

ABKHAZIA: DEEPENING DEPENDENCE

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ABKHAZIA: DEEPENING DEPENDENCE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The historically coveted region of Abkhazia has become even more dependent on Moscow since Russia's controversial recognition a year and a half ago. Russia is financing half the region's budget, and against vigorous Georgian protests, it is spending \$465 million to refurbish existing and build new military installations in the picturesque Black Sea coastal area. Virtually the entire population holds Russian citizenship, and almost all trade is with the northern neighbour. It will take constructive, creative thinking on the part of Georgian, Russian, Abkhazian and international actors alike to restore even a modicum of confidence between the parties to the conflict. Given Abkhazia's unrealistic insistence that Georgia recognise it as independent and the equally unrealistic prospect that Sukhumi will acknowledge Georgia's sovereignty, the two parties should focus on creating economic and humanitarian links without status preconditions in order to benefit both, build stability and give momentum to a long reconciliation process.

Abkhazian officials concede that the entity's "independence" is in effect limited by the asymmetrical nature of its relationship with Russia but do not see their deepening dependence on Moscow as a threat. "Independence is a means to an end, and not an end in itself", a high-ranking official told Crisis Group. "We have the amount of independence that meets our security and economic needs".

In return for recognition and aid, Russia obtained highly prized military-strategic assets in Abkhazia, damaged Georgia's drive to join NATO, demonstrated its anger at Western nations for their recognition of Kosovo and underlined its antipathy towards the government of Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili. Perhaps most notably, Moscow has shown that in certain circumstances it can flex its muscles unilaterally without suffering significant political costs. Relations with the U.S., NATO and the European Union (EU) are essentially back to normal, even though Moscow has failed to implement important elements of the ceasefire agreements concluded at the end of its August 2008 war with Georgia by President Medvedev and French President Sarkozy, the latter acting as the EU Presidency.

Abkhazia's international status is far from settled. With only three countries other than Russia considering it independent from Georgia and no chance of any EU member-state or other major international recognition in the near term, the conflict is unresolved and could again destabilise the southern Caucasus. As many as 212,000 ethnic Georgians remain forcibly displaced, and whereas some ethnic Georgians have in the past been able to return to the Gali district, Abkhazian officials most recently stated that no returns to other parts of the entity will be authorised. Questions also linger as to how solid a long-term asymmetrical relationship between Russia and Abkhazia might be. Some, especially ethnic Abkhaz, who number less than 100,000 in the entity, are wary of becoming overly reliant on Moscow economically, politically, and culturally, or essentially being assimilated.

The chances for meaningful progress between Tbilisi and Sukhumi were slim even before the 2008 war and have been further eroded. Tbilisi sees the conflict as a matter of Moscow occupying and annexing its territory, while the Abkhazian authorities see Russia as a guarantor of security. Diplomatic relations between Moscow and Tbilisi have been cut. The bitterness between the two governments is deeply personalised and emotional. Beyond occasional discussions in Geneva called for by the ceasefire agreements, there is no real process or forum for Russia, Georgia and representatives from Abkhazia and South Ossetia to find solutions to even day-to-day issues.

The Georgian authorities should show their constructiveness by not trying to isolate Abkhazia, even though Moscow's flouting of the ceasefire agreements makes this a bitter pill to swallow. It remains uncertain, given their military and economic dependence on Moscow, how much room for independent manoeuvre the de facto authorities in Sukhumi have to deal with Georgia. The long-awaited "State Strategy on the Occupied Territories: Engagement through Cooperation" unveiled by Tbilisi in January 2010 partly reflects new thinking. Though the initial reaction from Abkhazia has been dismissive, the plan contains some concepts that, if followed through, could start the two sides on a more promising course.

This report gives a snapshot of the state of affairs in Abkhazia today, particularly the extent of Russian involvement. Future reporting will deal more extensively with opportunities for finding common ground, as well as present more detailed analysis of refugee and IDP and other issues.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

To all sides:

1. Ensure the free movement and operation of international and local humanitarian organisations to and within Abkhazia, without status or other political preconditions.

To the Government of the Russian Federation:

2. Implement fully the terms of the 2008 ceasefire agreements, which oblige Russia to reduce troop levels to those mandated before 8 August 2008, and withdraw from previously unoccupied areas.
3. Refrain from building permanent Russian military installations in Abkhazia.
4. Disavow as inconsistent with international conventions and norms recent statements by the authorities in Abkhazia that they will not allow return of the up to 212,000 still displaced Georgians.
5. Do not claim that Abkhazia is part of the “Olympic zone” or emphasise its participation in the organisation of the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympic Games.
6. Engage with any Georgian government to defuse tensions, including the current one with which Moscow has no formal relations.

