

FREEDOM AND SECURITY

GEORGIANS AND ABKHAZIANS (GEORGIAN-ABKHAZIAN CONFLICT)

Where are we?

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A paradoxical situation has emerged in Abkhazia: Abkhazia's main (and practically the only) guarantor of its own security and "independence" - Russia has become the main source of threat.



Under these conditions, Tbilisi's authorities are the only ones who retain the tools to mitigate Abkhazia's isolation from the outside world.



Until the deep and acute political crisis in Tbilisi is resolved in one way or another and domestic political developments stabilise, it is unlikely that any innovative steps will be taken towards conflict transformation.

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Introduction

The aim of this analytical review is to present, without delving into the depths of history, various aspects of Georgian-Abkhazian (conflict) relations at their current stage, to substantiate the need to frame them constructively. This task is of vital importance, especially for the Abkhazian side. Given the mutual alienation, growing external pressures, global uncertainty (primarily the difficult-to-predict political and legal outcomes of the end of Russia's war against Ukraine), economic factors and more, this issue must be addressed with urgency. The ambiguous political processes taking place on both banks of the Enguri should not impede the restoration of relations and their development in a healthy and mutually beneficial format. The so-called "red lines" of the parties should not hinder the improvement of people's daily lives and the steady increase in their security. Obstacles of various types and scales, some of which are reflected here to a certain degree, pose a serious challenge for both. At the same time, a proper understanding of the high price that both sides have been paying over the past three decades as a result of unresolved conflict should ultimately become an effective incentive to change the situation. With mutual goodwill and determination reflected in a policy based on realistic approaches and expectations, achieving may be slow but steady and consistent progress should not be an insurmountable task.

1

HOW DO GEORGIANS AND ABKHAZIANS PERCEIVE EACH OTHER?

GEORGIANS' PERCEPTION OF ABKHAZIANS

There is a wide spectrum of perceptions of Abkhazians (attitudes towards them) in Georgian society, starting with: “our Abkhazian sisters and brothers” (from the vocabulary of some high-ranking officials) and expressing a similar sentiment: “good friends and neighbors who saved my life”, “they still take care of my grandparents’ graves” (the experience of some IDPs). The spectrum continues with “Russian puppets” (a perception held by certain politicians) and ends with “such a nation does not exist at all” (expressed by supporters of P. Ingorokva’s theory). Of course, there are many shades of opinion between these extremes.

Public opinion surveys in Georgia show that over the past decade, the restoration of territorial integrity has remained on the list of topical issues (the respondents themselves have ranked the problems on the proposed list), but it is by no means considered the highest priority.¹ At the same time, when asked “was it possible to avoid the wars in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in the 1990s?” 57% think it could have been, while 20% think it could not (the rest either do not know or refused to answer).² This suggests that the Abkhazians are not perceived as enemies with whom there is no other language to speak than the language of weapons.

A significant part of Georgian society interested in conflict related topics clearly empathises with the Abkhazians’ resistance to Russian domination in the political and economic spheres (although there are those who, not without reason, ask the sarcastic question „Well, what else were they expecting would happen?“).

What’s remarkable, or, if you like, disturbing, is what is happening among the younger generation, who have a rather vague (or complete lack of) knowledge of the Abkhazian phenomenon, its place and the role it has played in the Georgian state over the centuries, how Abkhazians live, what problems they face and what they want today. The majority of young people (72%) do not personally know anyone who currently lives in Abkhazia or the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia; 73%

of them have not had any contact with an inhabitant of Abkhazia over the past ten years.³

The roots of such an unfavourable situation should be sought in education, though not exclusively.⁴ Firstly, other issues are more of a priority on the youth agenda (the youth movement in Georgia in recent years clearly demonstrates this). Secondly, the topic of conflicts is rarely raised in the domestic political discourse, and even then - in the context of mutual accusations between the opposing parties, while the Georgian media, who are overwhelmingly focused on this confrontation with rare exceptions,⁵ does not pay due attention to the events taking place in the territories not controlled by Tbilisi.

The only consolation is that, based on all surveys, it is possible to state with certainty that the majority of Georgian citizens see only a peaceful path to resolving the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict; as to the potential timeline for resolution, there is spectrum of opinion as broad as the attitudes toward the Abkhazians.

