

Chapter 4

Geographical Background to a Settlement of the Conflict in Abkhazia

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Introduction

I had wished to begin the paper with the sentence: "The conflict in Abkhazia (Georgia), which reached its climax in the 1992-1993 civil war, is awaiting a settlement" but I realised immediately that the terminology might not match, since those involved in the conflict held a variety of opinions. For example, even the first line may bring a protest from a representative of the ethnic Abkhaz, who may not agree with the wording "Abkhazia (Georgia)" although it is present in all the UN Security Council resolutions on this conflict, while some would have preferred the term "the Georgian-Abkhazian war" to "the civil war in Abkhazia". However, all the wars that take place on the territory of one state between the citizens (or, at least, permanent residents) of that state are in fact civil wars, irrespective of whether they are of class origin or ideological, religious or ethnic in nature. Since 1992 the Republic of Georgia has been recognised by the international community as an independent state within the borders of the Georgian SSR and received into the United Nations, and in addition local inhabitants of the most varied nationalities (not all, it is true; and that perhaps is no bad thing) were involved (without going into whether this is good or bad) on both sides in the military action in Abkhazia.

This was the terminology used in preparing the paper: "Georgia" means the entire state within the officially recognised borders, while "the rest of Georgia" means the part of Georgia without Abkhazia. The situation that has developed in Abkhazia since 1989 is called the "conflict", the war of 1992-1993 is called "the civil war in Abkhazia", the supporters of the separation (secession) of Abkhazia from Georgia are referred to as "secessionists" while the actual leadership of the secessionists is referred to as "Sukhumi" or "the Sukhumi government", and in corresponding fashion the leadership of Georgia is referred to as "Tbilisi" or "the Tbilisi government". When I refer to the opinion of "the Abkhaz" or "the Georgians" I mean the prevailing public opinion in the corresponding ethnic groups, while freely admitting that there are quite substantial groups that do not share the predominant view.

Since there was an aim for consensus from the outset, not to create additional obstacles to constructive dialogue among the representatives of the parties by discussions on "which is the autochthonous population?" or "who started first?" and the like, I intend to give only my own opinion on the geographic (in the broad sense of the term) background to the conflict.

The fact that the conflict has created a difficult situation for both sides is beyond doubt:

the social and economic situation in Abkhazia is not improving, and the economic so-called blockade^[1] by the CIS, imposed against the secessionist region is aggravating the situation. Abkhazia paid a high price for the result achieved in the civil war, in the lives of many young people and in the loss of many loyal citizens who were forced to leave the territory. The sword of Damocles of revenge makes it necessary to maintain a costly standing army: according to Russian sources 72% of the budget is being spent on defence.^[2] This is hardly a situation in which people would wish to live permanently;

in the rest of Georgia, which was plunged into two civil wars in 1993, being humiliated by defeat at the hands of the secessionists (this is no place for an analysis of why or how) and by forced entry into the CIS, its citizens constantly confronted by the spectre of a great mass of starving and deprived persons displaced from Abkhazia against their will, the ideas of revenge may prevail. This is not the best way to solve the problem.

The principal hypotheses in my paper are that from the economic and political-geographic viewpoints the dismemberment of Georgia (which is the actual aim of the secessionists in spite of frequent rhetoric to the contrary) is not to the advantage of the Georgians or the Abkhaz and the other nationalities living in Abkhazia, while from the cultural-geographic viewpoint there are no insuperable obstacles to finding common points of contact. The international community also has an interest in preserving the territorial integrity of a UN member and in the observance of human and ethnic minority rights. Accordingly public opinion, both in Abkhazia and in the rest of Georgia, will clearly have to get used to the idea that being in a single state - a common economic and political space - will be more beneficial to both sides in the long run than endless confrontation. However, the psychological problems in the various communities, greatly aggravated during and after the civil war, must be fully understood.

I wish to give a brief description below of the economic-geographical, cultural-geographical and political-geographical background against which the conflict developed. Of course, geography is neither the sole factor in the conflict nor a complete guarantor of a solution for it, but it may be helpful in explaining the reasons for it and, more importantly for us, in predicting particular difficulties in putting various solutions of the conflict into practice.

The Economic-Geographical Background

The geographical location of Abkhazia is extremely favourable and also predetermines its geopolitical significance. Situated along the shore of the Black Sea (however, the principal ports of Georgia - Poti, Batumi and Supsa, the latter now under construction - are further south, in the rest of Georgia), Abkhazia has a definite advantage over the land-locked North Caucasus republics of the Russian Federation. After the Ubykhs and Adighean peoples, the Abkhaz' kinsfolk, who had previously occupied the Black Sea shore north-west of Gagra almost to the Sea of Azov, had been driven out by tsarism in the 1860s, the Abkhaz were left as the only autochthonous people in the Caucasus, apart from the Georgians, with access to the open sea (the Caspian is in fact a lake). This gives Abkhazia an opportunity to neutralise the CIS economic sanctions to a considerable extent. The coastal blockade by Russian warships is more symbolic than real - economic contacts, e.g. with Turkish seaports, have been practically uninterrupted: according to the Russian mass media, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs states that last year more than 75 ships were unloaded in the port of Sukhumi.^[3]

The only railway linking the Central and Western Transcaucasus to Russia passes through Abkhazia. After it was closed due to the civil war, Abkhazia became a railway dead end and Russia was deprived of the possibility of a rail link, e.g. with its strategic partner - Armenia - and its military bases in the Transcaucasus. Restoration of this railway (which Tbilisi also links to a settlement of the conflict) will be extremely beneficial to all sides; this includes the economy of Abkhazia.

