

## Chapter 3

# The Georgian-Abkhazian Conflict: In Search of Ways out

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"The principle of the free self-determination of nations [is one] upon which all the modern world insists (...) It is the principle of justice to all peoples and nationalities, and their right to live on equal terms of liberty and safety with one another, whether they be strong or weak".

Woodrow Wilson

The collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War and the appearance on the map of Europe of dozens of new states marked a transition in world history: from a bipolar world, dominated by two superpowers, to a completely new situation characterized by a substantial increase in the importance of internal and regional issues, including regional conflicts. In Western Europe, the fast-growing integration of national structures into a pan-European megastructure is leading to the erosion of classical notions of the state, including such sacred cows as state borders and state sovereignty.

But old notions, which reflect the preceding Cold War era or even more archaic periods of history, still dominate major international organizations, the United Nations and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe included. Arguably, any true reform of the United Nations, now much spoken about, should not be confined to fighting its bureaucracy and ineffectiveness, but - even more importantly - should get this major international organization to face the burning regional issues that are now to the fore in the making of the world's history. The UN should defend not only the interests of recognized governments, but also those of the peoples ruled, and sometimes oppressed, by these governments - it should become more an organization for peoples than for nations. Ethnic minorities should have their own place in UN structures, so that their voices are heard when important decisions or resolutions that directly affect their interests are being adopted. It is only because of the UN and OSCE's insensitivity to the plight of ethnic minorities that many of these see no other way out than to resort to violence in order to assert their rights and defend their interests.

It could be argued that a more principled approach by the United Nations to the conflict situations emerging in different parts of the world could, in many cases, help to overcome any deepening of these crises. Taking Georgia and Abkhazia as an example, one can ask whether it was normal that a country like the newly born Republic of Georgia should have been admitted to the UN in conditions of unresolved ethnic conflicts and civil war, simply because an allegedly pro-democracy leader came to rule the country after the democratically elected president had been deposed by a military coup. Was it normal that when in August 1992 this same leader, a short time after Georgia was granted UN membership, started a major military campaign against the small Abkhazian republic that was seeking more autonomy; when there were numerous reports of bloodshed and abuses of basic human

rights; when, in a televised address, the commander of the Georgian forces in Abkhazia explicitly threatened the entire Abkhazian population with genocide;<sup>[1]</sup> when the monuments to Abkhazian culture were being desecrated and the National Archives and scientific establishments of Abkhazia were being burnt to ashes; when there were numerous appeals to the United Nations by the Abkhaz authorities and different international organizations and NGOs to intervene and help to stop violence - that, despite all this, there was no response whatsoever from the United Nations? But when Georgia began to lose ground in Abkhazia and, sensing imminent defeat, appealed to the United Nations to help preserve its "territorial integrity", it immediately got a positive reaction. Is it normal that the United Nations resolutions should invariably use pejorative language towards Abkhazians and their elected authorities and, paradoxically, should treat Abkhazia as a culprit and the Tbilisi government, which started and waged the war, as a victim? And such an attitude is characteristic not only of UN. In one of its resolutions, the European Parliament called the Abkhazian Government a "bandit-terrorist movement".<sup>[2]</sup> This and many other instances clearly demonstrate the exclusively pro-government - whatever the government - attitude of major international structures, and their utter insensitivity to the voices of anyone other than recognized governments. It is this (in my view) outdated approach that needs to be reformed.

### **Self-determination**

All the UN Security Council resolutions on Georgia/Abkhazia - notorious for their one-sided pro-Georgian stance and harsh language towards Abkhazia - while ritualistically repeating the demand for respect for the territorial integrity and sovereignty of the Republic of Georgia, leave out one very important element. Not a single word in these resolutions addresses the concerns of the Abkhazian side of the conflict or the legitimate and inalienable right of the Abkhazian people to self-determination.

The right to self-determination remains a burning issue for the international community, and one which the United Nations and OSCE are failing - or rather, are unwilling - to address properly. Though this principle is enshrined in the United Nations Charter (in Article 1), priority is in fact given to the concurring principle of territorial integrity and the inviolability of state borders. The history of the last decade, with the sudden and unexpected disintegration of the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, as well as the separation of Eritrea from Ethiopia, has showed that today this principle has only relative validity, and should be applied more to forced changes of the borders of one state by another state or states than to the emergence of two or more new states from an older one.

