

Abkhazians and Their Neighbours  
George Hewitt  
(Istanbul Conference 30-31 May 2009)

Nobody who was fortunate enough to find themselves in Abkhazia on the afternoon of the 26th August 2008 is ever likely to forget the exhilarating outburst of sheer delight that exploded in the streets after Russia's President Dmitry Medvedev's declaration in the Kremlin at 3pm that Russia finally recognised Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. This followed the hostilities that broke out in/around S. Ossetia late on Thursday the 7th August and the subsequent expulsion of Georgian forces, illegally introduced in 2006 into Abkhazia's Upper K'odor Valley by Georgia's President Mikheil Saak'ashvili, on the following Tuesday (12th August). Despite these military and political achievements (subsequent recognition from Nicaragua being a small additional bonus), many (if not most) of the problems facing Abkhazia and the Abkhazians since the war of 1992-93 remain. This means that there will be a continuation of the need to present the same arguments as previously in order to persuade the international community to understand, as Russia did in 2008, that the solution to the problem of Abkhazia's relations with neighbouring Georgia must begin by accepting that two states are involved in this dispute and that no progress in ameliorating their inter-state relationship is possible without recognition of Abkhazia's independence.

Apart from the simple fact of recognition by Russia, one other significant change has occurred. This is the greater level of security against Georgian military adventurism that the defence-treaty with Russia and the consequent presence of Russian land-, air- and sea-forces in Abkhazia should provide. But this situation by itself is hardly satisfactory, allowing for the familiar (if erroneous) charge that the Abkhazians have achieved their goal of gaining entry into the Russian Federation by the back door. Whilst it is true that at the time of socio-political unrest throughout Abkhazia in 1978 some 130 intellectuals wrote to the Kremlin requesting that Abkhazia be removed from Georgian jurisdiction and placed under Moscow's control, there was no alternative way for Abkhazians to express their continuing disquiet with the subordination to Tbilisi that Georgian Stalin had imposed on them in 1931, for the Soviet Union was then shewing no signs of imminent (or future) collapse. It did not mean that the Abkhazians yearned to become just another tiny ethnic region in the vastness that was (and still is) the Russia Federation, and such a status for their homeland is not what the Abkhazians desire today. So, what specific recommendations can one offer for consideration in the current climate?

Minor irritations for the Abkhazians are likely to occur for the foreseeable future as regards the treatment afforded to their country in works of reference. These need to

be challenged wherever they arise — if no-one speaks up, no-one will sense the need to take corrective measures. In the case of entries in encyclopaedias or, indeed, of scholarly articles or monographs, authors are free to describe as many aspects of the situation as their own prejudices and publisher-imposed word-limits allow, but what about maps? This question arises out of the way Abkhazia is presented to the world in the latest edition (the 12th) of the highly authoritative Times Atlas of the World, which I happened to acquire just before writing this paper (in mid-March this year). Because the majority of the international community has decreed that (in its wisdom) Abkhazia is part of Georgia, the cartographers, now that Georgia is independent, obviously consulted some Georgian source. The result is that the country-name 'Abkhazia' appears only in brackets beneath the Georgian designation /Apkhazeti/; 'Apsny' is nowhere to be seen. Whilst many of us are accustomed to arguing for 'Sukhum' (as against 'Sukhumi'), the capital is here designated /Sokhumi/, and again 'Aq<sup>w</sup>'a' is absent. For 'Afon CH'yts' (most familiar, perhaps, according to its Russian name of 'Novyj Afon') we have /Akhali Aponi/, and for 'Amzara', the divine holiday-resort usually called 'Pitsunda', there appears /Bich'vinta/, which will baffle everyone outside the Georgian-speaking community. In addition to these specific toponyms, Georgian terms besmirch the map for such geographical features as: 'ridge' = /kedi/, 'reserve' = /nak'rdzali/, 'promontory, headland' = /k'ontskhi/, and 'mountain' = /mta/. This abomination (compounded by the narrowly linguistic retrograde step of using the apostrophe, normally the mark of glottalisation, to indicate aspiration, quite the opposite of usual practice) will remain as a misrepresentation of Abkhazian statehood until at least the next edition of the Atlas, and probably even longer than that, unless the international community overturns the error it committed in 1992 by recognising Georgia within its Soviet (Stalinist) frontiers and follows Russia's lead in recognising the Republic of Abkhazia and re-recognising Georgia within reduced (but more legitimate) borders.