During the Soviet era Abkhazia, with natural and climatic resources unique in the USSR, was transformed into a major recreational area and producer of crops such as citrus fruits, tea and tobacco. These goods and services were almost entirely for the vast Soviet market (and in part for COMECON markets), which were protected from outside competition and now are almost lost. It will be very difficult to restore access to these markets, to say nothing of expanding them, if the conflict remains unresolved.

Abkhazia has relatively few mineral, fuel and energy resources. It is even difficult to use the fairly numerous and free-flowing rivers for power generation, because building dams on them will reduce the load and this will adversely affect the beach equilibrium and undermine the recreational resources. For example, the construction of a hydroelectric power station on the River Bzyb will involve the destruction of Cape Pitsunda with its major resort and tourist complex. The fact that the contribution of Abkhazia to electric power generation in Georgia is substantial (over one-third) is almost entirely due to the Inguri cascade overfall generating stations in south-east Abkhazia, in the Gali district, to which water is supplied by a reservoir lying entirely within the territory of other Georgian provinces. Operation of these generating stations presupposes inevitable economic co-operation both now and in the future.

Abkhazia was not noted for industrial and agricultural products (other than tea and citrus fruit) even in terms of the Georgian SSR, which according to the Soviet yardstick had average economic potential. For example, in 1990 Abkhazia, with 12.5% of all Georgia's territory and 9.8% of its population, produced 5.8% of all industrial production and 5.1% of consumer goods. The figures for agriculture looked better: in 1985-1990 on average Abkhazia produced 12.5% of Georgia's total agricultural output. This was almost entirely due to citrus fruit (43% production on collective and state farms, but 29% from state purchases: a substantial part of the citrus fruit purchased was grown in the private sector in the rest of Georgia) and tea (20% production and 18% purchases). However, Abkhazia could not meet its own requirements for basic food crops or for most livestock products, producing 6.6% of the grain, 5.1% of the vegetables, 5.8% of the fruit (excluding citrus fruit), 0.8% of the grapes, 9.3% of the meat and 5.3% of the milk in the total Republic collective and state farm output in 1985-1990.^[4]

This does not mean that Abkhazia "was very poor" and "the rest of Georgia had to support it entirely": there was actually a pattern of geographical division of labour over a certain period which will be difficult to restore under the new conditions. During the Soviet era there was no need for Abkhazia to be self-sufficient in food, because expenditure on imported foodstuffs was more than covered by the income from the more expensive products of subtropical farming and tourist services (in fact no such calculations were made, because in the USSR supply was centralised, like everything else).

Since the civil war the economic crisis has not receded. The present parlous economic state of Abkhazia is aggravated by the fact that the markets for subtropical farm products and tourist services are contracting sharply: the main reasons for this are increased competition

at the international level and the economic sanctions. But even lifting the sanctions cannot fully restore the flows of tourists from Russia unless a stable peace is achieved. It is difficult to judge as yet how effective this frequently breached blockade is from the political viewpoint, but it is obviously damaging the economy of Abkhazia and affecting the material welfare of many sections of the population.

The fact that Abkhazia can maintain an army when the economy relies mostly on subsistence farming and the sanctions theoretically prevent exports leads us to assume that there is an unofficial and very substantial flow of outside (non-humanitarian) aid which makes it possible to maintain the military potential of Abkhazia and/or that the forces that are supposed to maintain the sanctions are breaching it. In any case the situation provides no opportunity for genuine economic reforms.

Due to the substantial drop in population in Abkhazia there should be enough agricultural land to achieve self-sufficiency. If we make the theoretical assumption that the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) simply will not return to their homes, the problem will most probably be a shortage of capital and labour rather than a lack of land. But autarky can scarcely be an end in itself on the threshold of the 21st century.

For structural improvements to be made in the economy of Abkhazia, or if only for the partial restoration of the economic structure that existed there before the beginning of the 1990s, i.e. the tourist business, subtropical farming and market gardening, to say nothing of restoration of housing stock, transport and social infrastructure and the like, much greater labour resources than those left after the civil war will be required, apart from major capital investment. It is these limited labour resources that may prove to be the main complicating factor in the future economic development of Abkhazia.

The whole population has declined: according to the Sukhumi government there were "over 300,000 people" in the territory of Abkhazia by the beginning of 1997^[5] compared with 535,600 in 1989.^[6] The figure of "over 300,000", meaning that about 240,000 were IDPs and refugees, may be exaggerated, but if it is true the proportion of ethnic Abkhaz in the entire population (less than 100,000 before the conflict began) cannot exceed one-third. Even in 1993, directly after the end of hostilities and when expulsion of most of the Georgian population (described by many as "ethnic cleansing") was practically over, the Sukhumi leadership announced that the Abkhaz would not tolerate becoming a minority again in their own country.^[7] According to some estimates, after many had fled or been driven out the ethnic Abkhaz became a majority of 65%:^[8] if this is a true estimate, the total population must have declined to under 150,000. In any event the decline in labour resources is obvious.