ABKHAZIANS' PERCEPTION OF GEORGIANS

In this regard, the presentation of an unbiased and comprehensive picture is hindered by the fact that open public opinion polls are not held in Abkhazia, while the “Georgian topic” in Abkhazian media is discussed nearly exclusively within a negative context. With a low probability of error, it is possible to assume that the ethnically diverse population of Abkhazia has a mixed attitude towards Georgians and Georgia itself, however, since the political agenda in Sokhumi is entirely determined by ethnic Abkhazians, we will focus on their attitudes. Thus, impressions and assessments (the word

1 <https://www.ndi.org/georgia-polls>

2 https://crrc.ge/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/final-fog_eng_08_04_2021.pdf

3 Research on the Civic and Political Engagement of Youth in Georgia and Their Participation in Peacebuilding, Caucasus Research Resource Center - Georgia, December 2021

4 See, for example: Maia Barkaya: „A History Divided by War: Conflicts and the Teaching of History in Georgia“, Caucasian House, 2019 <https://regional-dialogue.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/%E1%83%9D%E1%83%9B%E1%83%98%E1%83%97-%E1%83%92%E1%83%90%E1%83%A7%E1%83%9D%E1%83%A4%E1%83%98%E1%83%9A%E1%83%98-%E1%83%98%E1%83%A1%E1%83%A2%E1%83%9D%E1%83%A0%E1%83%98%E1%83%90-2019.pdf>

5 An exception is, for example, the section „Georgian-Abkhazian Context“ on the media platform JAMnews; <https://geabconflict.net/ge/>

“conclusions” would be an overstatement here due to the aforementioned circumstances) are based on open sources and observations mutually shared by the participants during informal meetings/dialogues (track-2) with their vis-à-vis.

Over the three decades following the war (and indeed even before it), the image of the Georgian enemy was being shaped in Abkhazia, and the cultivation of this image has been perpetually ongoing. Throughout this time, the hope of normalising relations flickered only twice: firstly in 1995–1997, when Abkhazians were not yet convinced by the possibility of breaking away from Georgia with Russian support; and again in 2004–2005, when the arrival of new governments in Tbilisi and Sokhumi created opportunities for attempts to find common ground. However, due to a combination of various factors, including subjective ones, no positive outcome was achieved in either instance.

The war of 1992–1993 is labeled as a “Patriotic War” in Abkhazia and serves as the cornerstone of contemporary Abkhazian identity. If this foundation was to be removed from Abkhazian separatism, they would immediately face an unanswerable question: What did they fight for? For what purpose did Abkhazians make such immense sacrifices? Moreover, to maintain both the (ethno) nationalist and mobilising fervour, they must continually nurture the narrative of an external enemy. In the immediate aftermath of the war, the Abkhazians assigned this role of enemy to the Georgians.

The uncompromising stance toward Georgians also has another, no less significant, but less emphasised aspect: Abkhazians fear of being absorbed by Georgians more than with Russians. In this context, the cultural proximity between Georgians and Abkhazians is considered the main threat to Abkhazians. Before the war, ethnically mixed Georgian-Abkhazian marriages were common; Abkhazians with Georgian-origin surnames who identified themselves as Abkhazian, and vice versa— self-identified Georgians with Abkhazian origins—were also typical. Traditions are similar (understandably, similar with Mingrelians in particular, though not entirely identical). We (Georgians and Abkhazians) both share a love for good living, though the willingness to work hard for such a living is less (this too varies to different degrees).

In contrast, ethnic Russians are different, alien, foreign to the Abkhazians; no amount of effort could ensure the competitiveness of the Abkhazian language with Russian— and due to this and many other factors the Russification of Abkhazia objectively continues. Whilst Abkhazia’s closest relatives – Ubykhs and Shapsugs – have been assimilated into Russia, Abkhazians console themselves with the fact that the Circassians, Chechens, Ingush, and Lezghins have preserved their own identity and (quasi) political entities.

