizations through which they usually prefer to work, do not apply real pressure unless there is a particular, and strong, interest or demonstrable threat to international security involved. Provided there is neither war in Abkhazia nor an immediate danger of its renewal, no decisive measures are imminent. The extraction and transportation of Caspian oil is currently the only issue that makes the Caucasus interesting to the rest of the world, but Abkhazia is not on any real or even projected pipeline routes.^[23] Abkhazia's geographic position makes it vitally important for Russia's relations with Georgia and with the South Caucasus in general, but only an actual renewal of war would make it significant for the West.

This is not to say that Western participation may not be valuable. Contacts with Westerners help both Georgians and Abkhaz understand what modern political thinking is about and shake off the illusions that are distracting them from their search for realistic solutions. Western interest in the region may be slight, but the Western interest in peace, at least, may be more genuine, so if the parties choose to reach a compromise they would have a better chance of doing so with Western mediation. But this last option would require a profound change in the attitudes of the parties directly involved in the conflict.

The illusion that the West may one day come and impose a "fair" solution (whatever the definition of "fair" may be) can only postpone this change of attitude.

3. Changes in Georgia and Abkhazia. As I have tried to show in the previous sections, both the fact that the war happened, and its military outcome, were caused predominantly by internal Georgian turmoil. What influence can the change from turmoil to stability in Georgia proper have on prospects for a settlement in Abkhazia? One of the possible strategies of the Georgian political elite (which is rarely expressed in the form of a coherent doctrine but appears to be gaining influence nonetheless) is that, once Georgia picks up economically (and in 1996 its economic growth rate was already the highest in the CIS), and the situation in politically and economically isolated Abkhazia deteriorates, the Abkhaz will be more likely to seek a compromise. The Abkhaz will see more sense in being united with Georgia than in being dragged, kicking and screaming, into some form of federation. In the meantime, recollections of the cruelty of war will fade, making the reconciliation psychologically more possible.

I think this approach has many rational aspects to it. But there is a risk of overestimating economic factors here. The Abkhaz attempt to separate from Georgia was not primarily dictated by economic considerations, and economic rationality on its own cannot reverse it. It is hard to imagine, realistically, the level of disorder and impoverishment of the Abkhaz society that would be needed to induce it to accept serious compromises. The so-called economic blockade was never really enforced by Russia, and presumably there will always be some influential forces there to help Abkhazia survive (the smallness of Abkhazia makes it easy). Abkhazian land is good enough to prevent real starvation. As I said, traditions of militancy are not as strong in Abkhaz as in Chechen society, a fact which, after the war, is purely positive: there are probably fewer chances of public order being disrupted by clashes between warlords. So far, at least, nothing serious has happened. Under these conditions, isolation and external pressure alone may merely help Abkhaz society continue to consolidate itself around a more radical stance, rather than increasing its propensity to compromise.

Stabilization and growth in Georgia may give rise to a different tendency as well. Georgia could take the time to build up a strong army and prepare for a military revanche: an option sometimes referred to as the "Croatian scenario". This trend would be quite logical and should not be discounted. As I said, the majority of Georgians regard the country's territorial integrity as a legitimate cause in which to apply military force. It is still widely believed that, at the end of the day, the conflict will be solved by military means. The current political situation makes it possible to create a more regular and disciplined army. Provided that Chechnya seeks closer contacts with Georgia - and many Chechen leaders denounced Chechen participation in the war against Georgia^[24] - the level of military support from the North Caucasians may be reduced. It seems likely that the Russians have learned their lesson in Chechnya and will not help the Abkhaz again. The Georgian minister for security, Shota Kviraia, stated in the spring of 1997 that his agencies' troops could only regain Abkhazia militarily.^[25] This may not be true (how is it possible to check without actually trying?), but it indicates that militancy on the Georgian side may be growing. So is pressure from the refugee community. Every now and then rumours spread of a coming eruption of hostilities.^[26]

So the military option is there and the likelihood of Georgia's using it may increase. At the moment, however, I do not think that this likelihood is as great as it sometimes seems. The military coup is still a recent memory in Georgia, and Shevardnadze does not appear

to be making a priority out of building a strong army. Keeping his minister of defence, Vardiko Nadibaidze, politically weak and isolated is a sign of that: nobody believes that this man can build a viable army, nor is he politically dangerous to anybody in his own country (least of all the Abkhaz, probably). Countries preparing for war do not act in this way. With the economic turnaround yet to prove its sustainability, most of the Georgian political or economic elite would hate to gamble with Georgia's future. The behaviour of Russia and its military in the event of a fresh outbreak of conflict is unpredictable. The current, much more pragmatic political elite would start a war only if it were a safe bet. The general public, which has not reconciled itself to having lost Abkhazia, would probably accept a military solution in principle, but nobody actually wants to fight in person. The period of military enthusiasm is over, and it has been discredited by the (disgracefully) lost war.