If we assume theoretically that Abkhazia will become a monoethnic (Abkhaz) state it will be incapable of supplying even key sectors of its industry with a workforce. According to the 1989 Population Census, the employed (economically active) population in Abkhazia amounted to 260,042 persons, while the employed ethnic Abkhaz population (for the whole of Georgia: data for Abkhazia alone are not given, but the figure must be 1,000-2,000 less) numbered 47,954 persons (including 15,694 in intellectual work and 12,228 in manual agricultural work).^[9] In the absence of recent data it may be assumed with reasonable confidence that at best the labour resources of the ethnic Abkhaz have remained at the previous quantitative level or, most likely, have declined because of the war and emigration. Merely to restore the potentially most profitable sector in Abkhazia, the tourist and

recreation industry (including both direct services and infrastructure such as industrial, transport, agricultural, trading and sales and cultural and entertainment sectors) to its 1988 level (the last year without overt confrontation in the Abkhazian ASSR) will require not less than 40,000 workers according to the most modest estimates, and several times more for improvements and expansion. The population "is not enough to man the economy, let alone reconstruct the infrastructure of the area".^[10] This implies a necessity for recruiting additional (ethnically non-Abkhaz) labour from outside. I am not hinting that these labour resources must automatically come from among ethnic Georgians and that the economy cannot be restored without these. It is merely observed here that using a multi-ethnic workforce and maintaining a heterogeneous population are inevitable if there is to be economic growth in Abkhazia.

It cannot be right to maintain that any country that has been legally recognised as an independent state will not be able to survive in the conditions prevailing at the end of the 20th century. Russian "national-patriots" foretold great political difficulties and all but starvation for the Newly Independent States (NIS) unless they turned to the former empire for aid. For example, in 1994 the then Chairman of the State Duma Committee for links with the CIS forecast with respect to a number of NIS, that they have "to become our satellites or die".^[11] In fact, however, by closing the rail link through Chechnya and allowing the secessionists to cut themselves off from the three Transcaucasian states, Russia has merely produced a situation in which these states have established new economic ties, have survived and have learned to live without the former empire. Georgia is definitely moving towards a market economy: privatisation is proceeding rapidly, the stability of the new currency - the Lari - introduced in 1995 is being maintained (the Russian ruble is still used as currency in Abkhazia), and in spite of obvious difficulties there are visible signs of economic recovery. All this is being achieved with the help of international community.

This example might also inspire secessionist regions - local elites may argue that even the very small states that may emerge in their territories could survive and even flourish. However, normal economic development can be achieved only through contacts with the outside world, which will follow only after a full political settlement is reached. In such a case Abkhazia also can enjoy the benefits which the unified state will obtain from its position in terms of transport and geography. There may be a widening of the "Central Asia-Europe" transport corridor affecting Abkhazia. The proposed railway around the Black Sea and the "North-South" transport corridor assume the use of the territory of Abkhazia as well.

Of course, one may argue that there is also an option of economic development for Abkhazia within, or with special aid from, another larger state. The latter option is difficult to consider in current circumstances, as it implies a certain (clearly irresponsible) political decision - if a state is prepared to issue a challenge to the international community by recognising as independent, or taking under its wing, a secessionist region which Georgia regards as an integral part of itself, referring not without good reason to international law.

The Cultural- Geographical Background

Some attention must be given to ethnic dynamics and to the attitude of public opinion to them in order to understand the cultural-geographical aspects of the conflict.

Since the 1950s the numbers of ethnic Abkhaz, which had fluctuated previously,^[12] have clear rising trend: their proportion in the Autonomous Republic population rose from 15.1%

to 17.8% in 1989 (from 61,200 to 95,300 in absolute terms), while the proportion of C increased from 39.1% to 45.7% during the same period. Whereas in 1959 the Abkhaz were terms of numbers among the nationalities in the Autonomous Republic (Russians and A also outnumbered them), they were in second place by 1989.

Under Soviet authority the "titular nation" of a Union or an Autonomous Republic had definite official and unofficial advantages of representation in the administration, and in a bureaucratic state such as the USSR this was of decisive importance throughout public life: the Abkhaz held a greater proportion of such posts than their numbers in the population as a whole.^[13] A sort of "affirmative action" was pursued in relation to the ethnic Abkhaz - the titular nation, but a minority in terms of numbers.^[14] After the independence of Georgia was restored (1991) its first, extremely nationalistic President, agreed to a formula for elections to the local Supreme Council (parliament) in which the ethnic Abkhaz obtained a relative majority of seats. None of the above should be regarded as some kind of "excess of charity": in my opinion the Abkhaz must be given even more special guarantees of free development for the future.