Whatever the one-time ethnic constituency of Abkhazia might historically have been, it rapidly became a multiethnic territory once the bulk of the indigenous population crossed the Black Sea to Ottoman lands following the end of the Great Caucasian War in 1864 and a second migration after the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-8. And so, the immediate neighbours to whom the Abkhazians have to look are those ethnic groups with whom they share their republic. By and large, relations with two of the largest groups, the Russians and the Armenians, are unproblematic. The local *lingua franca* remains what it was in Soviet times, namely Russian, and the Armenians (to say nothing of the Russians, obviously!) do not object to this; also, neither of these ethnic groups has supported Georgia throughout the years of conflict (whether during the hot or cold periods). The availability of teaching in both Russian and Armenian seems not to be an issue, although, as the Armenian community grows,

provision might have to be re-assessed. The same cannot be said of the Kartvelian section of the population, which almost wholly consists of ethnic Mingrelians, whose home-language is Mingrelian.

I have already made suggestions within Abkhazia concerning the language-rights of the Mingrelian community resident there, predominantly in the Gal District. In a sentence, the recommendation I proposed some years ago was that they be allowed the right to be educated through the medium of Georgian (and, contrary to widespread belief, tuition in Georgian in Gal is NOT prohibited, as is often claimed), if that is their wish (as indeed it seems to be), on condition that Mingrelian is also taught to some (to be determined) level of proficiency. Text-books could be provided from Georgia, APART from any publications in such sensitive areas as history, geography or philology where there is deliberate distortion of the facts within these disciplines pertaining to Abkhazia (along the lines of the notorious Ingoroq'va hypothesis). Knut Vollebaek, the OSCE High Commissioner on National Minorities, has already offered assistance to the Abkhazian government by way of facilitating the printing of textbooks in Georgian which would present accurate views in the relevant areas. As it happens, on the very day that I was writing these lines (23rd March), it was brought to my attention that the previous day Georgian journalist Ek'a K'evanishvili had written about what she claimed to be attempts to ban the use of Georgian for teaching in the Gal District and to impose the use of Russian for the purpose, adding, with a huge sense of irony, that any history and/or geography textbooks translated from Russian into Georgian courtesy of OSCE would be biased in favour of the 'Abkhazian' interpretation (see: [http://www.rferl.org/Teachers\\_In\\_Abkhazia's\\_Gali\\_District\\_Under\\_Pressure\\_To\\_Give\\_U\\_Georgian\\_Language?1514767.html](http://www.rferl.org/Teachers_In_Abkhazia's_Gali_District_Under_Pressure_To_Give_U_Georgian_Language?1514767.html)); the author of this article also speaks of the native language of the Gal Mingrelians as being 'Georgian', another tritely familiar distortion of reality. One of the reasons I hold to the above-opinion is my firm belief that, just as Georgia at the time it was pressing for its own independence back in the late 1980s should have followed a course that would have united all the disparate peoples living within its Soviet borders (whereas it behaved in exactly the opposite way and alienated its non-Kartvelian citizenry), so Abkhazia needs to have all its citizens firmly behind its moves to build a secure, stable and successful modern independent state. In other words, it is not the failed Georgian model of exclusivity that should be followed, but inclusivity should rather be the order of the day, so that all residents, including the Mingrelian population, become willing rather than grudging citizens, proud to own an Abkhazian passport for its own sake and not just as a means of acquiring Russian travel-documents (and pensions). Moreover, Abkhazia's internal security will be better safeguarded, if a permanently disaffected minority is not accommodated within it.