Even when the Georgian government takes some steps (for example, a referral program) that Abkhazians view positively (not publicly, but within smaller circles), it is still marked with the connotation of “Well, what else are they supposed to do?”: of course, all the problems come from them (the

Georgians), and they should help us (by the way, a similar attitude - “they **must** help us” is also held towards Russia and the West). Any statement, no matter how harmless, generous, or righteous in its pathos (not to mention the actual action) directed from Tbilisi to Abkhazia, turns out to be counterproductive, because it will be conveyed to the local audience a priori as Georgian “deception” “duplicity” “evil intent” and ultimately as part of the Georgian plan “to swallow” Abkhazia. Mentioning Georgians or Georgia in a positive context (a rarity, but it has happened) will immediately put the author in a negative light, and for those engaged in political activity, even a glance towards Georgia is seen as a political suicide.

A recent example. The President of Georgia, Salome Zourabichvili, commented on events in Abkhazia in November as follows: *“I want to condemn the fact that today Russia is taking hasty steps toward annexation by demanding that Georgia agree to delimitation, which is unimaginable and fundamentally disregards the entire logic of Georgian government that somehow Russian politics can be changed through concessions. Not only will it not change, but it will accelerate it, and this is visible every day. There is an attempt to implement a Russian Law in occupied Abkhazia, which civil society has resisted, and I want to express my solidarity with them.”* (Style preserved - I.H.)⁶

The responses from Sokhumi arrived without delay. The leader of the local opposition, Adgur Ardzinba, reproached the President of Georgia for “being guided by the national mythology as usual”. He reminded her that “Abkhazia is a free country that determines its own destiny, developmental direction, and national interests” and issued a verdict: “Thus, it is unclear who Mrs. Zourabichvili is expressing solidarity with, as we clearly have differing views not only on the present and future of our homeland, but also on life in the country, politics, and perhaps even morality.”⁷ Aslan Bzhanias also stated: I strongly doubt whether Salome Zourabichvili has any sympathy for the Abkhazian government or the opposition. I think she is guided by the principle: “What is worse, is for the better.”⁸

During the 2024 election campaign, a resonant moment occurred when Bidzina Ivanishvili publicly apologised to South Ossetians in Gori. Sokhumi (both the de facto government and the opposition) welcomed this gesture, suggesting that the same should be done toward the Abkhazians and even outlined the **unilateral** steps that Tbilisi **should take** following the apology - signing an agreement of non-use of force and annulling the “Law on Occupied Territories,” which, in Abkhazian reasoning, should culminate in Georgia’s recognition of Abkhazia’s independence.⁹ In the event of recognition, the Abkhazian side will presumably raise the issue of

6 <https://tabula.ge/ge/news/725801-zurabichvili-okupirebul-apkhazet-ze-ruseti-dgams> 15.11.2024

7 <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/33205379.html> 17.11.2024

8 <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/33210637.html> 21.11.2024

9 <https://www.bpn.ge/article/133052-okupaciis-kanonis-gaukme-ba-da-apxazetis-gavlit-tranzitis-agdgena-ras-stavazobs-bzhanias-opozicia-tbilis/> 25.11.2024

reparations (they will agree to \$10 billion).¹⁰

As usual, the Abkhazians managed to see not only a Russian but also a Georgian threat in the creation of a privileged investment climate for Russia – B. Ivanishvili (and wealthy ethnic Georgian businessmen with Russian citizenship) would acquire certain assets in Abkhazia through Russia and then use them to prepare for the “violent encroachment” of Georgians.

¹⁰ <https://www.gazeta.ru/politics/news/2022/12/28/19381135.shtml>
28.12.2022

2

POLITICAL PROCESSES IN GEORGIA AND ABKHAZIA

POLITICAL PROCESSES IN GEORGIA AND THEIR REPERCUSSIONS IN ABKHAZIA

Naturally, we will not (and cannot) touch on all aspects of the recent political process in Georgia in this paper; we will briefly review only those issues that are directly related to the conflicts and have become a subject of discussion in Abkhazia (the topic of conflicts does not appear at all in the post-election processes in Georgia itself).

The 2024 parliamentary elections in Georgia certainly garnered more attention in the Abkhazian society than ever before. It is no secret that the current government of Georgia is considered more ‘tolerable’ by Abkhazians compared to its predecessors, and this applies equally to both the de facto government and the opposition.¹¹ Over the past four years, Tbilisi’s lack of initiative in the conflict related matters has somehow calmed down Sokhumi in terms of the Georgians’ “revanchist” intentions. It seems that the electoral slogan of the ‘Georgian Dream’ — ‘We will ensure peace’ worked quite successfully not only in the areas controlled by Tbilisi but also in the occupied territories. In any case, they did not and do not expect any aggressive actions from the ‘Dream’ government and therefore, they sympathized them more than others.