However, all this was seen by the local Georgian population as encroachment on their rights as a community (this is not a matter of "democratic rights", because even now there is a long way to go to democracy), especially against the background of demands by the ethnic Abkhaz for separation from Georgia as a sovereign republic or joining the Russian Federation directly: such a development would mean the local Georgians becoming an "actual minority" (in terms of legal rights) and for Georgia as a whole the loss of over 12% of its territory and about 10% of its population. Meanwhile, in complaints by the Abkhaz addressed to the Soviet leadership the existence of Abkhazia as an autonomous republic within Georgia was declared to be an historical injustice; the numerical superiority of the ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia was seen as intentionally created by the communist government of Georgia and the repressions of the Stalinist era as specifically aimed only at the Abkhaz.^[15] As a rule there were no complaints of direct political, social or economic discrimination by any ethnic Abkhaz as an individual; the collective complaints were only about the rights of one ethnic community, while the rights of the other communities were almost completely ignored. Without entering into a discussion on the extent to which the complaints were justified, I wish to put forward some brief views on certain ethno-demographic issues that are clearly territorial in nature (the cultural-geographic dimension).

The values, or "ideas and beliefs shared by the people in a society on what is important and worthwhile"^[16] of the Georgians and Abkhaz are quite similar, though not identical. In the conflict between them something like a "clash of civilisations"^[17] is not apparent. Rather the opposite: they definitely share a common cultural and historical heritage from medieval times, when the Georgian Bagrationi dynasty called themselves the kings "of the Abkhaz and Georgians", while the realm itself, embracing the territory of present-day Georgia with its own name of "Sakartvelo" (i.e. Georgia) since the 10th century, was known among the neighbouring nations in the 10-13th centuries as "Abazgia" (i.e. Abkhazia).

From the 10th right up to the end of the 19th century the language of worship for the Orthodox Abkhaz (who were an absolute majority among the Abzhu or Ochamchira Abkhaz to the south of the River Kodori and accounted for a substantial proportion of the rest of the Abkhaz) was ancient Georgian. For the Bzyb (Gudauta) Abkhaz, however, many of whom had been converted to Islam in the late middle ages, the Georgian language and culture had become quite remote. However, Islam does not play a dominant part in their

social life: almost all the true Muslim Abkhaz emigrated to the Ottoman Empire some 120 years ago. Incidentally, some Georgians take the view that it is the Bzyb Abkhaz who are the main supporters of secession, although this may be incorrect.

When the Russian Empire was expanding rapidly southwards and reached the Transcaucasus at the beginning of the 19th century, this territory, including Abkhazia, was essential to the Empire as a military bridgehead rather than as an area to be opened up economically. Economic interest in the Sukhumskiy okrug (Sukhumi region) - as Abkhazia was called at the time - increased only during the last third of the 19th century. The possibility that this was why tsarism decided on the direct annexation of a previously 'autonomous' principality (1864) and a drastic change in the ethnic structure of the population of Abkhazia (following the example of the North-West Caucasus, which was settled by the Slavic peoples mainly after expulsion of the Adighean peoples in the 1860s) cannot be ruled out. The expulsion in 1878 of more than half (32,000) of the ethnic Abkhaz,^[18] almost half of whom soon returned,^[19] into the Ottoman Empire was provoked by the tsarist authorities (although both the Ottoman government and the Muslim clergy had a hand in it, not a single Georgian had participated in it). This was followed by settlement of the vacant lands both by "planned" Slavic immigrants from European Russia and by Armenians, Greeks and, least desirable from the Imperial viewpoint, Georgians from the neighbouring districts or from the south-east of the Sukhumi region itself.^[20]

In contrast to the North Caucasus, in Abkhazia not a Slavic but a Georgian population grew rapidly: the latter lived in similar ecological conditions and adapted more easily to the Abkhazian coastal environment, infected to a considerable extent by malaria at that time, and to alpine conditions. These natural conditions limited the influx of a Russian population (malaria was eradicated only by the 1930s). According to the Imperial administrative statistics, the Georgians were already a relative majority in Abkhazia before the First World War I.^[21] Incidentally, in the 1920s-40s conditions for Russian population growth in Abkhazia were not less (and possibly more) favourable than for Georgians: in the period between censuses from 1926 to 1959 the number of Russians increased from 12,000 to 87,000, i.e. by 7.2 times, while during the same period the numbers of Armenians increased by 2.6 times and of Georgians - by 2.3 times.^[22] However, the increase in the non-Georgian ethnic groups was never seen by Abkhaz scholars (or by Abkhaz public opinion) as a "demographic threat". The reason for such a specific approach can be understood when a broader cultural-geographical context is considered.

The growth in the relative importance of the Georgian population in Abkhazia since the end of the 19th century, at the same time as a rapid consolidation of the Georgian nation and an increase in its national consciousness, aroused suspicion in the tsarist government. Again the geographical factor was important: the Georgian provinces bordered the Sukhumi region directly and, unlike the Greeks or Armenians for example, whose main area of settlement was much further away, the continuous area of Georgian settlement was expanding and they were becoming direct competitors for the Russians in this sector of the Black Sea shore. This geo-demographic trend was artificially transformed later into one of the principal causes of inter-ethnic tension, although the new Georgian settlers did not drive out any ethnic Abkhaz, for the simple reason that the latter had already gone and the land was regarded as belonging to nobody.

