

Abkhazia: Recent Developments

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On 12th October 1999 Abkhazia declared its independence. It is important to keep this date in mind, for, according to many (typically ill-informed) reports in the Western media, this step had been taken in August 1990 some two years before the start of the war (14th August 1992). But that is just one of the misrepresentations of the Abkhazian position for which I have been trying to provide a corrective over the course of the past 15 years.

The independence-declaration was, in large measure, the result of exasperation at Tbilisi's repeated attempts to frustrate the post-war negotiations. Contrary to what is usually stated, it has not been the Abkhazians who have refused to entertain thoughts of compromise -- one might say that after their military victory (September 1993), they would have been fully entitled to declare immediate independence, and yet they continued to pursue federative possibilities, whilst all that Georgia has to this day offered is a return to essentially the *status quo ante bellum*. After protracted talks and constant last-minute revisions by Georgia, a Protocol was ready for presidential signing in the summer of 1997, and yet at the last minute Tbilisi [sic!] refused (Abkhazian Foreign Ministry Document 325, 25 Dec 1997). Such petty obstructionism continues, for in February 2001 Georgia's then-UN Ambassador, P'et're Chkheidze, refused to sign two draft-documents, claiming them to be 'unacceptable for the government of Georgia'; as Liz Fuller noted in her Radio Liberty report (4.5, 2 Feb 2001): 'Chkheidze's criticism is surprising as the versions of both drafts currently under discussion were proposed by the Georgian side'...

Sadly, very little has altered since the signing of the Moscow accords on 4th April 1994 and the consequent establishment of a 3,000-strong CIS (*de facto* Russian) peace-keeping contingent in the demilitarised zone that extends 12 kilometers on either side of the Abkhaz-Georgian border along the R. Ingur. As the 6-monthly mandate of these forces (along with that for the unarmed multi-national UN observers of UNOMIG) comes up for renewal, one regularly hears demands of various kinds issuing from Georgia relating to such issues as the ethnic composition of the peace-keepers (Ukrainians and Turks would be preferable to Russians for Tbilisi) or their relocation further north to the R. Aaldzga (a.k.a. Ghalidzga) just south of Ochamchira -- these demands tend to be accompanied by threats that Georgia will withdraw its approval for the troops' deployment, but, despite the frequent blasts of such hot air (most recently generated at the end of January this year), the mandate has so far always been extended at the last minute.

Whereas Abkhazia has been desperately trying to come to terms with the aftermath of a bloody war that it did not seek but which the Abkhazians and their various allies fought and won to ensure their physical survival in the face of the ugly chauvinism that had scarred the Georgians' fully understandable drive for national independence from Moscow, there has been nothing but belligerent intransigence on the part of Tbilisi. And it was as a result of Georgian pressure that the nominally CIS blockade of the small republic was imposed in the mid-90s. This has meant that Abkhazia has not had the resources to rebuild its shattered economy that a country victorious in a war imposed upon it might normally have expected to enjoy. And, since the international community in its wisdom and humanity places a higher priority on territorial integrity than the self-determination of minorities, the funding that was deemed to be necessary for Abkhazia's revival (viz. \$187.3m, including such projects as the safeguarding of the water-supply system that is in places in danger of contamination) calculated by the UN Needs Assessment Mission of March 1998 has been withheld until Abkhazia assents to the will of the international community and again places its fate in what are seen as the untrustworthy hands of Tbilisi.

