



Commentary

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Easing Travel between Georgia and Breakaway Abkhazia

Curbs on ethnic Georgians' movement to and from breakaway Abkhazia are fuelling internal disputes and tensions with Tbilisi. South Ossetia's recently calmed crisis shows the risks of ignoring the problem. Abkhazia's election – though widely considered illegitimate – is a good moment for a course correction.

Thea, 40, has two homes. She probably spends slightly more time in her native village of Barghebi in Abkhazia. But the house on the outskirts of Zugdidi in the Georgia-controlled Samegrelo region is no less hers. An ethnic Georgian, Thea has travelled between her homes several times a month for years. Though the two dwellings lie only some 25km apart, the distance between them is more than physical. And it has widened of late.

“Every time I go to Abkhazia, I know it might be my last visit”, Thea tells me in Zugdidi, as she packs two big bags with food and medicine. She changes into a loose black dress and covers her curly hair with a scarf. The outfit is intended to help her blend in with locals in southern Abkhazia; otherwise, she might look like someone who spends a lot of time in Georgia-controlled territory. She hopes the change

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of clothes will help her avoid questions from Abkhaz and Russian security officials about her frequent trips to Zugdidi.

Travel between Abkhazia and Georgia-controlled territory has become more difficult since early 2019, though the roots of the problem go back years. Georgia, along with most of the rest of the world, considers Abkhazia to be Georgian territory, but Tbilisi has not controlled the region for over 25 years – since the 1992–1993 Georgian–Abkhaz war. For roughly fifteen years after that war, residents of Abkhazia could move freely back and forth to and from Georgia-controlled territory. But starting in 2008, following Georgia's war with Russia and Russia's subsequent recognition of Abkhazia as an independent state, movement across the line of separation has become considerably more constrained. Russian military and security personnel have deployed alongside Abkhazian counterparts to patrol the line of separation.

Sometimes, crossings are shut altogether. 2019 has been the worst year for closures to date. For two prolonged periods – first from 11 January to 5 February and now since 27 June – crossing has been either impossible or significantly restricted. Closure leaves families separated and creates economic hardship, especially among those on the Abkhaz side of the border who rely on trips to the Georgia-controlled side for access to food and medicine, which are cheaper there.

While Russia and the de facto authorities in Abkhazia are not fully transparent about their reasons for closing the crossings, tension

between Russia and Georgia clearly plays a role. In late July, the crossings closed amid anti-Russian street protests in Tbilisi. Though the broad ban on movement was lifted after about two weeks, ethnic Georgian men from Abkhazia between the ages of 18 and 65 continue to be turned away on the Abkhaz side of the line of separation, ostensibly for fear that they might join the protests – even though the demonstrations have petered out.

Extended limitations on movement compound other measures that appear intended to drive a wedge between Abkhazia's ethnic Georgian population and the communities to which they have ties in Georgia-controlled territory. This population of over 50,000 (about one quarter of the region's total people) lives mainly in Abkhazia's south, near Georgia-controlled territory. In 2013, de facto Abkhaz authorities in the regional capital, Sukhumi, stripped ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia of their Abkhaz passports, on the grounds that they already enjoyed Georgian citizenship – which many of them acquired when Tbilisi offered it to the region's residents in the early 1990s.

For a cautionary tale of how the situation in Abkhazia could evolve one need look no further than Georgia's other Russia-backed breakaway region, South Ossetia, which lies less than 200km to the east. There, a similar dynamic involving isolated populations living along the separation line and limited movement into Georgia-controlled territory sparked a crisis in recent weeks, calmed only through international mediation. The de facto authorities in Abkhazia would do well to embrace policies that tack away from, rather than into, the risk of escalation. The conclusion of the forthcoming election is a good moment to start moving in that direction.

The Case of Nabakevi

The implications of tightened crossing restrictions are illustrated by the recent history of Nabakevi, the third biggest village in southern Abkhazia. Just meters away from Nabakevi is another village, Khurcha, in Georgia-controlled territory. Natella, 68, lives in Khurcha on the main road that used to connect the two settlements. All her life, Natella had very close links



Local residents swim near the bridge that used to connect Abkhazia-based village of Otobaia with Georgia-controlled territory. The crossing point was closed in 2017. CRISISGROUP/Olesya Vartanyan

to Nabakevi. “Our kids went to kindergarten there”, she says. “When they got older, they came back [together with Nabakevi kids] to Khurcha’s school”.