To the Government of Georgia:

7. Cooperate with the EU, UN and NGOs engaged in projects in Abkhazia; streamline formalities for project implementation; and make changes, as needed, to the “Law on Occupied Territories” to facilitate such activities.

8. Continue, without setting status preconditions, to offer the Abkhazians measures that allow them to develop ties beyond Russia, including a free trade zone in the Gali and Zugdidi districts and the re-opening of trade and transport links, such as regular bus, ferry and air connections.
9. Support initiatives aimed at broadening the dialogue between Georgian and Abkhazian officials and civil society groups.

To authorities in Abkhazia:

10. Use opportunities to engage with Georgia in direct dialogue at any level, and reconsider Georgian offers to open economic, transport and trade links.
11. Pass the necessary legislation to regulate the status of ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia (mainly the Gali region); allow free movement by persons in that region across the administrative border with Georgia; and develop a plan outlining under what conditions and when IDPs will be allowed to return to other parts of Abkhazia.

To the EU, UN and other international actors:

12. Continue to implement humanitarian, confidence-building, economic integration and democracy building projects in Abkhazia and finalise agreements with Tbilisi and Sukhumi to make quicker decisions on project implementation.
13. Continue or renew contacts with authorities and civil society groups in Abkhazia – including by travelling there – without implying legitimisation or recognition of Abkhazia as an independent state or otherwise undermining Georgian sovereignty.

**Sukhumi/Tbilisi/Istanbul/Brussels,
26 February 2010**

ABKHAZIA: DEEPENING DEPENDENCE

I. INTRODUCTION

Abkhazia¹ welcomed its recognition as an independent state by Russia on 26 August 2008 with much fanfare. Since then, however, the entity of some 214,000 people² has become ever more dependent on its large northern neighbour. Recognition came almost fifteen years after Tbilisi lost effective control over most of the region. Abkhazia has had de facto independence since 1993 but continues to be recognised as part of Georgia by all but four states.³

Relations between Abkhazia, Russia and Georgia have steadily deteriorated since 2004, when Mikheil Saakashvili was elected president in Georgia, and Russia became increasingly concerned about his desire to chart an independent policy and NATO's eastward expansion.⁴ In 2004-2008, Moscow increased its economic, military and budgetary support to the entity.⁵ Especially after the U.S.

and many European Union (EU) countries recognised Kosovo's unilaterally declared independence in February 2008 despite Russia's vociferous objections, Moscow officials said Abkhazian independence was all but inevitable.⁶

The turning point, however, came with the Georgia-Russia war that started on 8 August 2008 in South Ossetia but quickly spread to much of Georgia. Contrary to widespread misconceptions, there was relatively little combat in and around Abkhazia. Rather, the region was used mainly as a transit route for Russian troops entering Georgian-controlled territory. What fighting did take place was concentrated in the mountainous Kodori Gorge area in the far north east of Abkhazia. This area, inhabited by ethnic Georgians, had been controlled by Georgian militias since the breakup of the Soviet Union and by Georgian interior ministry troops since 2006.

On 9 August 2008, the Abkhazian de facto authorities⁷ requested that a team from the UN mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) that was monitoring the Kodori Gorge leave the area.⁸ After its departure, aerial bombardments of

¹The term Abkhazian(s) refers to residents of Abkhazia, regardless of ethnicity, or to the de facto authorities or institutions. The term Abkhaz (singular as well as plural) refers to a person of Abkhaz ethnicity. The two terms are not used interchangeably. This report follows that standard usage.

²According to the Abkhazian information agency Apsnypress, the 2003 census found a population of 214,000. Other estimates, notably by UN diplomats, have ranged from 180,000 to 220,000.

³The four states that have recognised Abkhazia as an independent states are Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua and Nauru.

⁴For more detailed histories of the conflict in Abkhazia, see previous Crisis Group Europe Reports, N°176, *Abkhazia Today*, 15 September 2006; N°179, *Abkhazia, Ways Forward*, 18 January 2007; N°193, *Russia and Georgia: Clashing over Abkhazia*, 5 June 2008; and N°195, *Russia vs. Georgia: the Fallout*, 22 August 2008.