The sharp deterioration of Tbilisi’s relations with the West (this is a bilateral process to which the West has also contributed, though it’s a separate topic of discussion) has not gone unnoticed in Abkhazian society. The removal of the issue of European integration¹² from the agenda damages Georgia’s image and reduces its appeal in the eyes of the Abkhazians. Potential (and unfortunate) consequences, such as the suspension of visa-free travel to Schengen zone countries, opportunities to work in Europe, financial support, and other privileges (provided for EU candidate countries) cast doubt on the advisability of closer ties with Georgia from the Abkhazian perspective (although public discussions on these issues and similar topics are not held). Georgia, isolated from the West, where the personalist regime is gradually developing and exhibiting characteristics typical of authoritarian governance, is no more appealing to them than

11 <https://www.bpn.ge/article/133052-okupaciis-kanonis-gaukme-ba-da-apxazetis-gavlit-tranzitis-agdgena-ras-stavazobs-bzhanias-opozicia-tbiliss/> 25.11.2024

12 <https://www.radiotavisupleba.ge/a/33219304.html> 28.11.2024

their northern neighbour’s, which possesses greater resources and is considered to pose less threat of assimilation (see above).

The previously mentioned apology to the South Ossetians, the persistent talk during the campaign about the need to obtain a constitutional majority in the context of conflict resolution (which was not substantiated with any specifics and remained unclear to specialists working on conflict-related issues) and the emphasized mention of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region by Sh. Papuashvili and M. Mdinardze¹³ during the first session of Parliament raise the question: is all this merely rhetorical material, or does it serve as a sort of announcement of a pre-planned political course? If this is the beginning of a new and active policy, then, by the method of exclusion (given the strained relations with the West, who will not partner with the current Georgian government on this matter, and considering that discussing potential Chinese involvement in such issues is unrealistic), we can conclude that this policy will be implemented within the framework of relations towards Russia.

Thus, distancing from the West (in the context of the pervasive Russian-Western antagonism) naturally raises doubts (including in Sokhumi) - does this signal Tbilisi’s rapprochement with Moscow? In this scenario, Abkhazians fear that Moscow might ‘sacrifice’ Abkhazia by ‘returning’ it to Georgia as the price for Georgia’s political shift into Russia’s orbit.¹⁴ However, talk of such a ‘return’ lacks any real basis, since history does not recall a case when Russia has voluntarily returned something it has taken. Statements by Russian officials further confirm this.¹⁵

13 „As quickly as possible, we must become representatives of a united country’s parliament together with Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region,” said M. Mdinardze during the November 25 session; <https://www.interpressnews.ge/ka/article/821523-mamuka-mdinaradze-gvakvs-sashualeba-rom-batoni-bizinas-liderobit-or-pexzec-vid-get-erovnul-interesebsac-vemsaxurot-male-gaertianebuli-kveqnis-parlamentis-carmomadgenlebi-unda-viqot-apxazettan-da-cxinvalis-regi-ontan-ertad>

14 Such a development scenario is not ruled out by the Russian expert S. Markedonov either; see, for example: S.M. Markedonov, „Transformation of the Conflict Field in Abkhazia: Modern Politics and Historical Context,” *World Economy and International Relations*. 2024, volume 68, № 12, cc. 111-121

15 See example: <https://civil.ge/ru/archives/628768> 18.10.2024

If relations continue to head in this direction, a solution to the problem may be found that allows two of the three parties (Tbilisi, Moscow, and Sokhumi) to save face (which party benefits more and which less is clear, given the huge asymmetry that exists between the three). However, there seems to be no formula that would be acceptable to all three. We will not speculate on this topic here, but if, in the near future, discussions begin about, for instance, the commissioning of a railway through Abkhazia, this will become a clear indication the dynamics are shifting.