A number of important points emerge from this. First, whatever the apocalyptic predictions may be, the separation of part of a state does not necessarily lead to the annihilation of that state. It should be noted that despite the de facto separation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, populated by distinctly non-Georgian and independently minded nations, Georgia managed to acquire its much-needed internal coherence and enjoy the first years of a dynamic and relatively peaceful development. Secondly, it is sometimes more expedient to release part of a country and let it form an autonomy (as in the case of Gagauzia in Moldova), or even a separate state, than to engage in a bloody, costly and inhuman war trying to hold on at any cost to the independence-seeking territory, which is usually populated by a non-related people. Some analysts rightly call this latter phenomenon "aggressive integrationalism", a description that fully applies to such a state as Georgia and to some other multi-ethnic states which, in the course of their history, incorporated or annexed territories and their indigenous

populations. As noted by Gidon Gotlieb in his book *Nation Against State*, "The denial of statehood to the peoples who have engaged in a long and painful struggle or who continue to resist alien rule is increasingly difficult to justify even as the imperative of limiting the number of new states is becoming more pressing".<sup>[3]</sup>

While informally discussing these problems with high-ranking UN officials, the Abkhazian delegation in Geneva was reminded that much bloodshed in world history had been caused by the striving for self-determination. At least two contrary arguments can be put forward against this claim, typical of the current UN attitude towards the issue of self-determination.

First, the overwhelming majority of the present UN member states came into existence precisely through asserting their right to self-determination, often by way of military struggle, the best-known example being the United States of America. In more recent times, the fifteen newly recognized states of the former Soviet Union and the former union republics of Yugoslavia, as well as Slovakia and Eritrea, emerged as independent states and were recognized by the international community through realizing their right to self-determination, by separating from other states and by changing internationally recognized borders. Incidentally, most of these examples show that, as such, the realization of the right to self-determination does not necessarily lead to violence and bloodshed, and that the "divorce" can be arranged in a peaceful and civilized manner.

Second, in justifying military action by the need to preserve a country's territorial integrity, aggressive integrationalism can lead to no less violence and bloodshed than is usually ascribed to the striving for self-determination. Examples of this abound, but the closest to my theme are the bloody wars waged by Georgia against South Ossetia and Abkhazia and by Russia against Chechnya.

In discussing the different forms of self-determination, I would like to put special emphasis on the cases where the competing principles of territorial integrity and the right to self-determination can - though this may sound paradoxical - coexist peacefully. This can happen when a distinct territory is content to limit its claims to internal self-determination, which means the creation of a smaller state that maintains its internal sovereignty, or internal independence, without breaking away from the bigger state within whose borders it is confined. And this is exactly the case of Abkhazia and Georgia. One could discuss at length how to name such a complex state: a confederation, a loose federation, or associated territories. Whatever the name, what is really important here is that peace is being preserved between the different ethnic components of a bigger state, that the borders are not violated, and the population of all parts of the formerly unitary state can fully enjoy the privilege of peace.

Similar federalization processes are taking place in our day in parallel with the more visible integration of Europe. We see the federalization of Belgium and the creation of separate Flemish and Wallonian parliaments, we observe the process of the devolution of power in Great Britain and the setting up of Scottish and Welsh parliaments, as well as the campaign for federalization in Italy. Contrary to fears that such measures might undermine a country's stability, one can argue that the reverse may be true: they can actually lead to a strengthening of the country in question, as they allow it to avert the danger of a destructive explosion caused by the long-suppressed dissatisfaction of ethnic minorities or distinct territories.

Devolution of central power, shared responsibility, shared sovereignty, internal self-determination, internal sovereignty, internal self-government by smaller nations within

bigger states - all these issues, when properly addressed, present a promising perspective for many countries that have, for decades, been vainly fighting the spectre of "separatism" at a cost of huge financial, military and human resources. Such solutions can, arguably, serve not as a destabilizing, but, on the contrary, as a stabilizing factor for the state in question, as they allow it to achieve a vitally important internal coherence between its ethnically heterogeneous components.

## **The Validity of Abkhazian Claims to Statehood**

Before describing the situation with the Georgian-Abkhazian peace process, I would like to say a few words about Abkhazians and their country simply in order to make it clear that the Abkhazian people have legitimate grounds for their claims to statehood and sovereignty. Abkhazians speak a language unrelated to Georgian. They have their own distinct culture and history. Abkhazians have never been, have never regarded themselves, and have never been regarded by Georgians or, for that matter, by any other people, as part of the Georgian nation. Apart from short intervals, they have always enjoyed independent statehood or very high levels of political autonomy.