⁵In March 2008, Russia's foreign ministry announced its decision to lift the economic sanctions against Abkhazia. It also urged other members of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) to "undertake analogous steps and withdraw from the regime of restrictions against Abkhazia". "Russian Federation Withdraws from Regime of Restrictions Established in 1996 for Abkhazia", press release, foreign ministry, 6 March 2008, www.mid.ru/brp_4.nsf/0/79C58F476CAEC4E8C32574040058934C. Meanwhile, Moscow continued to enforce

its commercial embargo and visa restrictions against the rest of Georgia. The CIS sanctions against Abkhazia were introduced by unanimous decision of the twelve member-state presidents in January 1996.

⁶Moscow made it clear in many statements that recognition of Kosovo would, contrary to Western assertions, not be a "unique case", but a precedent that could be applied to unrecognised entities it supported – Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Moldova's Transdniester region. Transcript of Annual Press Conference of the President of Russia, February 14, 2008, www.kremlin.ru/eng/speeches/2008/02/14/1011_type82915_160266.html. "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov Meets Presidents Sergey Bagapsh of Abkhazia and Eduard Kokoity of South Ossetia", press release, foreign ministry, 15 February 2008.

⁷The authorities, officials and government of Abkhazia are all considered "de facto" due to the entity's unsettled situation. To avoid redundancies and heavy phrasing, however, this report does not preface every use of those nouns with that qualifier. This pragmatic usage should not be construed as carrying or implying any substantive meaning.

⁸"UN's Ban says Georgia conflict widening", Reuters, 10 August 2008, <http://in.reuters.com/article/worldNews/idINIndia-34921720080810>.

the gorge began on the same day,⁹ resulting in the wounding of four Georgian civilians and three police officers.¹⁰ At the same time, Russian forces crossed the Georgian-Abkhazian ceasefire line on the Inguri River and moved deep into Georgian territory, occupying a number of locations, including the towns of Zugdidi, Senaki and Poti. Facing risk of encirclement, the Georgian security forces deployed in the gorge left with most of the local population on the night of 11-12 August.¹¹ UNOMIG monitors who visited the Kodori area in early October 2008 reported that it was “full of Russian military personnel”.¹²

Abkhazians argue that they deserve Russian (and other international) recognition because of their historical ties to the territory, right to national self determination and gradual construction of effective state institutions, rule of law, armed forces and economy. Unlike South Ossetia, which gained Russian recognition at the same time, Abkhazia’s de facto government is comprised almost entirely of indigenous officials.¹³ Since the mid-1990s, Abkhazia has slowly begun to rebuild its economy, mainly focusing on tourism, and it has a fairly active civil society. It has also allowed the return of ethnic Georgians to the Gali region, even though as described below, returnees face many challenges, and it is now explicitly refusing to consider return to other parts of Abkhazia.

But rather than achieving more extensive de facto independence since the dramatic events of 2008, Abkhazia seems to have become more dependent on Russia. This report concentrates on the current situation there, with a particular focus on the extent of Russian involvement. While it offers a number of suggestions for how Sukhumi and Tbilisi might make a start on an inevitably long journey toward reconciliation, subsequent reporting will deal more extensively with the opportunities for finding common ground, as well as analyse refugee and IDP and other issues in greater detail.

II. RECOGNITION’S TANGIBLE EFFECTS

Under the terms of the Sarkozy-Medvedev-Saakashvili ceasefire agreements of August and September 2008, Russian forces are required to pull back to their pre-war positions. This should have meant that some 1,800 Russian troops stayed predominantly in Abkhazia’s Gali region, where they were serving as peacekeepers on behalf of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS).¹⁴ But actually Russia’s military presence has changed quantitatively and qualitatively since summer 2008. Moscow insists that pre-independence agreements have been superseded by Abkhazia’s “new reality”, which leaves it free to determine military relations on the basis of “bilateral” cooperation agreements.¹⁵ Georgia, on the other hand, which quit the CIS in 2008, shortly after the war ended,¹⁶ claims that the organisation’s peacekeeping force (PKF) no longer has a legal mandate and refers to the Russian troops as “occupation forces”.¹⁷

¹⁴Point 5 of the 15-16 August ceasefire agreement states in lapidary fashion: “return of Russian forces to their pre-conflict positions”. See Crisis Group Report, *Russia vs. Georgia*, op. cit., pp. 4-6.

