

The Abkhazian Separatist Movement

Introduction

Abkhazia is a former Soviet Autonomous Region located in the northwestern area of Georgia, sandwiched between the Black Sea and the Caucasus Mountains. It is a region of extremes, with sunny resort beaches on the coast and year-round snow in the mountains. During the Soviet era, the region was famed as a resort area, with many soviet elites vacationing along the coast and sampling some of the locally-grown agricultural luxuries such as wine and tea. More recently, it is an area marked by years of ethnic fighting as the Abkhazi separatists try to gain their independence from Georgia. What I intend to demonstrate in the course of this paper is an explanation of how such an area rife with economic prosperity under the Soviet system could become a poor wasteland within only a decade as a result of war and an embargo by the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).

Pre-Soviet History

The Abkhazes trace their lineage back to the dynastic Shervashidze of the twelfth century. While the Shervashidze were mostly identified as Georgian, their homeland was located in an area between Georgia, Turkey, and Russia. As a result, they switched loyalties several times, belonging to the Byzantine and Ottoman empires as well as the Georgian kingdoms. Georgia stakes territorial claims on the region due to it's control over it until the late seventeenth century, when the area came under the control of the Ottomans. Under the Ottomans, the Abkhazes were converted, with varying opinions to what degree, to Islam. During the nineteenth century, the Shervashidze switched religion several times as the Russians and Georgians fought

the Ottomans. Eventually, a movement among the Georgian priests to convert the Abkhazes back to christianity transformed into a secular movement to bring Abkhazia back into the Georgian nation.

Early Soviet History

During the Bolshevik Revolution, Abkhazia experienced a brief period of time as a full-fledged Soviet republic under the leadership of Nestor Lakoba. More likely than not, the newly-minted republic was a way for the Soviets to reduce the power of the Georgian nation by capitalizing on separatist sentiment in the area. After Georgia was conquered, Abkhazia was made an autonomous republic equal in stature to Georgia itself and with the Abkhazes as the “titular nationality,” but with a shaky legal standing in the 1920 Georgian constitution because Abkhazia was officially located within the Georgian SSR. As a result, the Abkhazian elites were answerable only to Moscow but geographically part of Georgia. Abkhazia’s constitution of 1925 will come into play later as the Abkhazes’ vote to restore it spurred the Georgian military into action.

Late Soviet History

During the Soviet regime, Abkhazia flourished, mostly as a result of its status as the premiere vacation spot. Local agricultural products were sold for high prices due to their rarity in the Soviet Union. Along with this wealth came a higher level of corruption and the area became known for the strength of its mafia.

After 1945 the political economy of Abkhazia, like that of Ajaria, was shaped by its unique geographic position in the USSR as a subtropical seaside. At first glance, it would seem that economic abundance muted the political relevance of cultural identity. Indeed Abkhazia, like Ajaria, was blessed by its

location. Its coastal strips and mountain valleys became prosperous resorts, and it was virtually a monopolistic producer of such universally prized products as tobacco, wines, and tea. Moscow had to purchase these commodities from the local collective farms and small factories at preferential prices. This was true even when these products were diluted with ordinary grass or water. The amount of dilution was always subject to invisible bargaining and implicit understandings. In fact, the quality of the commodity was directly related to the social destination of the final product. There was an informal yet relatively firm agreement as to how much tap water and sugar could be contained in wine sent to common shops in Russia, to local stores (where local honor had to be upheld, within limits,) and finally to those “special parties,” where it was destined to be consumed by the nomenklatura (Derluguian, 267-268.)

The “Vicious Cycle” of Ethnic Tensions

After the establishment of the Autonomous Region of Abkhazia, an interesting demographic began to develop. Most of the Abkhazes resettled to other regions and the population was filled in with Georgians and other outsiders. In 1989, the number of ethnic Abkhazes in Abkhazia equaled only 17-18% of the total population, with Georgians (including the Svans, Mingrelians, Lavs, and Bats, who are not Georgians but could not be counted as anything else) comprising 47% (Hewitt.) However, because of their status as the titular nationality, the Abkhazes still controlled all of the political institutions. With a constituency made up of Greeks, Georgians, Russians, and Ukrainians, the Abkhazia social structure became stratified. The Abkhazes were the rulers, and the other nationalities were the workers. As we shall see later, some

people believe that the Abkhazes deliberately planned military campaigns to drive these other nationalities out of the area.

Throughout this time, Abkhazia maintained a tenuous relationship with Georgia. The official language of Georgia was Georgian, and that limited the influence of the political-elite Abkhazes to their own region because they were unwilling to learn Georgian. A major victory for them was the right to use the Cyrillic alphabet because it meant that they could now make contacts and hold positions in the Georgian government.