The Abkhazians living in Abkhazia are predominantly (Orthodox) Christians (some 60%) or Sunni Moslem (some 40%).<sup>[4]</sup> The majority of Moslem Abkhazians were deported by the Russian Tsarist administration to the Ottoman Empire in the second half of the 19th century as a punishment for their fierce resistance to the Russian occupation and colonization of Abkhazia.<sup>[5]</sup> This explains, on the one hand, the existence of quite a sizeable Abkhazian diaspora in Turkey and some Middle Eastern countries<sup>[6]</sup> and, on the other, the fact that Abkhazians now represent only a minority in their own homeland.<sup>[7]</sup>

Contrary to the claim that Abkhazia has always been a part of Georgia, the real historical situation was quite different, because from the 13th century until 1918 Georgia as a single state simply did not exist. In the 8th century, Abkhazians created the Abkhazian Kingdom, which united in the 10th century with several Georgian kingdoms to form a united Abkhazian-Georgian Kingdom. In the 13th century this united kingdom was destroyed by the Mongol invasion, and from that time up until 1810 Abkhazia was always an independent principality, while Georgia disintegrated into a number of different principalities and "kingdoms", which in the 19th century were incorporated, one after another, into the Russian Empire. In 1810 the Abkhazian Principality, independently of Georgian lands, joined Russia. Even within Russia, the Abkhazian Principality under the Princes Chachba managed to maintain its political autonomy until 1864, at a time when all Georgian lands were reduced to mere provinces of the Russian Empire.

One often hears that autonomous status was granted to Abkhazia by the Bolsheviks, ostensibly in a plot to undermine Georgia's sovereignty. Again, the real situation was quite different. After the Russian Revolution of 1917, Abkhazia remained independent from Georgia. On 8 November 1917 the Congress of the Abkhazian People formed the Abkhazian parliament (the "Abkhazian People's Council"), which adopted a "Declaration" and "Constitution". On 11 May 1918, the Batum Peace Conference proclaimed the Mountainous Republic, which included the whole of the North Caucasus and Abkhazia. That same year, Abkhazia was occupied by the troops of neighbouring Georgia, who declared Abkhazia a part of Georgia and imprisoned members of the Abkhazian parliament, leading to protests from the command of the allied (British) forces in Transcaucasia and the Russian White Army. In 1921, Abkhazia and Georgia became Sovietized. On 31 March 1921, an

independent Soviet Republic of Abkhazia was proclaimed. On 21 May 1921, the Georgian Bolshevik government officially recognized the independence of Abkhazia. But the same year, under pressure from Stalin and other influential Georgian Bolsheviks, Abkhazia was forced to conclude a union (i.e., confederative) treaty with Georgia. Abkhazia still remained a full union republic until 1931, when its status was downgraded, under Stalin's orders, from that of Union Republic to that of an Autonomous Republic within Georgia. This act of incorporation of Abkhazia into Georgia was conducted without the approval and against the will of the Abkhazian people and caused mass protests in Abkhazia. Thus the creation of the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic within Georgia was not the result of the granting by the Bolsheviks of autonomous status to one of the republic's minorities, as it is often alleged, but was rather the forced convergence of two neighbouring states by the incorporation of one of them, Abkhazia, into the other, Georgia.

Another typical misunderstanding is that, by adopting certain constitutional acts in 1990-1992, the Abkhazian Republic proclaimed its independence from Georgia. In fact, Abkhazia has never officially declared its separation from Georgia. All acts undertaken by Abkhazia, beginning in 1990, were designed to protect its autonomous political status, deemed necessary in view of the numerous statements made by leading Georgian politicians that they doubted the legal character of Georgia's autonomies and even threatened to abolish all of them and transform Georgia into a unitary state.

The Act of State Sovereignty, adopted by the Abkhazian Parliament in 1990, was to protect the Republic's federal status from being ignored or eliminated by the Tbilisi government. Abkhazia adopted this act following analogous acts adopted by all the other former autonomous republics of the Soviet Union, and in none of these other cases did this mean the separation of their territory from that of the metropolis.

By reverting in 1992 to the Constitution of Abkhazian Republic of 1925, in which relations between Abkhazia and Georgia were based on a special Treaty of Union, Abkhazia was attempting to overcome a constitutional vacuum in its relations with Georgia after the abolition by the Georgian Military Council of all constitutional acts adopted in Georgia during Soviet times, and after its return to the Constitution of the Georgian Democratic Republic of 1921, in which the autonomous status of Abkhazia was not defined. By adopting its new constitution in 1994, Abkhazia broke off its last remaining ties with the old Communist regime, and declared Abkhazia a sovereign democratic state. This constitution did not specify the form its relations with Georgia should take, as these were to be defined through political talks with Georgia. Nor were the status of Abkhazia or its relations with Georgia specified in the new Georgian constitution.

### **The Georgian War Against Abkhazia (1992-1993)**

In 1991 the Soviet Union disintegrated. In May 1991, the one who became the first president of an independent Georgia was the ardent nationalist Zviad Gamsakhurdia, who actually pursued the policy of "Georgia for the Georgians". A year later, Gamsakhurdia was deposed as a result of a coup d'état organized by warlords and ex-criminals Tengiz Kitovani and Jaba Ioseliani. The former Communist boss of Georgia, Eduard Shevardnadze, who was perceived in the West as a "democratic" politician during his service as the USSR's Foreign Minister, was invited to rule the country, although his alleged democratic credentials did not convince the Georgians or former autonomies within Georgia, who knew Shevardnadze all too well as a staunch Brezhnevite - one who, for more than 10 years, had ruled Georgia with an iron fist.