The Empire moved to encourage Abkhaz ethnic nationalism as a counterweight to Georgian nationalism, which was regarded as more dangerous. As a preventive measure to check growing Georgian influence, strict cultural demarcation between the Georgians and Abkhaz

was imposed. Previously their elites (the noblemen) had many points of contact, not to mention ties of blood and friendship. Zurab Anchabadze, the noted Abkhazian historian, gives a typical example of this policy, quoting a report by an Imperial civil servant at the beginning of this century: "of course the Abkhazian language, being unwritten and having no literature, is doomed to disappear in the more or less immediate future. The question is which language will replace it? Obviously the vehicle for bringing cultural ideas and concepts to the population should be the Russian language, not the Georgian. It appears to me, therefore that establishing a written Abkhaz language should not be an end in itself but merely a means of weakening, by way of church and school, the demand for the Georgian language and gradually replacing it by the state [Russian] language".^[23] Hence the Abkhaz alphabet, based on Cyrillic, was introduced (the Georgian language has used its own alphabet since the 5th century A.D.) and in 1912 the first work of Abkhaz literature was published. The creation of a written Abkhazian language and the emergence of a nation should only be welcomed. The only problem is that the tsarist government gave that positive process an imperial slant: "divide and rule".

The repressions of the Stalinist era damaged all Soviet peoples almost equally: the losses of the Georgians, particularly the intelligentsia, were no less proportionally than those of any other Soviet nation. It is hard to say that the terror was aimed specifically at the numerically small Abkhaz nation and might have led to their numerical decline. Statistics show the contrary: in two years, from January 1937 to 1939, i.e. when repression was at its height, the number of Abkhaz increased by 1.8%.^[24] Of course, the Abkhaz also were victims of totalitarianism, particularly in the 1940s and at the beginning of the 1950s, when the total lawlessness of the Soviet authorities in relation to entire nations or subethnic groups (deportation of some North Caucasian peoples, Crimean Tatars, Volga Germans, Meskhetian Muslims, Pontic Greeks, and so on) affected the Abkhaz as well, who were subjected to certain attempts to assimilate them to the Georgians. I wish to express my abhorrence at all this, so that there are no misunderstandings. The historical memory of such events is damaging to mutual understanding among peoples.

However, in spite of the widely-held view, this was not an exceptional phenomenon "started by the Georgians Stalin and Beria" who, they say, practised a sort of "Georgian chauvinism" in Abkhazia. Without wishing to defend these individuals in any way it should first be said that in reconstructing the empire Stalin was indifferent to the fate of small nations, whether they were the Georgians, Abkhaz or any others: if he had thought that the Abkhaz were a threat to HIS Empire he would not have bothered with a prolonged process of assimilation, but would simply have ordered their deportation, as in the case of the much more numerous Chechens. Secondly, under Stalin there were similar processes in other republics: for example, many Iranian-speaking Kurds, Tats and Talishs were assimilated to Turkic-speaking Azeris^[25] and the ethnic consciousness of the Ingilos (Muslim Georgians) in the then Azerbaijan SSR was eroded, although the "Father of the nations" was not an Azeri. The process of russifying certain Ugro-Finnish nations was under way: as the Russian demographer V. Kozlov wrote

among the nations in autonomous republics of the RSFSR...the processes of transition to another language, usually Russian, increased on the whole in the period from 1926 to 1959. The proportion of those who replaced their mother tongue was particularly high among the Mordva (from 6 to 22%) and Karelians (from 4.5 to 28.7%).^[26]

The Soviet authorities obviously took the view, though without advertising this doctrine, that small nations should merge with the larger Soviet Republic titular nations, in order to "consolidate" the latter in the future to form a kind of "Soviet supnation". In the 1970s, the birth of a "new historical community - the Soviet people" was announced, the obvious assumption being that it would be Russian-speaking. Fortunately, by this time mass repressions were no longer being practised and the regime did not particularly pursue the russification of the "Soviet people", although this process was encouraged. Russification especially affected small nations, including the Abkhaz, which are, on the whole rightly, regarded as Russian speakers. (This is specifically stressed by the Russian nationalists who appeal for their "protection" outside the borders of Russia, which is perceived by other nations, also rightly, as "neo-imperialism".)

However, even under Stalinism relations at the personal level between the Abkhaz and Georgians were fairly close. This is indicated by the widespread intermarriages and even the assimilation of a certain proportion of Georgians into the Abkhaz cultural environment, especially in rural areas. Obviously this is why many Abkhaz have Georgian surnames and Georgian roots: this is a normal process of ethnic interaction. Incidentally there has been practically no process of assimilation of the Abkhaz by Georgians in the Autonomous Republic. Although there was a cultural take-over of ethnic groups living in Abkhazia, this was entirely based on the Russian language. This affected most Abkhaz and many of the local Georgians: among the children of the latter the proportion of those studying in Russian schools was almost 3.5 times higher than in the rest of Georgia, where most Georgian children were taught in their mother tongue.^[27] Russian was used as the actual lingua franca in Abkhazia and in practice no-one was putting Georgian forward as such (although it was regarded as the state language throughout Georgia).