A vicious cycle of ethnic tension developed as the Abkhazes tried to gain influence and the Georgians tried to hold the republic together. As the Georgians gained national consciousness, they set policies that restricted the Abkhazes. The Abkhazes, in turn, tried to gain more rights and influence, mostly looking to Russia. In "Abkhazia and Ajaria before and since the Soviet collapse," Derluguian argues that the ethnic tension in Abkhazia is a result of Russian influence in the region. According to his main premise, the Russians carried the favor of the Abkhazes in order to counter the Georgian separatist movement.

For a long period, the powerful alliance between the Abkhazian and Moscow elites brought relative social and political stability, and ... an "ethnic machine" was created, giving Abkhazian elites disproportionate power and resource, which they doled out to their ethnic clients in exchange for support. But in the late 1980's, glasnost deeply eroded ethnofederal institutions, and Georgians used their new-found freedom of speech to launch a campaign for confrontation with the central Abkhazian and Soviet authorities. Abkhazian elites,

with the central authorities on their side, raised the stakes by launching a campaign for Abkhazia's secession from Georgia. With the Soviet collapse, however, Abkhazian elites lost their patrons in Moscow and Georgia was unconstrained in its effort to control Abkhazia (Derluguian, 262-263.)

Derluguian sees the war as a result of Russian involvement

Conflict with Georgia

In a precursor to what was to follow, in 1989 violence broke out as a result of a decision by the Georgian authorities to open a branch of the Georgian State University in Sukhumi. Ethnic tension rapidly escalated.

The ouster of Georgian President Gamsakhurdia in early 1992 directly fueled the Abkhazian separatist cause. Abkhazian Supreme Soviet Chairman Vladislav Ardzinba capitalized on the confusion in Tbilisi to promote the republic's de facto independence. Numerous Georgian laws were nullified in Abkhazia; all local enterprises and organizations, including military and police units, were placed under regional jurisdiction; and a special regiment of internal troops was created and placed under the command of the Presidium of the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet. Finally, in July 1992, the 1978 Constitution was repealed and replaced by the long-dormant 1925 Constitution that declared Abkhazia a sovereign republic with only alliance commitments to Georgia.

In response to this declaration of independence, the Georgian government deployed troops in Abkhazia. The Georgian military occupied all of the major cities of Abkhazia, including the capital, Sukhumi, forcing the Abkhazian leadership, headed by Ardzinba, to retreat to the regional center of

Gudauta. After these initial advances, however, the Georgian assault on Abkhazia bogged down. Over the next year, the Abkhazians, who received substantial political and military assistance from volunteers from the Confederation of the Mountain People of the Caucasus (CMPC) and at least some assistance from local Russian military units, were able to launch a counteroffensive and gradually re-establish control over “their” republic up to the Russian-Georgian border.

Due to the brutal persecution that accompanied this counteroffensive, most Georgians (about 240,000) left Abkhazia as refugees (Kozhokin.)

During the Georgian “occupation” of 1992 and the Abkhazian offensive of 1993, there existed many thousands of dislocated persons. This prompted a high level of instability in the region.

After the Abkhazian offensive of 1993, the situation bogged down and approached a stalemate. Both sides resorted to small-scale military operations as they hoped for an agreement mediated by the UN or, in the later years, by Russia or the United States. The conflict became one of limited terrorist-type actions. As Georgia started to support the policies of the CIS, Russia changed its stance and supported them in the conflict.

Many analysts, especially those from the region itself, tend to ascribe all problems and deficiencies in the policies of Caucasian governments and movements to the “Russian factor”. A critique of this position does not mean that this factor should be underestimated. Russia is indeed actively involved in all the conflicts here, not only through its peace-keepers or paratroopers, but also

through the arms trade (it sells weaponry to all sides in a conflict, though it is selective as to quality and quantity), through manipulative activities involving economic levers, or through the activities of its military and intelligence services. As Olivier Roy writes: "In the early 1990s Moscow had actively encouraged conflicts in the Caucasus while presenting itself as an honest broker between the combatants." As a rule, Russian policies are inconsistent and contradictory, but they possess incomparably greater resources than any of the local forces. All conflicts in the Caucasus are connected with the presence of Russian troops, whether these are actively participating (Chechnya, Abkhazia), performing the role of peace-keepers (Ossetia, Abkhazia), or acting as trainers and advisors (Karabakh). Greater sympathy among the Russian military and political establishments for one of the fighting sides is apparent in each of these conflicts (Tarkhan-Mouravi.)