As the new Georgian leadership declared all laws adopted during Soviet times null and void, the leadership of the former Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, in order to save Abkhazia's political autonomy from being overridden, proposed a draft treaty whereby Georgia would become a federative state of which Abkhazia would be a constituent republic. The Georgian answer to this initiative was to launch a major military attack on Abkhazia on 14 August 1992. The Georgian leaders announced that there would be no autonomies in the new Georgia. To that country's great humiliation, the war was lost by the undisciplined and poorly trained Georgian army. Most of Abkhazia's non-Kartvelian minorities (Armenians, Russians, Ukrainians, Greeks, Turks, etc.) allied themselves with the Abkhazians in their struggle against the aggressors. In addition, related peoples from the North Caucasian republics, notably Chechens, Circassians and Abazas, came to Abkhazia and fought alongside the Abkhazian forces. The war ended in late September 1993 with the decisive victory of the Abkhazian army and its North Caucasian allies.

The much speculated-about Russian military assistance to the Abkhazians should not be overestimated, as it is in practically all Georgian and many Western publications. First, there was of course no direct involvement by Russian troops in any Abkhazian operations (apart from the participation of Russian and Cossack volunteers; Georgia, in turn, was assisted by fighters from Western Ukraine). Despite allegations, nobody has yet produced any compelling evidence to prove such involvement. For example, the UNPO human rights mission that visited Tbilisi at the end of 1993 could not obtain from the Georgian side any reliable evidence to support such charges.<sup>[8]</sup> One could perhaps claim that the bombardment of Georgian positions at the Gumsta front by Russian military planes could serve as proof. But the Russians themselves made no great secret of such raids, and explained that they were provoked by the Georgian artillery shelling of the Russian military laboratory in Eshera which caused numerous casualties, including deaths, among the Russian personnel. Arguably, all warfare is a profitable business, and the war in Chechnya showed that, paradoxically, some Russian elements sold weapons to the Chechen side in order to make a profit. In the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict too, all weapons on both sides were, after all, of Russian origin.

The difference was that while Georgia was getting huge amounts of weaponry and ammunition from the former Soviet Army free (in accordance with the CIS Tashkent Agreement, and via many other, non-official, channels), Abkhazia had to buy weapons from elements of the Russian army stationed in Abkhazia and beyond. The Russian military had no scruples about selling arms to any side, although, admittedly, in general their personal sympathies lay more with the Abkhazians, who were fewer in number and therefore much more vulnerable. The selling of arms to them was regarded as a fair business, to counterbalance their numerical weakness. Besides, many weapons were coming to Abkhazia from or via North Caucasian sources and, probably, also via the diaspora.

One of the unexpected consequences of the Abkhazian victory became the mass exodus of ethnic Georgians (or rather Kartvelians, i.e., Georgians, Megrelians and Svans) from Abkhazia. During the Georgian occupation of parts of Abkhazia, many local Georgians collaborated with the troops sent by Tbilisi and, together with these troops, were responsible for acts of murder and other atrocities, as well as looting, perpetrated against their Abkhazian, Armenian and Russian neighbours. After the Abkhazian victory, fearing reprisals, the panic-stricken Kartvelian population of the republic fled en masse.

The Georgian side accuses Abkhazia of the ethnic cleansing of the Georgian population of the republic. In response to these accusations the Abkhazian side has stated that the Georgian population of the territory of Abkhazia south of Sukhum fled to Georgia and elsewhere before the arrival of Abkhazian troops, and that it was not the policy or intention of the Abkhazian government to expel Georgians or any other ethnic group from Abkhazia.

After the Abkhazian capital Sukhum was retaken by the Abkhazian troops, as a result of fierce fighting, there were in fact no other major battles between the Abkhazian and Georgian forces because the latter, demoralized by their defeat in Sukhum and by the dynamic Abkhazian army advance, rushed in panic (often leaving their heavy weaponry behind) towards the Georgian border, or to the Svanetian mountains, in exactly the same way as had already happened earlier in Gagra. This disorderly retreat caused, in turn, great panic amongst the local Georgian civilians, who followed the fleeing Georgian soldiers en masse, with the result that when the victorious Abkhazians entered the previously occupied territory of their republic to the south of Sukhum, all they encountered in villages and towns were mostly deserted Georgian houses. The statement by the Supreme Council of Abkhazia, issued on 11 October 1993, read:

The local Georgian population, which in the course of a year-long war either witnessed or participated in the brutal outrages of the Georgian soldiers against civilian Abkhazians, Armenians, Russians and Greeks (mainly old people, women and children) (...) preferred to leave Abkhazia for fear of acts of revenge.