4. New Georgian-Abkhaz Dialogue? Since summer 1996, direct dialogue between the Georgians and Abkhaz, until then virtually non-existent, seems to be intensifying. Several meetings on a non-governmental level have taken place, and politicians are showing greater interest in having direct contact, without Moscow's supervision. In October 1996, a confidential visit by the Abkhaz foreign minister, Ozgan, to Tbilisi became known to the media the next day and made headlines, while in January, Georgian foreign minister Menagharishvili reciprocated by visiting Abkhazia. Not that anything important was achieved, but the tendency in itself is worth noting. I can offer no explanation for this other than that both sides are pinning fewer hopes on Russia and hence see more sense in talking to each other. Negotiations took place earlier too, of course, but that was only a politically correct ritual (both sides wanted to present themselves as properly peace-loving), while what mattered was persuading Russia to take the "right" position. Whatever the turning-point may have been (Georgia has had a series of disappointments, the Abkhaz may have been counting on a Communist victory in the Russian elections), now neither the Abkhaz nor the Georgians are sure that they can reach their ends through Russia alone. Russia of course continues to be an important player, but at least the possibility of finding a common language should be checked out.

1. Hugh Seton-Watson, *Nationalism and Communism*, Methuen: London, 1964, pp. 19-24.

2. Miroslav Hroch, *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe. A Comparative Analysis of the Social Composition of Patriotic Groups among the Smaller European Nations*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1985, p. 12; Karl W. Deutsch, *Problems of Nation-Building and National Development*, in: Karl W. Deutsch, William J. Foltz (eds.), *Nation-Building*, Atherton Press: New York, 1963, p. 140.

3. There was an episode of aristocratic nationalism which expressed itself in the anti-imperial conspiracy of 1832, but it did not develop further. In the 1860s, Ilya Chavchavadze had to start Georgian nationalism on a new basis, though tribute was paid to the conspirators of the previous generation.

4. The dogmatic difference is in interpreting the nature of Christ: diophysites (i.e., Roman Catholics, Eastern Orthodox) recognize His dual (divine and human) nature, while monophysites (i.e., Armenian Gregorians) deny His human nature.

5. Revaz Gachechiladze, *The New Georgia: Space, Society, Politics*, Texas A & M University Press: College Station, 1995, pp. 19-20.

6. Ernest Gellner, *Nation and Nationalism*, Basil Blackwell: Oxford, 1983, pp. 50-52.

7. "Georgia proper" excludes Abkhazia and South Ossetia, future breakaway regions.

8. "If the French understanding of nationhood has been state-oriented and assimilationist, the German understanding has been Volk-centered and differentialist". *Citizenship and Nationhood*, Harvard University Press: Cambridge/Mass., 1990, p. 184.

9. In this section of my paper, I depend partly on my notes from the lecture delivered by the Abkhaz-Georgian historian, Gia Anchabadze, during the conference organized by the Caucasian Home and Heinrich B^oll Foundation in Tbilisi in September 1992. Of course, Dr. Anchabadze cannot be held responsible for my interpretation of his ideas. For understandable reasons, I feel less confident in my interpretation of the Abkhaz national project and would especially appreciate any criticisms or suggestions.

10. See, for instance, Stanislav Lakoba, *Abkhaziya posle dvukh okupatsiy*, Gagra, 1994.

11. As Georgian authors point out, Abkhazia existed as separate from Georgia only from March to December of 1921, when it was attached to Georgia as "treaty republic", and the Soviet Constitution of 1924 "treated it in fact as an autonomous republic within Georgia", so in 1931 this status was only "made official" (R. Gachechiladze, *New Georgia*, op.cit., p. 33). These legal subtleties, however, may mean much less today in comparison with firm belief prevalent in Abkhaz society that Georgian Stalin attached Abkhazia to Georgia in 1931.

12. "Private Schools Should Exist", *Respublika Abkhazia*, 15-17 Jan. 1997, p. 3.

13. *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 14, no. 1, 1995, pp. 97-105.

14. "The Georgian government and public have never questioned the status of Abkhazia. I am declaring this to everybody, to the whole world, to the Abkhaz: extensive autonomy will be guaranteed, the rights of every Abkhaz will be guaranteed" - Eduard Shevardnadze's speech to the joint sitting of the Defence Council and Council of Ministers of Abkhazia on 6 July 1993, *Sakartvelos Respublika*, 8 July 1993. One can argue that part of the Georgian public did question Abkhaz autonomy and that some government officials (such as Minister of Defence Kitovani) denounced autonomy in personal interviews, but in principle Shevardnadze's assertion (and many more statements like this may be quoted) is correct.