The settlement of Georgians and Abkhaz in the Autonomous Republic was a patchwork, and interethnic cultural and economic contacts were intensive. According to data for 1989, only the Gali district was practically mono-ethnic: the Georgians accounted for over 93% there. Only in the Gudauta district was there a majority of the Abkhaz (53%; the local Armenians accounted for 15% and the Russians and Georgians for 13-14% each) and Georgians were in the majority in the Gulripshi district (53%, followed by Armenians - 25% and Russians - 13%; the proportion of the Abkhaz here was a mere 2.4%). In the remaining towns and districts no one ethnic group accounted for more than half: the Georgians had a relative majority in the city of Sukhumi (42%, followed by 22% Russians and 13% Abkhazians), while the Abkhaz predominated in the city of Tkvarcheli (42%, with 24% each of Russians and Georgians). Georgians predominated in the rural district of Ochamchira (40%, followed by 37% Abkhaz) and in the Sukhumi rural district (44%, with 29% Armenians, 10% Greeks, 7% Russians and 5% Abkhaz). In the territory of the Gagra City Council Armenians, Georgians and Russians were more or less equal in number - 24-29% each - while the Abkhaz there accounted for 9%.^[28] Leaving out the monoethnic Gali region, the historical site of settlement of a Georgian subethnic group (Megrelians), there were 160,000 Georgians, or 36% of the total population, in the rest of the territory of Abkhazia. The Abkhaz accounted for 20% and Armenians, Russians, Greeks and others for 44%.

It can be argued that "the Georgian demographic problem" for the ethnic Abkhaz was relative rather than absolute: the absorption of the latter by the Georgians was not a real danger. If there was a linguistic conflict it was between Russian and Georgian, not between Abkhaz and Georgian. The real problem was political, not demographic. The civil war helped to make the interethnic conflict much worse, to the point where representatives of

the different communities said that living together in one town, village or region was impossible. The property of many families from both sides was looted, burned or taken over; many houses abandoned by fleeing families are now occupied by families of other nationalities. The process of restoring peace and order may be very long and difficult. It is even possible that, after the IDPs return to Abkhazia, separate settlement of the ethnic communities may be a panacea for a while to allow wounds to heal and gradually restore confidence at the personal level. And there is no doubt that such confidence existed previously.

It should be noted that the standard stereotype of an Abkhaz among the Georgians is a positive one, because it is created on the basis of classic Georgian literature, in which the Abkhaz are represented as noble, hospitable and brave people. Even at the height of the civil war there was no anti-Abkhaz hysteria, and in Georgia proper and particularly in Tbilisi there were no anti-Abkhaz slogans to be seen; the fairly free Georgian press often stressed the positive features in relations between Abkhaz and Georgians (even during the military operations and the subsequent ethnic cleansing of Georgians in Abkhazia), and many atrocities in the war were ascribed, possibly without foundation, to alien, unknown "North Caucasians" and persons of other nationalities, but not to the ethnic Abkhaz.

There were no direct contacts between most Georgians from the rest of Georgia and the Abkhaz if the former did not travel to particular regions of Abkhazia, so that the mythological stereotypes remained alive. On the other hand, the majority of the Abkhaz were in contact with Georgians. This does not imply the creation of a priori negative opinions about each other; most probably there were many more pleasant than unpleasant episodes at personal inter-ethnic contact level: the general Caucasian traditions of hospitality, neighbourly solidarity and feasting are typical of both the Abkhaz and the Georgians.

Perfectly reasonable questions may arise on reading the above: "What is going on? Is it possible that the conflict arose without cause? Did someone stir it up? Is only 'the hand of the Kremlin' to blame again?" The answer may be that of course the Kremlin had a hand in the conflict. However, this cannot be the complete explanation for the conflict, which had ripened over a period of decades. It became particularly acute in 1989, when the Abkhaz political and intellectual elite appealed to Moscow demanding secession from Georgia: the Appeal was signed by many ethnic Abkhaz. This led to an escalation of the conflict, and large-scale disorder claiming many victims. On the surface of the conflict there were visible ethno-cultural differences (but these were not decisive), problems of ethno-demographic change (a fairly frequent argument by the Abkhaz) and wounded national pride (on both sides). The pattern of Abkhaz thought might have been approximately as follows: "we are few, and the Georgians are many; they do not give us our lawful statehood; we must neutralise them with the aid of Russia, giving Russia jurisdiction over our territory". The pattern of thought among the local Georgians might have been something like this: "the Abkhaz are a minority but they are oppressing us, the majority; they want to create their own separate state illegally out of our territory or to seize our land for the benefit of Russia, where we will be an unprotected minority".

Although there was an obvious clash of interests, such ideas could not in themselves lead to conflict, still less to warfare, until they became public property and a "guide to action": someone really must have needed the ideas to begin "to work for conflict". It is clear who could gain from inciting conflict from without, especially after the Georgian national

liberation movement (or "Georgian nationalism"^[29]) had begun to gather momentum since 1987 and, in the fully justified opinion of Kremlin analysts, began to threaten the established order in the USSR: the old imperialist motto "divide and rule" is as true as ever it was! However, even the imported seeds of conflict need local soil, and local gardeners even more. Someone from within must deliberately guide the situation towards conflict.

It is easy to ascribe the complications in inter-ethnic relations to the completely visible actions and widely read works of the intellectual elites, above all the historians, whose profession is "constantly to re-open old wounds so that the nation is always on the alert" and no less to writers and journalists who cannot, of course, keep silent if "the other side has written something wrong" and immediately call upon public opinion, which instantly heats up. The more a writer or scholar is a "patriot", the less he may feel bound to ensure the validity of his sources, relying mainly on emotion. This affects both sides, Abkhaz and Georgians. However, the somewhat trivial view seems to be more accurate: the conflict was most probably stirred up by ethnic political elites (nomenklatura), each wanting "a bigger slice of the national cake": the undercover fight of the bureaucratic (nomenklatura) bulldogs of various shades in Abkhazia was always because of the high and obviously highly profitable posts, while academics and poets merely ennobled this fight.