¹⁵Russian officials routinely refer to the situation existing after recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as the “new reality” and use the concept as apparent justification for actions inconsistent with the terms of the ceasefire agreements signed at the conclusion of the 2008 war and related international commitments. See, for example, “On the discussion of a draft resolution to extend the UN Mission’s mandate on the Abkhaz-Georgian border”, foreign ministry statement, 15 June 2009, www.un.int/russia/new/MainRoot/docs/press/090615eprel.htm; and “Russia urges UN to back independence move”, *Russia Today*, 27 August 2008, at www.derechos.org/nizkor/europa/caucasus/un1.html. An example of an agreement subsequent to the August 2008 war described as reflecting the new reality and justifying subsequent Russian military measures not envisaged in the ceasefire documents is the “military cooperation agreement” signed with Abkhazia on 15 September 2009 (see below).

¹⁶The one-year exit procedure for members quitting the CIS meant that Georgia technically remained a member of the organisation until late August 2009.

¹⁷Georgian officials and official documents often refer to Russian troops in Georgia as “occupation forces”. “The war between Russia and Georgia, its initial conditions, chronology, legal evaluation and deficiencies revealed in the activities of the Government of Georgia”, press release, Parliament of Georgia, 18 December 2008, www.parliament.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=1315&info_id=22018; “Saakashvili’s Televised Address”, *Civil Georgia*, 18 August 2008, www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=19187.

⁹“The Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia (IIFFMCG)”, vol. II, ch. 5, p. 213.

¹⁰Georgian government response to the IIFFMCG inquiries. Available at <http://georgiaupdate.gov.ge/en/tagliavini/2e23d3845c1828554649713a4b935d3a/e375d24e37e2a27fa45df29404b95e03>.

¹¹IIFFMCG, op. cit., vol. II, ch. 5, p. 213.

¹²Crisis Group interviews, UNOMIG troops who had been in Kodori the day before, Tbilisi, October 2008.

¹³Many members of the de facto government in South Ossetia are Russians – often military and security types with no previous ties to the region.

Lack of substantial discussion between Russia and Georgia about the military presence and security issues is the single biggest threat to stability and impediment to progress over Abkhazia. Russian officials have repeatedly said they will not talk with the Saakashvili government. Both sides should realise that intransigence only deepens mistrust and inflames an already volatile situation. For progress to occur, Moscow and Tbilisi will at some stage have to hold direct talks on a range of issues. Waiting for changes in leadership is a counterproductive strategy that makes mending fences harder the longer relations are frozen.

A. RUSSIA'S POST-2008 WAR MILITARY BUILD-UP IN ABKHAZIA

Russian officials have given various figures, from 1,700 to 3,700, for their troop numbers in Abkhazia.¹⁸ In the absence of international monitors on the ground, Western military analysts with access to satellite imagery estimate that between 4,000 and 5,000 Russian security personnel are there, including coast guard units, "border" forces and regular troops.¹⁹

Russia and the de facto Abkhazian authorities signed a "military cooperation treaty" on 15 September 2009, according to which Moscow can build, use and improve military infrastructure and bases in Abkhazia and create and maintain joint military contingents. The agreement can be extended automatically for increments of five years after the expiration of the initial 49-year term.²⁰ A follow-up agreement on "a united military base in the territory of the "Republic of Abkhazia" was formally signed on 17 February, 2010. NATO immediately condemned the agreement as illegitimate.²¹

¹⁸ "Russia may keep fewer troops in Georgian regions", Associated Press, 19 May 2009. "Georgia: Russia plans three military bases in Abkhazia", EurasiaNet, 6 February 2009, www.eurasianet.org/departments/insightb/articles/eav020609g.shtml.

¹⁹ The 5,000 figure was provided to Crisis Group by Western military officials, Brussels, September 2009. The 4,000 figure came from a Western European intelligence source. Crisis Group interview, EU diplomat, Brussels, January 2010.

²⁰ Russia signs military cooperation deals with Abkhazia, S. Ossetia", RIA Novosti, 15 September 2009. http://en.rian.ru/mlitary_news/20090915/156135405.html. "Chairman of the Russian Audit Chamber Sergey Stepashin told Interfax today after visiting the Russian military base in Gudauta: "Once these documents [an agreement on military cooperation between Russia and Abkhazia, as well as a treaty on a Russian base in Abkhazia] have been signed, capital construction and financing should start in accordance with the status of the Russian military base". Interfax, 23 July 2009.

²¹ "We do not consider any agreements signed between the Russian Federation and the regions of Georgia as having any

validity", Reuters quoted NATO spokeswoman Carmen Romero as saying. "The North Atlantic Council has condemned the decision by the Russian Federation to recognise the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and called on it to revoke it", she said. Reuters, 18 Feb 2009.

Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, during a visit to Abkhazia in August 2009, promised that Russia would spend 15 to 16 billion Russian roubles (over \$465 million) in 2010 to upgrade and build bases and reinforce Abkhazia's "borders".²² This is more than Georgia's entire defence budget for the year (\$435 million).²³ Sergei Stepashin, the powerful chairman of Russia's Audit Chamber, said during a visit to Abkhazia, "we are here for the long term, and the Russian base in Abkhazia [at Gudauta] should therefore be one of the best. ... Cooperation with the authorities of the republic is excellently established, and all issues that arise are resolved quickly and well".²⁴

The Bombora airbase near the town of Gudauta, the largest military airfield in the entire South Caucasus,²⁵ is central to Moscow's plans for its long-term military presence.²⁶ It is of particular significance because of its location along the Black Sea and lengthy runway that can handle heavy payload military cargo craft. The Russian defence ministry said it would staff it with 1,500 troops by the end of 2009. Sergey Chebotarev, the base commander, noted that many soldiers are bringing their families, and he expected the base would contain a large mili-

validity", Reuters quoted NATO spokeswoman Carmen Romero as saying. "The North Atlantic Council has condemned the decision by the Russian Federation to recognise the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and called on it to revoke it", she said. Reuters, 18 Feb 2009.

²² "Putin visits Abkhazia, confirms Russian aid commitments", RIA Novosti, 12 August 2009, <http://en.rian.ru/russia/20090812/155792028.html>. The Russian rouble – henceforth referred to in this report simply as rouble – is widely used as Abkhazia's currency.

²³ "2010 State Budget Approved", Civil Georgia, 4 December 2009, <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=21751>.

²⁴ "Russia, Abkhazia to ink deal on military base 'before end of July' – official", Interfax, 23 July 2009.

²⁵ As part of its 1999 commitments, undertaken at the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) summit in Istanbul and enshrined in the Final Act of the treaty on Convention Armed Forces in Europe (CFE), Russia was to close the Gudauta base, evacuate the personnel and equipment and hand it over to Georgia by 1 July 2001. Russia claimed that it closed the base that year, but Georgia said it never did. "Resolution of the Parliament of Georgia on the Military Bases of the Russian Federation Located on the Territory of Georgia", 10 March 2005. As recently as 2006, Russia admitted to maintaining a large presence at the base. "Russia's retention of Gudauta Base – an unfulfilled CFE treaty commitment", Eurasia Daily Monitor, 21 May 2006, www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=31702. "Abkhaz Reports: NATO parliamentarians to visit Abkhazia", Civil Georgia, 20 April 2006, www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=12382.

²⁶ "Russia, Abkhazia to ink deal on military base", op. cit.

tary town within a year or two.²⁷ It is expected that T-62 tanks, armoured vehicles and S-300 air defence systems will be deployed there.²⁸

Russia also plans the construction of a new Black Sea naval base in the town of Ochamchire – formerly predominantly ethnic Georgian, now Abkhaz – just ten to fifteen kilometres from the administrative border with Georgia.²⁹ Some Russian officials have suggested that Ochamchire might help offset the strategic loss of Sevastopol, if Ukraine does not renew the lease for the Black Sea fleet when it ends in 2017.³⁰ Though the navy has already deployed patrol boats, it would likely not be possible to turn Ochamchire into the kind of deep-water port that Russia now has in the Crimea, due to the constant build-up of silt along the coast.³¹ But the proximity of the base to Georgia and the chances for naval incidents in waters recognised as Georgian by all but Russia and a handful of its allies are potential hazards in themselves. Ochamchire is within striking distance of Georgia's Poti and Batumi ports, which have been periodically visited by U.S. warships since the 2008 war.³²

Under a separate treaty that Sukhumi signed with Moscow,³³ Russian forces have also taken control of the administrative border with Georgia. Although guards at the lone open border crossing are Abkhazians, there are hundreds, if not more, Russian forces in the zone. The camouflage- and fatigue-clad troops can often be seen in military vehicles in the Gali district, near the

frontier.³⁴ According to Stepashin, “the state border between Abkhazia and Georgia will be fully sealed off and equipped by 2011, taking into account all modern technical means”.³⁵