Along with what one might call such 'normal' political pressures, Abkhazia has been subjected to ongoing terrorist-attacks launched from Mingrelia on the Georgian side of the border. The two main groups involved are known as The Forest Brothers (led by Dato Shengelia) and the The White Legion (led by Zurba Samushia) -- a list of casualties arising out of some of the exploits of these formations can be found on the site www.apsny.org. In spite of the anticipated official denials of any governmental links with these organisations, consider the following -- Georgian journalist, Ak'ak'i Mikadze, writing in 'Vremja' (7, of 3 June 1998), boldly stated: "The Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of State Security actively support the partisan groupings operating in the Gal Region [sc. southernmost district of Abkhazia]. For example, fighters from the division called 'The Forest Brothers' officially receive wages of 200 lari (about 150 dollars), whilst their commander, criminal authority David Shengelia receives 300 lari (about 220 dollars). The division supposedly numbers about 700, for whom wages and allowances are set aside from the budget." A report on Georgia from Amnesty International in August 1998 stated: "To Amnesty International's knowledge...no criminal proceedings have been initiated against any suspects although some have a high profile locally, or in the press. In the western town of Zugdidi, for example, close to the Inguri river border, men said to be local commanders of the White Legion reportedly move openly around the town and surrounding areas, with the tacit approval of the local authorities. Members of armed groups are said to have given press interviews during the May fighting in Gal, and the leader of the White Legion, Zurab Samushia, is regularly quoted by domestic and international media. He was, for example, interviewed and photographed by the

British daily 'The Guardian' in June [13th June 1998] while he was recuperating in Tbilisi from a leg wound sustained in the fighting. In that interview Zurab Samushia claimed that the White Legion had 'executed' 47 members of the CIS peacekeeping forces..." On 14th November 2002 the Institute for War & Peace Reporting noted that Shengelia was given an official post in the exiled Georgian government of Abkhazia, headed by Tamaz Nadareishvili, who has consistently been urging, even at respected international venues, a resumption of the armed conflict with Abkhazia since the ending of the war in 1993 -- Shengelia said he would continue his partisan activities. Further indication of the involvement of the authorities in Tbilisi in such nefarious deeds was the appearance in the upper reaches of the K'odor valley, home to Abkhazia's Svan population, of hundreds of armed Chechens in the autumn of 2001 -- they could not have traversed virtually the whole of Georgia from the P'ank'isi Gorge in eastern Georgia without at the very least some sort of official sanction. After their arrival in the K'odor, a UN helicopter was shot down with the loss of all on board, and attacks on a couple of Armenian populated villages ensued with loss of life. Furthermore, the Radio Liberty Caucasus Report (6.5, 30 Jan 2003) quotes Georgian Parliamentary Speaker, Nino Burdzhaneladze, as likening Shengelia to Zoja Kosmodemjanska, a Ukrainian girl who died of torture under the Nazis in World War II rather than reveal the whereabouts of a group of partisans and who thus achieved the status in the postwar USSR of a national heroine.

The last outbreak of serious fighting, alluded to above in the Amnesty quotation, took place in May 1998 in certain villages close to the Ingur-border when Abkhazian volunteers responded to the emergency presented by fighters amassing there on the Abkhazian side of the border. The incident is normally referred to as a 'further' case of 'ethnic cleansing', though an anonymous military observer was cited at the time as saying that, however unfortunate in terms of the suffering imposed on those local Mingrelians whose homes were destroyed, the Abkhazian response was a classic case of dealing with such a threat, namely clearing all places where opposing forces could find concealment.

So, what can one say of other developments over recent months? It is impossible to avoid mentioning the health-problems of the Abkhazian leader, Vladislav Ardzinba. For about 3 years rumours have circulated about what might be the cause of his apparent difficulties in controlling his speech; neurological problems of some sort seem to be the cause rather than a brain-tumour, as initially suspected. For quite a time during 2002 his wife's cousin Anri Dzhergenia, the former Abkhazian procurator and long-time adviser to the President, served as Prime Minister. During his premiership Russia made it possible for Abkhazian citizens to acquire Russian passports. This permitted Abkhazians, who had previously been virtually cut off from the outside-world through lack of passports acceptable to states other than Russia,

once again to travel beyond Russia itself -- for a period after the war, Turkey had accepted newly issued Abkhazian passports, and a popular boat-service had run between Sukhum and Trebizond until stopped in late 1995; most Abkhazians (almost religiously) refused even to consider applying for the Georgian passports to which they would have been entitled. It also seemed that Abkhazia would bring its legal code into conformity with that of Russia, and there was a certain amount of disquiet in Abkhazia last summer during my last visit about the extent to which Abkhazia might be falling into Russia's clutches: 'Did we fight a war against Georgia to preserve our liberty only to lose it to Russia?' was a sentiment expressed at the time. However, the unpopular Dzhergenia was dismissed towards the end of 2002, possibly, as some surmise, because of policies that were perceived to be too Moscow-orientated. That said, the end of December saw the reopening of the rail-link between Sukhum and Sochi in southern Russia, which of course means that there is now an easier way to cross the Psou-frontier with Russia than queuing, often for hours, to pass the separate border- and customs-controls of both Russia and Abkhazia, an experience that could/can be burdensome in terms of time and money alike!