As a result of the civil war the ethnic Abkhaz elite does not have to share power either with the Georgians or with anyone else. Ideally, under democratic conditions, moral and professional qualities should play a part in the election of a politician, not national allegiance. Unfortunately such an ideal position is a long way off (and not only in Abkhazia or Georgia, but also in many quite highly developed countries).

The Political-Geographical Background

It seems preferable to consider many geopolitical issues at the regional, all-Caucasian level. In the course of the last five centuries the Caucasus has been a subject of dispute and an area of expansion involving three regional superpowers - the Russian empire (tsarist, Soviet), the Ottoman empire and the Persian empire. During the past two centuries the dominant power in the Caucasus has been Russia, which became a world superpower in the 20th century. Even now, when the Soviet Union has disintegrated, Russia regards the three states of the Transcaucasus as its "near abroad", maintaining military bases in two of them (Armenia, Georgia) and retaining control over their external frontiers, actually limiting their sovereignty.

It is natural that Russia, in spite of a policy that is sometimes contradictory and outwardly inconsistent, has an interest in its own military security in the region and therefore views any internal conflicts in the Transcaucasus from this position. Influential politicians in Moscow (but not all of them) take the view that the conflict in Abkhazia is not a real threat to the security of Russia, since both parties to it rely on preferential aid from the latter. Russia can therefore allow itself to help both sides in escalating the conflict and then delay its settlement, justifying this by the "fear of complicating its relations with nations of the Northern Caucasus" (many of which are sensitive towards the measures against their kinsfolk - the Abkhaz). On the other hand wise Russian politicians cannot fail to see that the example of Abkhaz secessionism, should it ultimately succeed, may be followed in the Russian Northern Caucasus. Incidentally the best Chechen fighters received their baptism of fire in the Abkhaz civil war, where they fought against the Georgians alongside many

ethnic Russian troops (officially retired), and later successfully used the weapons and military know-how gained with their assistance against Moscow.

Small states always have to take international interests into account to a greater extent than the dominant powers^[30] although the latter also are obliged to respect general interests. Therefore relations between the centre of such a small state and its secessionist regions cannot always be settled at the bilateral level. Even when the parties declare "Their firm intention" they are in fact taking the prevailing international situation into account and hope to use it to their advantage. In this sense, if we view the position objectively, a recognised state usually has more possibilities than its breakaway province: even in spite of possible military successes the latter will be able to resist for just as long as the central government takes to arrange its relations with the stronger power that has decided to act as "referee". These relations can be arranged through specific concessions or deals, or through the rivals of that same "referee". Of course, this may take a long time or, in a situation very favourable for the secessionists, may not occur at all. Much depends upon the success of diplomacy.

In our specific case the vital factors in the conflict are geography and economics, not ethnic or political history and they influence policy. Georgia was the only one of the eight southern NIS with access to the open sea. A substantial section of the Eurasian transport corridor (at least in the foreseeable future) will pass through its territory (possibly even through Abkhazia). If it is in Russia's interest to reap the benefit of this corridor, political stability in the region will serve its purpose. Conversely, if it sees no advantage in it Russia can use the "ethnic conflict" trump card, especially close to its borders. Some Moscow political scientists (who did not wish to be named) openly urged the Russian government to stir up these conflicts artificially.^[31]

Under present conditions practically all the NIS have to manoeuvre, in order to avoid directly confronting the former centre of empire, where a new "Monroe doctrine", while not declared by the official executive authority, is being implemented in practice by the legislative authority.^[32] The geopolitical location of the NIS and their regions can explain much in this context: both the international relations of each of them and the practical results of those relations.

It is quite natural for Russia to devote more attention to Abkhazia, which has a direct frontier with the Russian Federation and whose resorts have traditionally been the holiday destinations of Moscow's political, and more importantly military, elite (according to the press, Russian generals still use these resorts extensively and own holiday houses there^[33]), than to other ethnic regions in the "near abroad"

Russia must not be regarded as some kind of "evil genius" who just wants to spoil things for Georgia or as too large to bother to keep a close eye on Georgia, or still less Abkhazia. Inconsistency in Transcaucasian policy is just an illusion: Russia wants safe borders, and artificially creating enemies for itself, even in the form of small states, cannot be in its interests. Russia would prefer Georgia to be tied to its policy and regards Abkhazia as a "good hook" to prevent Georgia from straying too far. But a strategic partnership with Georgia, if the latter always feels humbled and deprived of its rightful heritage, will be an unreliable one. Probably Russia simply "didn't have time" to settle the conflict. But the longer it takes to find time, the greater the number of other candidates for strategic partnership.