POLITICAL PROCESSES IN ABKHAZIA

In November of this year, for the third consecutive time in a row, an Abkhazian ‘president’ was forcibly removed from office. This type of procedure has already become kind of a ‘brand’ for Abkhazian ethno-(demo)cracy,¹⁶ which, among other circumstances, is facilitated by the clan-based structure of Abkhazian society. The current turmoil centres around an agreement with Russia on the creation of a privileged investment environment for the latter in Abkhazia, which is considered dangerous by a significant part of the local population for various reasons (one of which was mentioned earlier). However, nothing unexpected seemed to have happened – for years, initiatives from Russia had been accumulating relentlessly, the inclusion of which in the agenda aroused similar emotions.¹⁷

This time, the main thesis of the Abkhazian opposition is: under the previous governments, we had more balanced (equal) relations with Russia, whereas under A. Bzhania’s ‘presidency,’ these relations have acquired a one-sided character, benefiting only Russia. There is only partial truth to this claim from the opposition: against the backdrop of the war against Ukraine, Moscow has increased its pressure on Sokhumi, suspended subsidies (civil servants may not receive their salaries), halted the export of citrus fruits to the Russian market, no longer helps in overcoming the energy crisis, etc.; under such conditions, the de facto government simply lacks any resources to withstand this pressure.

Any other ‘president’ will find himself in the same untenable situation as A. Bzhania and would be forced to retreat. Whoever is elected as the next “president”, will face the same challenges and will fundamentally be unable to change the policy.¹⁸ This is for the simple reason that today’s Abkhazia has no alternative other than Russia (they not only failed to maintain such an alternative, they also failed to create a new one). While the

cultivation of the image of the Georgian enemy continues in Abkhazia, the growing anti-Russian sentiments are not “translated” into the emergence of pro-Georgian sentiments. However, an experienced observer might notice a process of the Georgian enemy image being somewhat reframed¹⁹ or “triptych”-ed: in the centre of the triptych remains the Georgian ‘enemy’ (larger and more prominent than the rest), while on one side of the triptych Russian oligarchs (smaller and less intense) have started to appear, and on the other side, a graphic sketch of local ‘unreliable forces’ is beginning to take shape.

One way or another, A. Bzhania resigned or rather was removed from office (alongside him, ‘Prime Minister’ A. Ankvab was also dismissed, who had similarly been removed prematurely from his presidency in 2014, partly due to accusations of distributing ‘Abkhazian passports’ to the ethnically Georgian population of Gali) and early elections have been scheduled for February 15, 2025 (the regular elections were supposed to be held in March).²⁰ As of early December, three individuals are being considered as presidential candidates: A. Bzhania, A. Ardzinba, and O. Bartsyts. Part of society believes that a constitutional reform should be carried out before the elections, which would limit the powers of the so-called president and ensure that the next parliamentary elections are held under a mixed majoritarian-proportional system. The issues of judicial reform and a real fight against corruption remain relevant as well, which, due to the clan structure and the (still insurmountable) lifestyle that was established during the Soviet period, seriously hinders development and can often be quite easily traced behind certain “political” decisions.

16 Not to mention the total discrimination against ethnic Georgians remaining in Abkhazia, the restriction of rights for other non-Abkhaz ethnic groups and citizens is highlighted, for example, by Article 49 of Abkhazia’s so-called „Constitution,” according to which only a citizen of Abkhaz ethnicity can be elected as „President“ (author’s note)

17 For more details, see, for example: Mamuka Komakhia, „Political Crisis in Occupied Abkhazia: What Happened and What to Expect”, GFSIS, 21.11.2024 and Ketil Sarthania, „Radical Obedience and Protest in Abkhazia”, Indigo, 20.11.2024.

18 Olesya Vartanyan: “No Way Forward, No Way Back”, IPS, https://www.ips-journal.eu/topics/democracy-and-society/no-way-forward-no-way-back-7939/?utm_campaign=en_1262_20241126&utm_medium=email&utm_source=newsletter 25.11.2024

19 Triptych - An icon with movable wings (doors) attached on both sides of its central part. Since the wings are movable, they can be opened or folded as needed (author’s note).