The two villages remained tightly inter-linked, even when war raged. People from Nabakevi bought much of their food, including bread, from the shops of Khurcha. There, they also sold their crops of hazelnuts, the village’s main source of income. People from Khurcha went to Nabakevi to see their relatives and help them with plantings and harvests. The busy crossing between Khurcha and Nabakevi also became a locus of illegal trade between the Abkhaz and Georgian regions.

Social and economic ties to Khurcha – manifested in support from family and friends, and access to Khurcha’s cheaper markets – were critically important for Nabakevi residents’ subsistence after the village was devastated by conflict and wracked by poverty. In the summer of 2013, I spent several days in a typical Nabakevi home. The family that hosted me could barely make ends meet. Their house, which had burned down twice in the 1990s, lacked a floor. The bed I slept in stood on open ground. Desperate thieves roamed the community. My host family left their front door unlocked during the night – explaining that, if criminals came, it was better not to resist. They said, “We’re more likely to stay safe that way”.

But the ties that once bound Khurcha to Nabakevi are increasingly strained. The origins of the current situation go back to 2011, when Russian soldiers established a permanent base in Nabakevi. At first, the locals were happy. The military presence fostered a drop in the crime rate, with fewer robberies and killings. But in 2016, Russian soldiers started to build fences separating Nabakevi from Khurcha. From there, things got worse.

Sukhumi ordered the crossing between Nabakevi and Khurcha permanently closed in 2017, and there is no longer any movement between the two villages. At the time, residents from Nabakevi organised street protests and blocked the main regional road, demanding

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that the crossing reopen. It did not. The closure has wreaked havoc on Nabakevi’s fragile economy. Food and gasoline prices have tripled, according to Natella, who stays in touch with her relatives and friends on the other side using Skype.

Today, surveillance cameras and watch towers surround Nabakevi’s gardens at the edge of the line of separation. Russian soldiers, who patrol the village and ensure that no one crosses into Georgia-controlled territory, are no longer welcome. Some residents still try to cross, however, leading to a high rate of arrests and related incidents. For example, in March 2019, a Russian guard detained Irakli Kvaratskhelia, 28, trying to cross the line of separation from Georgia-controlled territory near Nabakevi. Russian officials reported that he committed suicide in detention hours later, an account that his family and Georgian officials reject. Both Russia and Georgia continue to investigate.

Abkhazia’s Response

Abkhazia’s de facto government recognises the problems faced by Nabakevi’s residents and ethnic Georgians more generally since the authorities have made it harder to travel. They have sought to improve access and opportunity in Abkhazia. They built a good road, which now connects Nabakevi with the town of Gali, the regional center of Abkhazia’s south. Gali itself has received significant de facto government investment in recent years: the roads have been repaired, night lights installed and the main local club renovated.

Moreover, in 2016 the de facto Abkhaz leadership adopted a new law, designed to address the problems caused by their 2013 revocation of Abkhaz passports held by the ethnic Georgian population. In place of those passports,

Sukhumi is offering ethnic Georgians residence permits. Those who accept the permits will be eligible to apply for Abkhaz passports in five years, provided that they agree to give up their Georgian citizenship. Some 11,000 Georgians – less than one quarter of the ethnic Georgian population living in the territory – have applied for the permits.

But while some ethnic Georgians appear prepared to embrace this proposed solution – an older Georgian man, Vepkhvia from the village of Saberio, shows me a document confirming that he should receive his residence permit in October – others are not convinced. They fear that the de facto authorities have ulterior motives, and that applying for a permit will expose them to adverse consequences for their ties to Georgia-controlled territory. “They will start counting how many days I spend in Zugdidi”, a woman in Gali tells me.

So far, the restrictions have not led to unrest. The locals may clench their fists, but they obey. But this peace should not be taken for granted. The history of the Georgian community in Abkhazia indicates that pressure from the authorities can lead to violence, including attacks on de facto local officials. For example, in the early 2000s and in 2010-2011, armed groups, with alleged support from Georgia-controlled territory, shot Abkhaz security officials, whom local Georgians had blamed for bad treatment and discrimination. Nothing of this sort has happened in the last six years, but rising tensions increase the risk that violence will flare up again.

Abkhaz Elections

Abkhazia is now in the midst of voting for the de facto president. The first round of voting on August 25 produced no outright winner. A second round is scheduled for 8 September. Most other countries view these elections as illegal and illegitimate because they regard Abkhazia as part of Georgia. Ethnic Georgians are excluded and there are no internationally mandated observers. Still, the elections themselves are well organised and genuinely contested. The

candidates have campaigned hard and engaged in serious policy discussions – including about the situation of ethnic Georgians.