15. Actions by the Abkhaz government are described in Svetlana Chervonnaya, *Conflict in the Caucasus: Georgia, Abkhazia and the Russian Shadow*, Somerset, Gothic Image Publications, 1994.

16. In this context, see my "Georgia's Identity Crisis", *Journal of Democracy*, 1995/1, pp. 104-116.

17. This is usually admitted by most Russian scholars. See, for instance, Dmitri Trenin, "Russia's Security Interests and Policies in the Caucasus Region", in: Bruno Coppieters (ed.) *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, Brussels, VUBPRESS, 1996, pp. 91-102.

18. "Indeed, at the beginning of 1997 there appeared to be at least six key actors in the Russian foreign policy-making process: (1) Yeltsin himself and the extensive presidential apparatus; (2) the Foreign Ministry led by Primakov; (3) Lukoil, Transneft, Gazprom and other energy conglomerates linked to Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin; (4) the Defence Ministry led by Igor Rodionov; (5) the Atomic Energy Ministry led by Viktor Mikhailov; (6) the Ministry of Foreign Economic Relations led by Oleg Davydov, and the Rosvooruzheniye state-owned arms exporting company which is subordinate to the ministry." Robert O. Freedman, "Russian Policy-Making and Caspian Sea Oil", *Analysis of Current Events*, vol. 9. no. 2, February 1997, p. 6. The list of agencies may vary from one expert to another (why not add, for instance, the Border Troops Department led by Gen. Nikolayev?) and their weight changes over time, but the assessment that a single foreign policy-making centre is lacking is universally shared by experts on Russia.

19. A liberal member of the Russian Duma said in an interview with us in 1994 that the overwhelming majority of the Duma committee on relations with the CIS countries believed that Georgia should be kept weak and divided in order for Russia to dominate it. The Chairman of this committee, Konstantin Zatulin, publicly said that "Georgia should become our satellite or die".

20. In his interview with *Moscow News*, Sergey Leonenko, a retired officer of the Russian army who fought in Abkhazia, listed hatred of Shevardnadze as the number one reason why the Russian military (meaning regular forces deployed in Abkhazia) support the Abkhaz. He also said that the Russian military believed that by supporting the Abkhaz they were promoting Russia's national interests. When asked about specific forms of support, he said he could not say everything because there was an official order to stay neutral, but he admitted that they could always get from the Russian army a "fully detailed plan of combat operations". "The success of the Abkhaz army confirms this," he continued. "But the battle for Sukhumi will be prolonged, because the army lacks people who are capable of properly carrying out those plans. Now it is our urgent task to fill positions on the management level, predominantly at the expense of retired Russian officers." "Za Pravoye Delo?", 18 July 1993.

21. On this, see Ghia Nodia, 'Waiting for the Russian Bear', in: *War Report*, June 1995, no. 34, pp. 39-40.

22. For more on this, see: S. Neil MacFarlane, Larry Minear, and Stephen D. Schenfield, *Armed Conflict in Georgia: A Case Study in Humanitarian Action and*

Peacekeeping, Thomas J. Watson Jr. Institute for International Studies, Occasional Paper no. 21, 1996.

23. After this paper was written, the idea emerged of putting Abkhazia on the map of oil pipeline networks - an issue presumably discussed during the meeting between Ardzinba and Shevardnadze in August 1997 in Tbilisi. This appears to be based on the notion that there should be economic incentives for co-opting Abkhazia, rather than on any economic rationale for the project itself. It therefore has probably even slimmer chances of materializing than another idea for a "peace pipeline" - the one running through mountainous Karabagh.

24. According to the interview with the Georgian MP Valeri Giorgobiani, even Shamil Basaev, the commander of the Chechen fighters in Abkhazia, says that his participation in the war was a mistake and they were deceived into it by Russia: "Kartvelebi tsin tsadit da chechnebi mogqvebit ukan, - atsxadebs shamil basaevi" ("Georgians, lead the way and we Chechens will follow you," says Shamil Basayev"), Akhali Taoba, 6 January 1997.

25. Georgian Chronicle, March 1997.

26. As recently as in April 1997, Radio Liberty expert on the Caucasus Liz Fuller was writing that "Politicians and political commentators in both Russia and Georgia predict that fighting between Georgia's central government and its breakaway Black Sea region of Abkhazia may soon break out again". Liz Fuller, 'Is Russia's Peacekeeping Force in Abkhazia a New Casus Belli?' RFE/RL Newslines, vol. 1, no. 21, 29 April 1997.