I can well imagine that some people are perhaps thinking to themselves at this point that Abkhazia would be in a better position without any Kartvelians within it whatsoever. That would be a dangerous proposition. Already the world, to the extent that it is aware of Abkhazia at all, is largely of the opinion that the majority of the Kartvelian population was forcibly expelled from Abkhazia at the end of the war in 1993, and this charge of 'ethnic cleansing' (regularly accompanied by grossly inflated figures for the number of refugees) has been made at every turn, as it serves the Georgian propaganda-goal of painting themselves as victims and Abkhazians as racist aggressors (a total reversal of the actual situation). Contemporary reports which cast suspicion on, or deny, these claims are ignored and/or forgotten. One such is the report of the UN mission to Abkhazia in October-November 1993, issued on 23rd Nov that year, which declares: 'In addition to the loss of numerous lives, the conflict has led to the almost complete devastation of vast areas of the country and massive displacement of population, entailing extreme hardship and suffering. There are indications, in the latter connection, that during the administration of the area between the Gumista and Inguri Rivers by Georgian government representatives, a large number of Abkhazians had left. Conversely, entire regions, such as Gali and Ochamchira, have now been deserted by almost all of their Georgian (Mingrelian) population, which had constituted a large majority there, and most Georgians also appear to have left Sukhumi', but the crucial observation comes in the next few words: 'ON THE BASIS OF THE INFORMATION COLLECTED, THE MISSION WAS NOT IN A POSITION TO ASCERTAIN WHETHER IT HAD BEEN AN ACTIVELY PURSUED POLICY OF THE AUTHORITIES OF EITHER SIDE, AT ANY TIME, TO CLEAR THE AREAS UNDER THEIR CONTROL OF EITHER THE ABKHAZIAN OR THE GEORGIAN POPULATION' (Para. 52 — stresses added). Another is the second Unrepresented Nations & Peoples' Organisation (UNPO) report from Abkhazia based on its mission of November-December 1993, which, whilst admitting: 'When Abkhazian troops entered Sukhum(,) many civilians were killed. Similar incidents occurred in other parts of Abkhazia', nevertheless goes on to state: 'THE MAJORITY OF GEORGIANS, HOWEVER, FLED BEFORE ABKHAZIAN AND NORTH CAUCASIAN TROOPS ARRIVED' [see Pauline Overeem *Report of a UNPO coordinated human rights mission to Abkhazia and Georgia*, in **Central Asian Survey** 14,1, March 1995, pp.127-154 — stresses added]. In other words, population-movements leaving areas formerly occupied in large numbers by a particular ethnic group denuded of that group are one thing; such a fact of movement does not automatically mean that it came about by force, which is what I understand the term 'ethnic cleansing' (incorporating the transitive verb 'cleanse') to mean. Georgia went down the wrong path when the creation of its own independence

was on the agenda (and continues to travel along it); Abkhazia absolutely must not commit (or even giving the appearance of committing) that same error.

The afore-mentioned OSCE High Commissioner, Knut Vollebaek, after a visit to Secondary School No.2 in the town of Gal in 2008 referred to discontent among the children there of the Abkhazian authorities' attempts to impose a Mingrelian identity and the Mingrelian language across the whole district via the educational system. This sounds very much like a criticism of the proposal I have advocated, as noted above, for some years. However, since my proposal has not, as far as I am aware, been put into practice, I am not entirely sure what 'attempts' the High Commissioner has in mind here. Let me take this opportunity openly to agree that imposition of a nationality is wrong, but encouragement (I would argue) is entirely acceptable. I shall no doubt be corrected, if I am mistaken, but Abkhazians do not regard Mingrelians as Georgians — it is the inculcation of a Georgian identity among the Mingrelians over the last 80 years, achieved partly as a result of the denial of official 'literary language' status to Mingrelian, that should be regarded as an example of the imposition of an ethnic identity in practice. Historically, Mingrelians provided a buffer between the Abkhazians and the Georgians (properly so called), and it is in the interests of the Abkhazians to have Mingrelians serving as some sort of buffer once again. Before they can play this role, they have to rediscover pride in their Mingrelian language and the associated Mingrelian culture, and what I am suggesting is that Abkhazia should actively engage in encouraging this process. I need immediately also to stress that this idea is in no way part of any devious goal of inciting Mingrelian separatism within Georgia itself in the short, medium or even long term. That would be in nobody's interests and would certainly lead to further bloodshed in the region.

Even before the war of 1992-93 I was discussing the possibility that Abkhazia might act in some way to rekindle a sense of Mingrelian identity among the Mingrelians, but what I was told was that this was far too dangerous a move to contemplate, however sympathetic my interlocutors might have been to the basic idea itself. The danger they had in mind was the risk of hostilities with Georgia. Well, those hostilities befell Abkhazia regardless, and now, I feel, it is time to do more than publish the trilingual newspaper *Gal*, excellent though I have always thought this undertaking to be.