A UN fact-finding mission was sent to Abkhazia by the Secretary-General in October 1993 to investigate human rights violations, especially the reports of ethnic cleansing. The mission was sent at the insistence of the Georgian side, and as a precondition to Georgian participation in talks in Geneva. Though in its report the mission stressed that it was not in a position to ascertain whether it had been a policy actively pursued by the authorities of either side, at any time, to clear the areas under their control of either the Abkhazian or the Georgian population, at the same time it clearly stated that most Georgians living in the region between the Gumsta and Ingur rivers had tried to flee before the arrival of the Abkhazian forces.<sup>[9]</sup> Incidentally, some more objective Georgian authors also prefer not to exploit the controversial term "ethnic cleansing", speaking instead in terms of the flight of the Georgians from Abkhazia.<sup>[10]</sup> However, official Tbilisi, which is trying to score points in its propaganda war against the Abkhazian Republic, continues its accusation of "the ethnic cleansing and genocide of the Georgian population of Abkhazia", while at the same time disclaiming all responsibility for unleashing the war in Abkhazia in August 1992 or for the establishment of the regime of terror on the occupied territory of Abkhazia.

## **Peace Process**

The negotiations process between Georgia and Abkhazia, which started in December 1993 in Geneva under UN auspices and with mediation by the Russian Federation, initially produced promising documents, one of the most important of which was the "Declaration on measures for a political settlement of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict", signed on 4 April 1994 in Moscow. The declaration emphasized the wish of the parties to reinstate their state-legal relations and outlined the contours of a future common state. According to this declaration, the Abkhazian Republic is to have its own constitution, parliament and government, and appropriate state symbols. The document delimits the spheres of separate and shared Georgian/Abkhazian competence. Abkhazia is to delegate some of its state responsibilities - such as foreign policy and foreign economic ties, border guard arrangements, customs, energy, transport and communications, ecology, civil and human rights and the rights of ethnic minorities - to the common (federal) organs of power. All other responsibilities will remain the unique prerogative of the Abkhazian State. The declaration was signed by the parties to the conflict and the representatives of Russia, the UN and the OSCE in the presence of the Russian Foreign Minister, the UN Secretary-General and many Western ambassadors.

The relative stabilization of the situation in Abkhazia and the deployment of CIS peacekeeping troops and UN military observers on the border between Abkhazia and Georgia along the Ingur river allowed some 70,000 Georgian (mainly Megrelian) refugees to return to their homes in the Gal region of Abkhazia. These people, however, are suffering because of the destroyed economic infrastructure and large numbers of landmines, some of which are still being deployed by subversive Georgian groups.

But the political process of the peaceful reintegration of Georgia and Abkhazia, as envisaged by the Declaration of 4 April 1994, was given no follow-up, and the situation took a turn for the worse. What happened was that Georgia, after having recuperated from the blow inflicted by military defeat, began revisiting the essential provisions of the Declaration of 4 April and trying to solve the problem of Abkhazia by separate military agreements with Russia and increased political pressure on Abkhazia. During the visit by the Russian Prime Minister, Chernomyrdin, to Tbilisi in 1995, it was agreed that Russia would help to restore Georgia's rule over Abkhazia in return for five Russian military bases in Georgia for a period of 25 years. These arrangements provoked a strong protest from Abkhazia. Instead of trying to resolve its differences with Abkhazia by means of mutual accommodation, Georgia, starting from the false premises that military intimidation and an economic blockade could force Abkhazia to give up its claim to sovereignty, preferred to reappear, as in the 19th century, as a major military ally and foothold for Russia in Transcaucasia. The UN is supporting the tough stance newly adopted by Georgia, blaming Abkhazia, as usual, for the breakdown in negotiations. Russian support has brought new optimism to Georgia that the Abkhazian problem can be solved by combined Russo-Georgian military action in Abkhazia. The spectre of a new war has begun to loom over the region.[\[11\]](#)

The political rapprochement between Georgia and Russia has resulted in a wholesale Russian blockade of Abkhazia aimed at the strangulation of Abkhazia's civilian population. Since 1995, Russia has established a naval and land blockade of Abkhazia, closed its borders with Abkhazia and refused to recognize Abkhazian passports or to allow Abkhazian citizens to travel abroad. Since April 1997, Russia has cut off all telephone lines connecting Abkhazia with the outside world, thereby establishing an information blockade of the small republic. All this raises serious doubts regarding Russia's capacity to act as a mediator, as such a position requires neutrality and a balanced approach to both sides in the conflict.

The result of separate Georgian-Russian arrangements undermining Abkhazia is that the peace talks are nearly at a standstill, and the prospects of a peaceful settlement are as remote as they were at the beginning of talks in Geneva three years ago.