One of the two candidates in the runoff is the incumbent Raul Khajimba, 61. A former security officer, he has been de facto president of Abkhazia since 2014. After an early August meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin, Khajimba is broadly seen as Russia’s preferred candidate. He was the biggest vote getter on 25 August, but only by a small margin, and he fell far short of the 50 per cent needed for victory.

Khajimba came to power five years ago in part by harnessing anti-Georgian sentiment in Abkhazia. He and his political allies stirred up unrest by launching a parliamentary investigation into what they claimed was illegal distribution of Abkhaz passports to ethnic Georgians living in the region. The street protests that followed included a forcible takeover of the local presidential palace. The then de facto leader resigned, early elections were called and Khajimba won handily.

Not surprisingly, many ethnic Georgians blame Khajimba for their problems, including closure of the crossings. But Khajimba and his supporters stand by his actions. While campaigning, Khajimba boasted that he had “established order along the border with Georgia”. The restrictions imposed on ethnic Georgians are, to his mind and the minds of his supporters, necessary to prevent that population from facilitating what they have described as “the creeping integration of Abkhazia into Georgia”.

Khajimba’s rival, Alkhas Kvitsinia, heads Abkhazia’s war veterans’ organisation, and has set a different tone. His vote total on 25 August was only some 1,600 fewer than Khajimba’s. Kvitsinia represents the former Abkhaz leadership, ousted by Khajimba five years ago, and is associated with the decision to grant ethnic Georgians Abkhazian passports in the first place.

Though ethnic Georgians in southern Abkhazia cannot vote, the race is so tight that both Kvitsinia and Khajimba campaigned in the area to fight for the 800 or so votes of ethnic Abkhaz living there. Their faceoff, of course, put them

face to face with disenfranchised ethnic Georgians as well. At an event in Gali on 20 August, a woman asked Kvitsinia whether he planned to return passports to those who had lost them. Kvitsinia was careful not to make promises, but insisted that ethnic discrimination could not bring order to the region. If he is elected, his campaign has promised – without offering specifics – to seek other ways forward.

Khajimba appeared to embrace the distance between the two candidates when he spoke at the same venue two days later. “I know this is a painful topic for you”, he told the audience. “I know, some come here and tell you that as soon as they come to power, they will resolve the issue of passports and you will all get passports again. I will be open and honest with you: these are lies, lies, because to do so runs counter to the legislation of Abkhazia”. He insisted that ethnic Georgians would have to give up Georgian citizenship to get Abkhaz passports.

Georgia's Role

In addition to raising the plight of the ethnic Georgian population in Abkhazia repeatedly in international forums (where foreign partners

are generally sympathetic), Georgia's government has undertaken several projects near the line of separation in an effort to improve conditions for this population. Metres away from the main crossing in the village of Rukhi, a big new hospital will open in a matter of weeks. A large trade centre is nearby. But none of Tbilisi's projects will help ethnic Georgians on the Abkhazian side of the line if they cannot reach them, which is surely at least partly the point of the crossing restrictions.

Georgia also provides financial support across the line of separation. Abkhazia's ethnic Georgian elderly population receives monthly pensions from Tbilisi. Many teachers and doctors in southern Abkhazia are similarly paid out of Georgia's budget. As of this year, young people from Abkhazia (whatever their ethnicity) can enter Georgian universities without paying tuition or taking preliminary exams. Finally, Tbilisi is on the verge of launching a major project to support trade with Abkhazia, meant to facilitate the tax-free export of Abkhaz produce to the rest of Georgia and abroad. These last steps are aimed at improving Georgia's image in the eyes of all Abkhazia residents, to support



The Georgian government sponsored the construction of a new hospital near the main crossing in the village of Rukhi. CRISISGROUP/Olesya Vartanyan

Tbilisi's goal of eventual reintegration, which Sukhumi, of course, fundamentally opposes.

Tbilisi and Sukhumi have not spoken directly to one another in years. Their representatives take part in the Geneva International Discussions – created to help manage the consequences of the 2008 conflict – but these conversations do not touch on the specifics of relations between the two. During the last six years, Tbilisi has consistently proposed to Sukhumi that they hold direct informal talks, including to discuss Georgia's plans to increase trade. The de facto officials from Abkhazia have said no, insisting on official recognition of Abkhazia's independence as a precondition. In the meantime, de facto authorities in Abkhazia do not hide their irritation with Georgian projects intended to benefit those living on the Abkhaz side of the border – seeing them as undermining their own efforts to integrate ethnic Georgians and solidify Abkhazia's independence.