In 2008 I was told that, as a result of the use of Mingrelian in the *Gal* newspaper, a parallel venture had been started across the Ingur in Mingrelia. Once the reported plans to initiate broadcasting in Mingrelian in the Gal District are in place, this facility should be used not just for entertainment but to provide a platform for discussion of (a) the distinctiveness of the Mingrelian language and culture, (b) the gains that would follow from Mingrelians renewing their pride in that language and culture in terms of the greater likelihood of the preservation of the language, and (c)

the positive role that Mingrelians might play in the future of Abkhazia<sup>1</sup>. If the existence of the *Gal* newspaper has had its influence inside Mingrelia, what might follow from this larger scale encouragement of mingrelianism by the Abkhazians?

But it is not just Mingrelians who reside as neighbours to the Abkhazians on the south-eastern front. Georgians will always be there in the background, and at some stage relations will have to be normalised with Tbilisi. Assuming that the Abkhazians agree that their relations with Georgians would improve, if Mingrelians resumed their historical role as buffers, then stating this openly could be part of the general campaign I am advocating that Abkhazians should consider undertaking to raise Mingrelian self-awareness. In this regard, it would be appropriate for Abkhazian politicians and opinion-formers to start debating how the possibility of normalisation of relations with Tbilisi would be improved, if Georgia were to federalise. Such restructuring of the state is, of course, precisely what the leadership in Tbilisi should have contemplated and articulated in the days when Soviet Georgia was moving towards independence, and then they should actually have effected such restructuring once independence was achieved. It goes without saying that it is too late to attract Abkhazia back within any Georgian fold (federalised or otherwise), but there are excellent reasons why Tbilisi should be considering federalisation for its own good, given the multi-ethnic nature of Georgia even within its post-2008 reduced borders and given the position of two significant minorities (Armenians and Azerbaijanis, to say nothing of the Mingrelians) living compactly in border-areas. A federalised Georgia, with Mingrelia as a meaningful constituent part, would be likely to present less of a threat to Abkhazia, but might there be scope for a wider reorganisation of Transcaucasian polities that would lead to a stabler situation across the region as a whole?

For two decades any mention of Abkhazia and S. Ossetia as Transcaucasian hot-spots has always included in the same breath a third problem-area, namely Nagorno-Karabagh. Leaders/Spokesmen of these three entities would always say, when asked, that it was inconceivable that there could be resolution of one case without the other two. After 26th August 2008, Nagorno-Karabagh remains out of the resolution-loop. Obviously Karabagh is intimately linked to Armenia, and Armenia, flanked by two Turkic states (Turkey to the west and Azerbaijan, its currently 'hotter' foe to the east) plus a millennia-old fellow-christian rival in Georgia to the north, is far from reluctant

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<sup>1</sup>In a little booklet published about a year before his death by one-time Minister of Culture of Abkhazia, Aleksej Argun, entitled 'The Svan and Mingrelians should not be humiliated' (in Russian, Sukhum, 2007) and dealing with aspects of Georgian moves over the decades to keep these communities quiescent in terms of gaining language- (or, worse from the Georgian perspective, political) rights, he quotes the Abkhazian proverb 'A person who has lost his way/identity is a greater danger to himself than 100 enemies' and adds: 'In sum, there is still time to defend the Svans and Mingrelians from being humiliated. As for the Abkhazians and Ossetians, they will look after themselves'.