20 After completing the article, a couple of other candidates emerged.

3

MOSCOW'S POLITICS TOWARD THE GEORGIAN-ABKHAZIAN CONFLICT

The reduced tension between Tbilisi and Moscow during the “Georgian Dream’s” rule has somewhat worried the Abkhazian community; in local public discourse, precisely during Georgia’s parliamentary election campaign, the topic of a Georgian-Abkhazian confederation unexpectedly emerged, leading to suspicions that if a move towards normalising relations between Tbilisi and Moscow produces not just rhetorical or economic, but tangible political results, then Moscow will “sacrifice” Abkhazia and essentially “return” it to Georgia, at the cost of Georgia’s transition to Russia’s orbit.

There is no sign of such a “sacrifice” though: Moscow is deliberately ensuring the establishment of a super-comfortable sphere of influence in Abkhazia. In other words, it is carrying out the de facto annexation of Abkhazia, while simultaneously urging Tbilisi to delimit “borders” at the Geneva discussions. Even if we imagine Russia “ceding” Abkhazia to Georgia, it would only have a formal or symbolic character, since shaking Russia’s strong foothold in Abkhazia exceeds Georgia’s capabilities (at least in the foreseeable future).

The official position of the Russian Federation regarding the crisis in Abkhazia is “non-interference in the internal affairs of a neighbouring and friendly Abkhazia.”²¹ However, messages of a different (and disparate) nature have also been voiced towards Abkhazia by members of the Russian Duma who are directly involved in the Abkhazian issue. For instance, the first deputy chairman of the Duma’s CIS and Eurasian Integration Committee, Konstantin Zatulin, wrote: “I cannot remain indifferent to what is happening in Abkhazia. It is shameful that just a few months before the upcoming presidential elections, there is an attempt to stage a coup under the pretext of (non)ratification of the agreement between Abkhazia and Russia. You can review this agreement or look for negative aspects in it. There is nothing in it that is not dictated by the desire to help Abkhazia attract investment - to create jobs for the republic’s youth, who are forced to look for work in neighbouring Russia. If, in a historically short period, within one generation, a mob manages to overthrow the government for the third time, can such a state still be called a state?”²²

According to K. Zatulin’s colleague, Sergei Markov, “The Abkhazian uprising is not against Russia, but against Russian oligarchs, more specifically, against the Sochi developers. People fear that the new law will allow Russian oligarchs to buy up the entire coastline, leaving the people with nothing. The last thing they have – their common land – will be taken away.”²³ It is clear that the Abkhazian resistance - the rejection of the investment agreement’s ratification by Abkhazia’s People’s Assembly (the “parliament”) after A. Bzhanias’s resignation – irritates Moscow. However, Moscow has enough leverage over Sokhumi to ensure that, in the final analysis, the Abkhazian “doomed spirit” will remain doomed if, in short, just like on the “Western front” (see the next subsection), the “Northern Front” remains unchanged for the time being.²⁴

21 https://mid.ru/ru/foreign_policy/news/1981814/15.11.2024

22 <https://jam-news.net/ge/koaliciuri-mtavroba-da-reformebi-akhali-sap-rezidento-archevnebi-gamosavali-politikuri-chikhidan-afkhazetshi>

23 right away

24 An allusion to the title of Erich Maria Remarque’s novel „All Quiet on the Western Front.“

4

WEST'S POLITICS TOWARD CONFLICTS IN GEORGIA

In September 2009, when then-President of Georgia Mikheil Saakashvili met with the U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the American side first voiced its recommendation to Tbilisi regarding “strategic patience.” The essence of the recommendation was that, since there was no short-term prospect of resolving the issues of Abkhazia and South Ossetia following the August 2008 war, the best way forward would be strategic patience, where Georgia should present itself as a stronger, more attractive, democratic country.²⁵ At the end of the same year, after the publication of the findings by the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia (the so-called Tagliavini Commission), the Political and Security Committee of the European Union approved a policy which includes two components: (1) non-recognition and (2) engagement (NREP, Non-Recognition and Engagement Policy for Abkhazia and South Ossetia).