The actual possibility of other countries in the region influencing the settlement of the conflict at the moment are limited. Turkey, which has quickly become a leading power in the Black Sea area, even if inherently interested in extending its influence in the Caucasus, has expressed no intention of interfering in what it may regard as "an internal affair of the CIS". The world powers, even further from the region, initially confined themselves to playing the part of detached observer. "In the early years of the post-cold war period, Western governments failed to develop a clear regional concept of the Caucasus within the framework of their European security policies. Their interest in the region remained marginal. Their Caucasian policies were subordinated to their relations with Turkey and, especially, Russia."^[34] However, after the autumn of 1994, when the western countries' interest in developing Caspian oil began to increase sharply, their interest in Caucasian politics increased also. The issue of the route for transporting the oil and building pipelines went beyond purely economic decisions and became an issue of high policy. It is probable that Georgia's territory will be chosen for routing pipelines vital to the West.

On the other hand, as Coppieters states:

The issues of the oil wealth in the Caspian Sea and the routing of pipelines have dual consequences. On the one hand, they make the pacification of this region by international agreements more imperative, while, at the same time, they increase destabilization by generating fierce international competition among those attempting to gain a foothold there. In the long term, the economic interests of all the players involved in the Caucasus lie in the lasting settlement of the main ethnic conflicts. This does not mean that any of these players is prepared to accept such pacification unconditionally, or that they are all pursuing a foreign policy based on primary economic interests.^[35]

The new political realities in the Caucasus clearly increase the opportunity for foreign policy tactics for Georgia somewhat. Abkhazia, however, can only count on Russia, which in turn must want to "keep Georgia on the Abkhazian hook". If this becomes unnecessary, because a strategic partnership with Georgia will be guaranteed without it, or Russia cannot do this because circumstances (for example, domestic difficulties or active intervention by international organisations) will not allow it to continue such a policy, Russia may cease its actual support for Abkhazia. Most probably Russia will not give up its traditional "hook" so easily, but may relax the tension on the line, the more so because an economic interest for Russian capital may be found in Georgia.

In the case of Georgia, foreign policy diversification is becoming a vital priority. The steady though slow movement towards democracy, the achievement of internal political stability, the signs of economic revival and the definite marginalisation of radical nationalism are helping to increase international interest in Georgia. If its internal conflicts end happily this will enhance Georgia's investment value and may bring peace and welfare to all parts of it, including Abkhazia.

It is obvious that neither side is interested in resuming the war. An unbiased and impartial negotiator is essential for a peaceful solution to the conflict, a part that could be played by international organisations. As for internal political geography, Tbilisi is definitely ready to overcome bitter internal opposition to the federalisation of Georgia and to offer Abkhazia a special status (and more rights and guarantees for the Abkhaz) within a single state - an "asymmetrical federation". The recognition of Abkhazia (actually - the ethnic Abkhazians) and the rest of Georgia as equal partners in the federation (actually a confederation) which

is presented as a "concession" from the Abkhaz side, is equivalent to the recognition of Abkhazia's independence and is unacceptable to Tbilisi and to Georgian public opinion. Above all, in Georgia there are other ethnic regions which would like to have a similar status, and this is the route to disintegration of the state.

On the other hand it is understandable that Sukhumi is not ready to accept the proposal of a "special status for Abkhazia within a single Georgia", to let the refugees and IDPs return (there is a quite understandable fear of these people returning to their houses - destroyed or taken over by other families). The "burden of victory" outweighs any economic or other proposal based on rationality: it might be difficult to explain to the local public, still influenced by the euphoria of "military achievements", the necessity for real concessions to prevent a resumption of the war, especially when there is always faith in "invisible hand of the elder brother" which will come and help at the proper time. Nevertheless it is not always necessary to be defeated in order to learn something: the decision-makers must find the courage to persuade their people to look the future in the face and to come to a compromise.

Conclusion

Of the hypotheses set out above, the more self-evident seems to me to be that a single economic space will be advantageous to all of Georgia, including Abkhazia. The international community would also prefer to deal with a single Georgia rather than with several creatures of international law that are too small, the more so because the division of one country always revives the "domino effect". In addition, stability and peace in the region are guarantees of safety for foreign investments. The possibility that Russia will find a profitable economic niche in the Transcaucasus cannot be ruled out. In addition Russia will be able to guarantee its strategic security in the region by collaborating with Georgia on an equal footing, not by confrontation.

Theoretically there are no serious obstacles to finding common points of contact between the Georgian and Abkhaz nations. However, the assumption that it will be relatively easy to overcome the psychological problems of coexistence is not really justified: inter-ethnic relations have been seriously damaged by the civil war and its consequences to the point of incompatibility, which we hope is temporary. Perhaps initially, after the refugees and IDPs have returned to Abkhazia, it will be better if conditions can be created for the two ethnic groups to live apart temporarily (e.g. in separate villages, towns or districts). From this point of view international organisations (e.g. by way of police forces to maintain public order) may be particularly helpful.

The greatest problem in settling the conflict arises from the issue of Abkhazia's political status and the geopolitical calculations of the third force. Restoring the territorial integrity of the single state is the aim of the Tbilisi government, while Sukhumi regards this as unacceptable. International organisations and the world community as a whole may play a decisive part in settling the conflict.

1. Actually economic sanctions imposed according to the decision of the Council of the Heads of State of CIS on 19 January, 1996 forbidding economic and other contacts with this secessionist region without the permission of the Government of Georgia. Lifting the

sanctions is being linked to serious efforts to settle the conflict, primarily the return of internally displaced persons, mostly of Georgian nationality, who were driven from the region as a result of the civil war, and guaranteeing their safety.

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