### **Possible Ways Out**

Despite such negative developments, I believe that the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict is one of the most manageable among the conflicts on the territory of the former Soviet Union, and that there are still grounds for optimism, provided both sides can overcome sensitive psychological barriers and demonstrate enough political will to compromise. The recent history of Georgian-Abkhazian relations has shown that both parties to the conflict have insufficient strength to achieve the political goals they are pursuing: Georgia to overrun Abkhazia militarily and abolish its political autonomy, Abkhazia to gain international recognition as an independent state. This leaves the parties with room to compromise.

There are at least two crucially important positions that could lead to swift progress in the Georgian-Abkhazian peace process. First, unlike the South Ossetian autonomy, Georgia has never officially abolished the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic, still regarding it as an Autonomous State. Second, unlike Chechnya in Russia, or Karabakh in Azerbaijan, Abkhazia has never officially declared its independence from Georgia. This means that both Georgia and Abkhazia still recognise, de jure and de facto, the existence of an Abkhazian State. These crucially important positions can offer quite promising prospects for an early settlement of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. The major issue now is how exactly to accommodate the Abkhazian Republic's sovereign status, in a future state shared with Georgia, with Georgian claims to sovereignty over the whole of its territory.

The obvious diplomatic impasse in which Georgian-Abkhazian relations now find themselves could be neutralized in what I described above as internal self-determination. According to this formula, the Abkhazian Republic would remain within the internationally recognized borders of Georgia and would enjoy broad political autonomy, preserving its own constitution, parliament, government and state symbols, as well as its national army, while delegating some other important state functions, such as border control, customs, transport and communications, foreign policy, etc., to the common federative bodies: the federal parliament and government. Outside the competence of the federal institutions, both Georgia and Abkhazia would enjoy full sovereignty over their own internal affairs on the territory under the control of their own elected government bodies.

Such a structure will only be stable and capable of bringing about lasting peace if all parts of the federation are satisfied with their level of sovereignty. This makes it necessary to create a constitutional arrangement in which Georgia, Abkhazia, Ajaria and South Ossetia

enjoy equal political rights and are equally subordinated to the common federal legislative and executive structures. Within such a structure, each of the constituent republics should have a right of veto on decisions taken by the federal bodies that directly affect their vital interests. If the parties agree to make such arrangements, this will enhance their interest in common economic activity and cooperation, and will inevitably, within an estimated period of five years, lead to closer reintegration.

There are signs that at least some international structures are ready to support such a solution to the problem. Thus, recently, in its Resolution of 22 April 1997, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe stressed the importance of extensive autonomy status for Abkhazia as one of the basic elements of a political settlement.<sup>[12]</sup> Any other arrangement, based on the principle of the subordination of one people to another, on the inequality of the subjects of a federation or on old Soviet-style super-centralized rule from Tbilisi, can a priori be regarded as futile and incapable of bringing lasting peace to this part of the former Soviet Empire.

International efforts can be instrumental in persuading the parties to reach a mutually accepted constitutional arrangement concerning the status of Abkhazia. Such concerted efforts were quite effective in achieving peace in Bosnia, and are now indispensable in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Unfortunately, in the case of Georgia and Abkhazia all pressure, including military intimidation and an inhuman economic blockade, is being put on Abkhazia. This is the wrong path to follow, as it was the UN, OSCE and individual governments' encouragement of Georgia in its uncompromising stance on political negotiations with Abkhazia that effectively brought the whole peace process to a halt.

This one-sided and mistaken approach should be radically changed. It is very important not to lose momentum and to try to revitalize the peace process now, before the current favourable situation changes and we become witnesses to another escalation of hostilities. It could be that either Georgia will start a new war against Abkhazia, or that Abkhazia, being convinced that it is futile to expect any equitable arrangement with Georgia, will declare its complete independence. These are real possibilities, which could substantially complicate the situation and diminish the chances of a comprehensive settlement.

Though the participation of Russia as facilitator is crucial for the conclusion of any lasting agreement between Georgia and Abkhazia, there is nothing to say that the group around the negotiation table should not include a new member, representing a country with no direct political or economic interests in Georgia or Abkhazia. New initiatives, fresh ideas and probably fresh personalities are needed to push the stalemated peace process forward and to achieve, as speedily as possible, political arrangements that would preclude the possibility of the oppression of the smaller nation by the bigger one, allow thousands of refugees to return to their homes in safe and dignified conditions, and lay the basis for stability and progress in this part of Europe.