An official document (if such document exists at all) describing in detail the essence and stages of this policy has not been published. However, a summary report from an international event held in December 2010 gives some insight into the goals and instruments of the policy.²⁶ According to this report, the second component (engagement) of the policy (the first - non-recognition - is successfully operating and, in the light of Russia's aggression against Ukraine, seems unlikely to face any threats in the future) does not contain anything particularly original and is saturated with good (more or less realistic) wishes and intentions. Over the past 15 years since, even after the Russian Federation's de facto (and “legal” according to the Russian government) annexation of Crimea and several other regions of Ukraine, there have been no updates to the NREP. From this perspective, it is interesting, for example, whether the clause requiring “constant contact with Russian forces and diplomats to ensure that they are subject to some degree of international humanitarian law control” is still in effect.²⁷ Thus, under circumstances where the Georgian government has not blocked a single international project in the occupied territories, the logical question arises: Does the European Union itself consider this policy effective in its current form? Any strategy or policy

requires revision, reconsideration, and correction from time to time, doesn't it? When was the last time the EU reviewed its policy? What has been removed (or changed) from the policy that failed to work? The recent dynamics are undoubtedly concerning (if not outright alarming), with the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus being denied entry into Abkhazia, UNDP activities being suspended, and attacks targeting EU and other international (including non-governmental) organisations' local partners, as well as the organisations themselves.²⁸ Shouldn't these (and other) developments warrant an adequate response from the EU? Let us see whether the new EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia, *Magdalena Grono*, who has considerable experience working on South Caucasus issues, will manage to give a new impetus to the EU's policy engagement.²⁹

25 <https://kvirispalitra.ge/article/754-hilari-klintonma-saqarthvelos-mothmineba-urchia/>, 28.09.2009

26 European Union for Security Studies, Seminar Report by Sabine Fischer [NREP_report.pdf \(europa.eu\)](https://www.euss.eu/NREP_report.pdf)

27 right away

28 The de facto „Minister of Justice,” Anri Bartsits, announced to the public that „Western intelligence agencies had been funding certain representatives of non-governmental organizations in Abkhazia for years to create chaos in the country.” <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/22428583> 18.11.24

29 <https://geabconflict.net/ge/chemi-mizania-tanamshromlobis-khelshe-wyoba-samkhret-kavkasiashi-eu-s-specialuri-warmomadgenlis-inter-viu-jamnews-tan/> 19.11.2024

5

CURRENT SITUATION

A paradoxical situation has emerged in Abkhazia: Abkhazia's main (and practically the only) guarantor of its own security and "independence" - Russia has become the main source of threat. Moreover, none of the possible outcomes of the war in Ukraine appear favourable for Abkhazia, and yet right now, there are Abkhazians who are fighting (and dying) for the Russian side; an act which naturally goes against their own aspirations. The "Karabakh precedent" has also undoubtedly been imprinted in the Abkhazian memory, when Azerbaijan restored its territorial integrity through military means, while the Russian Federation did not provide assistance to its strategic partner – Armenia (leaving aside the formalities of the issue).

International sanctions imposed against Russia are having a painful impact on Abkhazia (deficit, price increases, isolation, increasing Russian domination). Crossing the border at the Psou has become more difficult, as Russian border guards create problems for Abkhazians (especially those who are seen acting unfavourably towards Russia). Obtaining a Russian passport has also become more challenging, and the majority of young people in Abkhazia do not have one. This means that theoretically, they no longer even have the option to travel to Europe (or elsewhere). Under these conditions, Tbilisi's authorities are the only ones who retain the tools to mitigate Abkhazia's isolation from the outside world, (i.e., to present themselves as an alternative to Russia) which, however, requires a reciprocal step from Sokhumi in terms of a tangible easing of the movement regime on the Enguri.

However, Tbilisi is currently preoccupied and unable to focus on such matters. Until the deep and acute political crisis is resolved in one way or another and domestic political developments stabilise, it is unlikely that any innovative steps will be taken towards conflict transformation (if the Georgian political class has even realised the feasibility of implementing a transformational approach in practice). Now the question is more about in which "basket" - Western or Russian—the country will end up in, depending on the specific formula used to overcome the crisis. If it is the Western "basket," then the West will also have to address the questions raised in the previous subsection and revive, revise, or update its own policy in terms of engagement. However, if we find ourselves in the Russian "basket," then... then,

even without our participation (not only those working on the topic of conflicts, but also the wider public) the problem will be settled according to Moscow's scenario with the asymmetrical partaking of the "Georgian Dream".

6

WHAT SHOULD WE DO?