Possible Ways Out

Whoever emerges from the election as Abkhazia's de facto leader will have to assess how to move forward on the issue of crossing restrictions. The main considerations on both sides of the issue are clear. On one side is the belief that greater access to Georgia for Abkhazia's ethnic Georgians is bad for the de facto entity. On the other are the downsides of restricted access, including the weakening of southern Abkhazia's economy and the creation of discontent among a large part of Abkhazia's population, which could boil over into instability. The conversations that both 8 September candidates had in Gali show that they are not blind to the frustration of ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia.

Whoever is Abkhazia's de facto leader after the polls close on 8 September should take heed of recent events in South Ossetia. South Ossetia

“Further deterioration of Georgian-Russian relations would create its own risks both in the region and beyond.”

has a population of around 30,000 people, a fraction of Abkhazia's. There fencing and closure of the crossings started much earlier, in 2011. These activities have provoked condemnation from EU and U.S. officials, including in meetings with Russian counterparts. In early August, a renewed fencing project by Russian and de facto border guards triggered the most serious crisis in Georgia since the 2008 war. Tbilisi, which had previously avoided physical response, this time took action. On 24 August, it placed a new police station on the edge of the line of separation. Tskhinvali threatened to attack the station if it was not removed. For a week, the two traded accusations. With the risk of escalation high, the Russian foreign ministry called on all involved to return to “constructive discussion of contested issues” and outside mediators brought the parties back to the negotiating table on 30 August. Talks continue.

An Abkhaz variation on recent events in South Ossetia is in no one's interest. Not only does Abkhazia's larger population mean that even more people would be threatened, but the resulting further deterioration of Georgian-Russian relations would create its own risks both in the region and beyond. Georgian officials raise the deepening humanitarian crisis in Abkhazia in their public statements and meetings with Western partners with increasing frequency. For now, foreign mediators representing the EU, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and the UN, have tried to calm the situation. They have criticised the closure of crossings and called for more communication between the parties.

Against this backdrop, it is time for Sukhumi to revisit its crossings policy. For the de facto leadership, leniency could stabilise a potentially volatile situation. From the perspective of Russia, whose acquiescence and support is needed to make any new policy work, relaxing the restrictions is also a smart move. As Russia's shift toward conciliatory rhetoric regarding the August South Ossetian crisis shows, Moscow recognises the danger of renewed conflict in Georgia. One reason may be that Moscow views

instability in South Ossetia (and, by the same logic, Abkhazia) as an additional and unwanted point of tension with the West. The instability also, of course, worsens Russian-Georgian relations, which had thawed somewhat, to mutual economic and strategic benefit, in the years since 2008. And having to pour resources and attention into managing a deteriorating situation would cost Russia financially and geostrategically.

A more peaceful line of separation would also help prevent dangerous incidents that could threaten the local population and Russian and de facto Abkhaz security personnel. In almost a decade since their deployment to the region, only one Russian soldier has been killed. But that may be in part because Tbilisi's pledge to build relations with the de facto authorities has helped peace to hold for the last six years. The more frustrated the ethnic Georgian population, and the higher the tension between Sukhumi and Tbilisi, the greater the risk that something will go wrong.

Sukhumi, with Russian support, can begin to lower tensions by lifting remaining restrictions on crossings put in place this year. Because crossings have been reopened in the past, no one need view doing so now as capitulation. Sukhumi could cast the measure as a supportive gesture toward a stressed and vulnerable population.

In time, de facto authorities and their Russian partners should also revisit past decisions to close crossings near densely populated villages. Two sites are worthy of particular attention. One is Nabakevi. The other is the village of Otobaia. Ease of movement between these

villages and their neighbours would do much to alleviate residents' hardship and generate good-will.

No less urgent is to restart the Incidents Prevention and Response Mechanism, which has not functioned in its full capacity for over a year. The mechanism was created back in 2009 within the framework of the Geneva International Discussions. It consists of regular meetings of Georgian, Russian and de facto Abkhaz security officials, facilitated by international mediators. In the past, it has served as a forum for discussing issues like crossing points and fencing and has been useful for reducing tensions. Meetings ceased in 2016 after a de facto border guard shot an ethnic Georgian from Abkhazia six times in the head near a crossing. Some telephone communications have continued between the parties, but absent regular discussions, they have been unable to inform one another of and discuss planned security measures along the line of separation, including closures of crossings. Thus, they have no easy way to bring down tension when incidents occur or policies change.

Both Abkhazia's de facto leadership and its Russian partners should have an interest in resolving problems at the line of separation with Georgia before they grow. The key to stability is in improving conditions for ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia, not creating additional hurdles.