Although Russia has been castigated in Georgia for taking this measure, which is seen as yet another demonstration of Russia's anti-Georgian attitude and its readiness to meddle in Georgian affairs to Georgia's detriment, it should be noted that a relaxation in the harsh regime of the blockade was actually advocated in the 1998 UN Needs Assessment Mission report, and Shevardnadze's special representative for Abkhazia, Aslan Abashidze, the local potentate in another virtually *de facto* independent Georgian republic, Adzharia, made a similar call in the summer of 2002, for clearly the siege-mentality that had long been growing in Abkhazia was viewed as likely only to harden anti-Georgian sentiment within Abkhazia (if that is indeed feasible). Bearing in mind what we said earlier about governmental support in Tbilisi for the terrorists in Mingrelia, former Speaker of Parliament in Georgia and now leader of the opposition United Democrats, Zurab Zhvania, demonstrated his disingenuousness when on 17th January he said that the Russians would not have reopened the railway, if the Georgian authorities had moved earlier to support the guerrillas and urged the government to provide them with all the support they need now!

In fact, as many observers have long recognised, the Georgians have long been their own worst enemies. Instead of enticing their minorities (Abkhazians, South Ossetians, Armenian, Azerbaijani, Daghestani, etc..) to support their calls for independence in the late 1980s, they did their very best to alienate them by objectionable rallying-cries of 'Georgia for the Georgians!' and 'Only 5% of "Guests" on Georgian soil!'. Since instigating the totally unnecessary war in Abkhazia, the Georgians have been denied rail-access to Russia -- Armenia too lost this same rail-

link to its northern Russian ally. It is in the interests, therefore, not only of Abkhazia but *everyone* in the Transcaucasus for this rail-link to be fully restored. Therefore, if the Georgians were wise, they would take this development as an opportunity to start negotiating seriously for a solution to this long-running and in many ways seemingly intractable problem. Apart from economic and political advantages, there would be an end to the crime-wave that has come to blight western Georgia, as discussed by Nana Khubutia's recent article for the IWPR's report at the end of February where she points out that there is much illegal traffic over the border with Abkhazia beyond the reach of those crossing-points controlled by frontier-guards. The Georgians need to realise that, just as they failed to keep hold of Abkhazia by force of arms, they will not regain it by going down the same path. And if the international community were really concerned to bring about a resolution of this conflict, they would be urging Georgia to make some sensible compromise to accommodate Abkhazian (and, indeed, South Ossetian) concerns, rather than placing all the pressure, as has consistently been done over the last 10 years, on the Abkhazian side. Just as one cannot legislate to make men moral, so international pressure will never force a people who have had a bloody war imposed upon them by the majority in the state in which recent history had placed them willingly to agree to put themselves once more into that dangerous position. In 2001 Svante Cornell's *Small Nations & Great Powers* was published by Curzon Press. My review of it ended as follows: 'I wholly endorse the opinion that Georgia is a classic case for federal restructuring but disagree that it should be of the asymmetric variety (p.196). Cornell is also persuasive in proposing, on the basis of his consideration of Nagorno-Karabagh, "the establishment of a free-trade zone incorporating the two republics [Armenia & Azerbaijan -- GH]. Ideal[ly], this would also include Georgia, South Ossetia and Abkhazia" (p.138) -- note the implicit recognition of South Ossetia's and Abkhazia's independence. Indeed, might not the resurrection of a Transcaucasian Federation be a more radical but in the longer term viable way to cut so many regional Gordian knots that seem unpickable under Transcaucasia's present configuration? But the depressing lack of vision characterising largely mediocre power-brokers within and beyond the Caucasus compels one to agree with Cornell that the outlook remains gloomy.' And here too I close my short presentation today.