What is at Stake

Territorial Sovereignty appears to be a major concern for both sides of the conflict. In fact, this is the one point of contention during the mediation process. The Abkhazes want complete independence and the Georgians want to give Abkhazia the status of a Georgian state.

In February 1995 in Geneva the sides made further steps toward reaching a settlement by agreeing to establish a "federal legislative organ" and a "supreme organ of executive power" in the future common state. For yet another time, the issue of territorial integrity of Georgia and the federal vs. confederal character of the future state led to the failure of the talks. Time and

time again, the “big concepts” got in the way of issue-specific deals on which progress was made.

Essentially, the difference between war and peace in Abkhazia is the difference between the concepts of “federation” and “confederation,” or between a single and joint sovereignty. Unfortunately, international law does not provide anything in-between; the first term implies a single state with indivisible sovereignty, the second--an association of individual sovereign units (Khachikian, 32.)

Eventually, in 1999, an agreement was reached for the federation approach.

Economically, the area has been ruined. Georgia was excluded from its economic ties by the location of an unfriendly entity between it and the rest of the CIS. Georgia realizes that in order to ship goods, such as oil, it must settle its differences with Abkhazia. For their part, the Abkhazes were blockaded by the CIS and found it difficult to sell their high-valued commodities. Russia's decision to support Georgia as a member of the CIS in the later stages of the conflict seems to have had serious effects for the Abkhazes.

Refugees are a major concern in Georgia. As has been already mentioned, the Abkhazian offensive of 1993 seemed to be planned with the intent of driving the Georgians out of the region in a classic ethnic cleansing move.

Certainly the largest group affected by the war are ethnic Georgians, the vast majority of whom have left Abkhazia and have settled in other parts of Georgia. The Georgian Ministry for Refugees claimed in March 1997 that there were 268,072 displaced persons from Abkhazia in Georgia. The Abkhaz argue

in turn that there were 239,900 Georgians in Abkhazia in 1989, according to the Soviet census. They claim that some never left Abkhazia, many others have repatriated already, and still others fled to Russia not Georgia. There are thus at most 140-150,000 displaced people still waiting to be repatriated in Georgia. Since a number of Georgians did indeed stay behind, it is difficult to see how the Georgian Government can substantiate its figures. However, without passing judgment on this issue, it is possible to describe the contours of Georgian migration. From cities, the vast majority of the Georgian population has gone. In towns that had quite small Georgian populations, like Verkhniaia Eshera above Sukhumi, and Labra below it, literally all the Georgians have left. In other places, when residents note that Georgians have remained, it often transpires that these "Georgians" are children of mixed marriages who self-identify as Abkhaz or some other nationality (Dale.)

In "Georgians and Abkhazians: The Search for a Peace Settlement," Coppieters disagrees with the idea that this displacement of the population by attacking forces was intentional.

The concept of ethnic cleansing as a "planned, deliberate removal" should refer not only to the original intentions of those who planned this removal but to all the elements that are included in a "planned" policy. Unintended but predictable consequences have also to be taken into account. This distinction between intended and unintended but predictable consequences is used in war ethics to assess the consequences of armed conflicts for the civilian population, who, according to the 'discrimination principle', are not supposed to be the

immediate target of war operations. The discrimination principle forbids military operations targeted against non-combatants, but considers that under certain conditions the evil effects of military operations on non-combatants are tolerable. One of these conditions is that these consequences are merely foreseen or expected as the outcome of a particularly important and legitimate military action, but not directly intended. The flight of the Georgian population, for instance, may reasonably be expected or even foreseen as the outcome of major military operations by the Abkhaz against Georgian troops, regardless of whether or not this flight was intended. This distinction between intended and unintended consequences of military acts takes into account, however, the fact that the unintended consequences of military operations are also foreseen, accepted and thus voluntarily caused. Even if the departure of a large proportion of the Georgian civilian population from Abkhazia had not actually been intended by the Abkhaz authorities (which may be doubted,) it remained foreseen, accepted and thus voluntarily caused as a side-effect of planned military operations against Georgian troops (Coppieters.)

Future and Conclusion

Unfortunately, both sides must learn to live peacefully. In order for Georgia to consolidate its democracy, it needs to settle problems with displaced persons and national sovereignty. The Abkhazes need to compromise on the issue of federalism in order to restore their economic prosperity. Eventually, each nation will have to be willing to compromise for the sake of development. Until then, the situation will remain as it has been for the last seven years--in a stalemate.

Many observers, Derluguian and Tarkhan-Mouravi included, feel that the Abkhazian conflict was a direct result of Russian intervention in recent years and historically. One can't help but direct blame towards the Russians, who somehow seem at the heart of the problem as they use regional politics to strengthen their political position and economy.

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