**1.** The Commander-in-Chief of the Georgian forces in Abkhazia, Colonel Giorgi Karkarashvili, in an address to the population of Abkhazia broadcast on Sukhum television on 25 August 1992, warned that "Even if the total number of Georgians - 100,000 - are killed, then from your [Abkhazian] side all 97,000 will be killed", and he advised the Abkhazian leader V. Ardzinba "not to act in such a way that the Abkhazian nation is left without descendants" (cf. G. Amkuab, T. Illarionova, Abxazija: Xronika

neobjavljennoj vojny. Chast' I. 14 avgusta - 14 sentiabria 1992 goda. Moskva, 1992, p. 128). 97,000 was the approximate number of the entire Abkhazian population of Abkhazia. Soon after this event Karkarashvili was promoted by Shevardnadze to the rank of general, and later replaced Kitovani as Georgian Minister of Defence. In an interview given in the occupied city of Sukhum, another high-ranking Georgian official, the Minister of State for Abkhazia, Goga Khaindrava, told the correspondent from *Le Monde Diplomatique* (published in April 1993) that "there are only 80,000 Abkhazians, which means that we can easily and completely destroy the genetic stock of their nation by killing 15,000 of their youth. And we are perfectly capable of doing this."

2. "Abkhazi [sic!] terrorist-separatist movement", in point B of the "Resolution on the situation in Georgia" (B3-1452, 1474, 1490, 1505 and 1516/93, November 1993).

3. G. Gotlieb, *Nation Against State. A New Approach to Ethnic Conflicts and the Decline of Sovereignty*, New York: Council on Foreign Relations Press, 1993, pp. 19-20.

4. No precise figures exist on the relative proportions of Christians, Moslems or atheists among Abkhazians living in Abkhazia. One may suppose that the proportion of Christians among the religious Abkhazians must reach 60%. My personal observations indicate that the number of believers among Abkhazian intellectuals has increased since the war of 1992-1993. All Abkhazian Moslems belong to the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, while Christians are Russian or (more rarely) Eastern Orthodox. The role of the Abkhazian language in church ceremonies has increased in recent times. The major Christian texts have been translated into Abkhazian since the middle of the 19th century. There is no antagonism whatsoever between Christian and Moslem Abkhazians and mixed marriages are very common. Abkhazia has never known any form of religious fanaticism, Abkhazians are very tolerant of other faiths, and, in all fairness, tend to be quite indifferent to matters of religion. Christian Abkhazians in general are not diligent churchgoers, and until recently those who regard themselves as Moslems have not had a single mosque to attend in Abkhazia. As rightly observed by many authors, the plain truth is that neither Christianity nor Islam forms more than a surface laid over the old Abkhazian paganism. Diaspora Abkhazians, on the contrary, are Moslems in the true sense of the word, although they are not renowned for any fanaticism either.

5. The pre-emigration figure for Abkhazians was between 130,000 and 150,000, and for Abkhazo-Abazas about 180,000 (cf. V.A. Chirikba, *Common West Caucasian. The Reconstruction of its Phonological System and Parts of its Lexicon and Morphology*. Leiden: CNWS Publications, 1996, pp. 1-3). In 1897 the first official all-Russia census established the presence in Abkhazia of 58,697 Abkhazians, which comprised 55.3% of Abkhazia's 106,000 population; the figures for other ethnic groups in Abkhazia were: 25,875 Georgians (24.4%; these were mainly Megrelians), 6,552 Armenians (6.1%), 5,135 Russians (5.6%) and 5,393 Greeks (5.0%) (cf. S.Z. Lakoba (ed.), *Istorija Abkhazii. Uchebnoe posobie*, Gudauta: Alashara, 1993, p. 347).

6. The exact number of Abkhazians in Turkey is not known, as the official Turkish data on minorities are notoriously unreliable. Some specialists speak of more than 100,000 Abkhazians (G.A. Dzidzariya, *Makhadzhirstvo i problemy istorii Abkhazii XIX stoletija*. Sukhumi: Alashara, 1982, p. 493), while other authors estimate their numbers in Turkey (together with that of the closely related Abazas) at half a million (cf. I. Marykhuba,

Abkhazija v sovetskuju epokhu. Abkhazskie pis'ma (1947-1989), Sbornik dokumentov. Tom 1. Akua (Sukhum), 1994; P. Overeem, "Report of a UNPO coordinated human rights mission to Abkhazia and Georgia", in: Central Asian Survey, vol. 14, no. 1, 1995, p. 18). According to the results of my own field research in Turkey, there are no fewer than 250 Abkhaz-Abaza villages in that country (V.A. Chirikba, "Distribution of Abkhaz dialects in Turkey", in: Proceedings of the Conference dedicated to the memory of Tefvik Esenç, Istanbul, forthcoming). In addition, a large number of Abkhazians are now living in cities and towns, the most numerous communities being in Istanbul, Ankara, Duzce, Inegol, Bilecik, Eskishehir, Samsun and Sinop. As well as in Turkey, there are also some 5,000 Abkhazians in Syria (information from Syrian Abkhazians); still smaller Abkhazian communities are to be found in some other Middle Eastern countries. Abkhazian colonies (made up mainly of Turkish Abkhazians) exist also in many Western European countries, such as Germany (some 3,000), the Netherlands, Belgium, France, Britain, Switzerland and Austria. A small Abkhazian community in New Jersey, USA, is mostly made up of immigrants from Syria.