We should still try (as history shows, Moscow's scenarios don't always withstand the test of time; *never say never*) to exploit the space that lies between the Georgian and Abkhazian "red lines".³⁰ This is otherwise referred to as "conflict transformation", where diametrically different approaches to the most sensitive and critical political issues are set aside, and both sides focus on interaction and cooperation to improve the daily lives and security of their citizens. We emphasise - *both sides* - because one-sided transformation is a harmful illusion; it can only be based on the principle of reciprocity. It is inconceivable, for example, for Georgians to work on opening up the outside world for Abkhazians while the Abkhazian side continues efforts to "de-Georgianize" the Gali region and its inhabitants.

The potential areas for interaction and cooperation, provided the aforementioned conditions are met, could include the following (in no particular order):

- Freedom of movement
- Transport, transit, and tourism
- Trade and finance
- Joint fight against organised crime;
- Cooperation of Law enforcement officers along the dividing line
- The rights and social conditions of residents in the Gali region
- Education, healthcare, culture, and sports
- Alternative internet sources on Abkhazian territory
- Energy, agriculture, and environmental protection

However, it would be counterproductive to create expectations that a comprehensive solution to any problem will be possible quickly and easily. It is necessary to jointly identify and prioritise directions that are more promising than others, to move gradually from the relatively simple to the more complex, to achieve progress where it is realistically achievable, and to properly present the established achievements and results to the public.

On this path of conflict transformation, it is inevitably essential to elevate the dialogue to a higher level while maintaining informal discussions among various societal clusters and groups of specialists in specific fields. Initially, this could take the form of a track-1.5 format (an approach both sides have experience with), and eventually by moving to the level of direct decision-makers.

Alongside consistently demonstrating the sincerity and exclusivity of its peaceful approaches, the Georgian side should strengthen the anti-annexation narrative,³¹ because unlike the anti-occupation narrative (the Abkhazians, as is well-known, do not recognise the occupation by Russia), this aligns more clearly and indisputably with our mutual interests. However, it is just as essential to ensure that the anti-occupation narrative does not disappear from the Georgian agenda.

30 For more details, see: Ivlian Khaindrava, „Regarding the Red Lines and More“, GFSIS, Expert Opinion #151, 2020 <https://gfsis.org/en/151-regarding-the-red-lines-and-more/>

31 See, for example: Tornike Sharashenidze, „What Should Georgia's Anti-Anexation Policy Be?“, Levan Mikheladze Foundation, December 2023 https://mikeladzefoundation.org/uploads/files/2024-03/1710942785_thornike-sharashenidze_rogori-unda-iyos-saqarthvelos-mier-gata-rebuli-aneqsiis-satsinaaghmdego-politika.pdf

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GEORGIANS AND ABKHAZIANS (GEORGIAN-ABKHAZIAN CONFLICT)

Where are we?



In November of this year, for the third consecutive time in a row, an Abkhazian 'president' was forcibly removed from office. This type of procedure has already become kind of a 'brand' for Abkhazian ethno-(demo)cracy, which, among other circumstances, is facilitated by the clan-based structure of Abkhazian society. The current turmoil centres around an agreement with Russia on the creation of a privileged investment environment for the latter in Abkhazia, which is considered dangerous by a significant part of the local population for various reasons (one of which was mentioned earlier).



The 2024 parliamentary elections in Georgia certainly garnered more attention in the Abkhazian society than ever before. It is no secret that the current government of Georgia is considered more 'tolerable' by Abkhazians compared to its predecessors, and this applies equally to both the de facto government and the opposition. Over the past four years, Tbilisi's lack of initiative in the conflict related matters has somehow calmed down Sokhumi in terms of the Georgians' "revanchist" intentions.



The reduced tension between Tbilisi and Moscow during the "Georgian Dream's" rule has somewhat worried the Abkhazian community; in local public discourse, precisely during Georgia's parliamentary election campaign, the topic of a Georgian-Abkhazian confederation unexpectedly emerged, leading to suspicions that if a move towards normalising relations between Tbilisi and Moscow produces not just rhetorical or economic, but tangible political results, then Moscow will "sacrifice" Abkhazia and essentially "return" it to Georgia, at the cost of Georgia's transition to Russia's orbit.

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