to enjoy close relations with Russia (and, indeed, with Iran). The Georgians have so antagonised the Abkhazians and the (South) Ossetians these two peoples have had no option but to look to Moscow (especially in view of America's and Europe's obtuse support for Tbilisi, activated the moment Shevaradnadze returned to his former communist fiefdom as a reborn christian, baptised 'Giorgi', at the end of March 1992, and this support has been taken to a deeper level of commitment since it was decided that Georgia would accommodate the pipeline to export Caspian oil to Ceyhan in Turkey). At the close of the conflicts in S. Ossetia and Abkhazia (1992 and 1993, respectively), the international community was perfectly happy to hand Russia the lion's share of the responsibility for peace-keeping along the ceasefire-lines — it was only with the just-mentioned increase in Western interests thanks to the flow of oil that this attitude started to alter, and the Georgian line of demonising Russia's role in the two regions began to be voiced more loudly by Georgia's Western supporters. And, after the cost of its military involvement in August 2008 (including loss of personnel and aircraft) and the subsequent recognition of the two states, Russia is hardly likely to turn its back and withdraw north of the mountains. All of this means that Russia has live concerns (and thus significant interests) in Transcaucasia as a whole, which have to be acknowledged. Might it not, therefore, be possible to construct some sort of new political arrangement for Transcaucasia in which, as a first step, world-wide recognition is immediately awarded to Abkhazia, S. Ossetia AND Nagorno-Karabagh, which would necessitate acceptance of the *de facto* shrinking of the borders of both Georgia and Azerbaijan? The then six Transcaucasian states would then be encouraged and helped to form some sort of regional partnership, possibly to include the North Caucasian states. The three major players (viz. Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia) did not exactly crown themselves in glory when they tried to cooperate in the years between the Russian Revolution and their sovietisation, but this time it would be the international community that would be promoting and aiding the formation of the new cooperative alliance. Russia is envisaged as an active player in this proposed scheme, thereby acquiring the right to safeguard her legitimate interests but unable in any underhand way to work for reestablishing some kind of hegemony over the region because of the counterbalancing role of the West and international insitutions/organisations. As an area of cooperation, Transcaucasia could (and ideally should) be demilitarised, security being externally guaranteed. In an age of increasing globalisation, might this not be a goal worth serious considering at least? Obviously, one is talking of developing a long-term ideal, but the very start of discussions about the ultimate establishment of a harmonious *modus vivendi* could be a way to help reduce tensions and build a basis for trust. Something better than the present situation, with all its obvious attendant fragilities, is certainly desirable, and only when neighbours are convinced that their best option is to work together for everyone's

mutual benefit will stability and prosperity follow. The railway-links will be reopened between Armenia and Azerbaijan, on the one hand, and Russia-Abkhazia-Georgia-Armenia, on the other. The largest airport in the entire Caucasus (at Babushera in Abkhazia) will return to full functionality for the benefit of not just Abkhazia alone (it essentially remained idle from 1993 until Russian flights began in the wake of the fighting in August 2008 — after the shooting in the region had stopped, as I sat by the sea in Sukhum watching as flights took off trailing flares as they rose across the bay, presumably to deflect any anti-aircraft missiles that might have been fired at them, my thoughts took me back to the days when the largest Soviet passenger-aircraft would convey hordes of tourists to and from this most attractive of coastal states. And Ochamchira in perhaps the most desolated region of Abkhazia, as this was the focus of the eastern, will be regenerated as a thriving centre after the development of what has the potential to be the best deep-harbour facility along the whole of the Black Sea's eastern sea-board. Babushera and Ochamchira are, of course, likely to be developed, regardless of any wider changes in the region, because both serve the immediate interests of Russia (and Abkhazia).

One long-term *desideratum* on the part of the Abkhazians is to attract to their historical homeland as many as possible of the descendants of those who migrated in the 19th century to Ottoman lands. The fall of the USSR has facilitated links between the home- and diaspora-communities, and a number have moved to Abkhazia to set up home and indeed businesses. But the war and continuing worries of renewed hostilities have hardly been propitious for realising Abkhazian hopes in this regard. Anything that will contribute to a reduction in tension and render more achievable the goal of peace and prosperity is likely to encourage more diasporan Abkhazians to put their faith in the home-country, relocate there and thus play their part in strengthening Abkhazian numbers. And if Abkhazian numbers start to rise and the Abkhazians have greater confidence that the threat of resurgent Georgian nationalism has disappeared, they might then tolerate the return of more Kartvelian (Mingrelian) refugee-families (even to regions other than the Gal District), though it must by now be clear both to the refugees themselves and to the international community (which has been so critical of Abkhazia over this issue) that the majority of those who took flight in the autumn of 1993 are fated never to return and that they must build permanent lives for themselves in Mingrelia, elsewhere in Georgia, or even beyond its frontiers.

It may be concluded from this presentation that, just as I came to the Caucasus as a romantic in 1975, so I continue to hold romantic hopes of an idyllic future for the region. Whether the ideas I have sketched above are in any practical way feasible, I cannot say, but I encourage political scientists and policy-makers to bring some new thinking to the problems of the region. The last 20 years have been a distraction to those of us whose interests in the Caucasus lie somewhere other than the political

arena, and the sooner (in my case) that I can return to full-time linguistic study, the better!