7. Apart from the forced emigration to Turkey, another factor responsible for the sharp decrease in the relative number of Abkhazians in Abkhazia was the (often forced) resettlement from Georgia to Abkhazia of tens of thousands of Georgians. This resettlement policy, aimed at shifting the demographic balance in Abkhazia in favour of ethnic Georgians, was successfully carried out by the Communist authorities of Georgia up to 1992, but this policy was practised on its largest scale in the 1930s and 1940s, under the rule of Stalin and Beria.

8. P. Overeem, op.cit., p. 138.

9. UN Document S/26795.

10. R. Gachechiladze, *The New Georgia. Space, Society, Politics*, London: UCL Press, 1995, pp. 43, 178. According to the Georgian State Committee for Refugees and Displaced Persons, some 160,000 refugees from Abkhazia have been officially registered and accommodated in 63 districts of Georgia, cf. "The Georgian Chronicle", February-March 1994, as cited in A. Zverev, *Ethnic Conflicts in the Caucasus*. In: Bruno Coppieters (ed.). *Contested Borders in the Caucasus*, Brussels: VUB University Press, 1996, pp. 13-71.

11. The dangerously increased tension was due to certain declarations made by Georgian leaders and to the actions carried out by the Russian military in Abkhazia. Thus, in an interview published in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* (29 June 1994), the Georgian leader Shevardnadze announced that the so-called "Council of Ministers of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia", based in Tbilisi, would soon move to the Gal region. In its statement of 29 June, the Abkhazian Supreme Council characterized Shevardnadze's declaration as "provocative", and expressed deep concern about the actions of the peacekeeping force which, by permitting the uncontrolled mass return of refugees, had caused the destabilization of the situation in the region. On two occasions, around 15 May and 15 July 1995, tension in Abkhazia rose considerably owing to the statements issued by Georgian officials in Tbilisi, who called for the mass repatriation to Abkhazia of Georgian refugees. The statements made in early July by the Russian Commander of the CIS peacekeeping force, endorsing such an uncontrolled mass repatriation and promising the repatriates the protection of his forces, sparked sharp criticism from Abkhazia's

officials, who declared that this could result in renewed hostilities. In the end, the much-heralded mass return of refugees was halted. In September 1995 a high-ranking Russian delegation headed by Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin visited Tbilisi. On 15 September the sides concluded a number of agreements, among them one on Russian military bases in Georgia, including the base in Gudauta, and they declared their support for the principle of territorial integrity and the inviolability of existing borders, condemning "aggressive separatism and terrorism in any form" (cf. S/1995/937). The Russian-Georgian deal on military bases and the unexpected announcement that military exercises would be carried out on 30 September 1995 by the CIS peacekeeping troops, obviously designed to exert pressure on Abkhazia, prompted the Abkhazian forces to go into a state of heightened alert. It was planned to carry out the exercises in the Gal region of Abkhazia, in parallel with the introduction there of a CIS battalion consisting mainly of ethnic Georgians. Following the arrival of this battalion, it was planned that Georgian police troops would enter the region. These plans coincided with Shevardnadze's statement that the problem of the Gal region would be solved in the next few days, and that Georgian sovereignty over this region of Abkhazia would be restored (cf. the statement by the Abkhazian Parliament on 4 October 1995).

On 20 March 1996 tension between the Abkhazian authorities and the Russian border troops in Abkhazia again rose sharply. A Russian military ship, N 040, entered Sukhum Bay without permission from the Abkhazian authorities and, having arrested the Ukrainian trading ship "Vega", forced it to proceed to the nearby Russian port of Sochi. This incident, which happened during Shevardnadze's visit to Moscow, was supposedly meant as a pro-Georgian gesture. During Shevardnadze's visit Russia gave in to the Georgian demand that all foreign ships bound for Abkhazia - even those with humanitarian cargoes - would have to pass through customs in the Georgian port of Poti. In addition, it was decided that the Russians would forbid the boarding of any passengers or loading of any cargo in the port of Sukhum, which was tantamount to an almost total naval blockade of Abkhazia. In its statement of 21 March 1996, the Abkhazian Government protested against these measures, regarding them as having been taken unilaterally in the interests of Georgia and interfering in the internal affairs of Abkhazia. On 2 July 1996 an Abkhazian police post on the Gal canal was fired at with rocket-propelled grenades and small arms. At the end of September 1996, Georgia carried out military exercises in the vicinity of the conflict zone, contravening the cease-fire agreement of 14 May 1994. These and some other incidents seriously aggravated the situation and led many to think there was a real possibility of renewed hostilities.

**12.** Resolution 233 (97), cf. [www.coe.fr/cp/97/233a\(97\).htm](http://www.coe.fr/cp/97/233a(97).htm).