The head of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) border guard operation in Abkhazia, General Yuri Zviryk, stated that 433 people were detained for “border offences” from May to December 2009. He emphasised the risks of sabotage and organised crime and added that Abkhazia's “maritime borders” were being protected by a range of measures, including radar and naval forces.³⁶ On 15 September, 2009, Russia officially warned that it would intercept and detain Georgian coast guard boats in the Black Sea if they attempted to interfere with ships trading with Abkhazia, or the Georgian boats otherwise trespassed into “Abkhazian waters”. The warning accompanied the deployment of Russian coast guard units to Abkhazia.³⁷

If Abkhazian officials harbour any reservations about the Russian presence, they do not show it. A high-ranking official told Crisis Group that Russian troops would not leave Abkhazia “even if Georgia recognised Abkhazia as an independent state. Russia is our guarantee of security”.³⁸

The number of Russians in high military and security positions in Abkhazia, according to official Abkhazian sources, seems not to have changed since 2008. They are also far less than in South Ossetia, where many Russian military or business figures with no previous ties to that region have held key posts in the past several years, including prime minister, defence minister and other top security positions.

One of the few notable Russians is Aleksandr Pavliushko. Until April 2008 he was the head of staff of the Russian peacekeeping contingent in Abkhazia. He then switched from chief peacekeeper to become an Abkhazian de facto deputy defence minister. Georgian government officials said this was just one more proof that the peacekeeping contingent, which served under a CIS mandate but included only Russians, was always on the Abkhazian side. They noted that given his high rank, he had an intimate knowledge of the terrain in the area and was well suited

²⁷ Vesti Novosti, 17 December 2009, at <http://vesti.ru/doc.html?id=331589>.

²⁸ “Russia to allocate over \$465 mln to boost Abkhazia's security”, RIA Novosti, 8 August 2009, <http://en.rian.ru/russia/20090812/155790250.html>.

²⁹ “U.S.-Russia Stand-off Looms as Moscow Announces Expansion of Military Bases”, *Guardian*, 12 August 2009.

³⁰ *Ibid*; “Russia, Abkhazia to ink deal on military base”, *op. cit*; “Abkhaz border to be fully equipped by 2011 – Russian senior official”, Interfax, 24 July 2009.

³¹ Crisis Group interviews, Western military officials, Brussels, September 2009.

³² The first U.S. warship arrived in the Georgian port of Batumi carrying humanitarian aid immediately after the end of hostilities in August 2008. Another entered the Poti port on 5 September, while Russian troops were still stationed there. U.S. warships also sailed into the ports of Batumi and Poti in October, November and December 2008. The most recent such visitor arrived on 14 July 2009 to participate in combined training exercises with Georgia's coast guard. “U.S. warship to make port calls in Batumi, Poti”, *Civil Georgia*, 11 July 2009; “U.S. warship confronts Russian military in ‘tinderbox’ port”, *Times Online*, 6 September 2008; “U.S. warship reaches Georgian port”, *BBC*, 24 August 2008.

³³ Russia and Abkhazia signed the agreement on 30 April 2009. “Georgia: Abkhaz Parliament Ratifies Border Accord with Russia”, *ITAR-TASS*, 10 July 2009.

³⁴ Crisis Group observations, Abkhazia, December 2009.

³⁵ “Abkhaz border to be fully equipped by 2011 – Russian senior official”, Interfax, 24 July 2009.

³⁶ “433 people have been detained for violating the borders of Abkhazia in 2009” (in Russian), *Kavkazskiy Uzel*, 4 February 2010, at www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/165075.

³⁷ “Naval security deficit growing in the Black Sea”, *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, 16 September 2009, www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=35505.

³⁸ Crisis Group interview, high-ranking Abkhazian government official, Sukhumi, December 2009.

to help prepare the Russian incursion into Georgia via Abkhazia during the August 2008 war.³⁹

Anatoly Zaitsev, Abkhazia's chief of general staff since March 2005, is a senior Russian defence ministry official.⁴⁰ Alexander Voinsky, another transplanted Russian and a former Russian KGB officer as well as ex-navy captain, is the de facto deputy secretary of the National Security Council.⁴¹

Abkhazia's regular forces are believed to be small, with estimates of the standing army ranging from 1,000 to 5,000.⁴² According to the 2010 budget, a relatively symbolic 283 million roubles (\$9.8 million) is allocated for defence spending, just 7.3 per cent of the total.⁴³ However, some estimates put defence spending as high as 49.5 per cent of GDP in 2008, when Russian subsidies were taken into account.⁴⁴ While it is extremely difficult to verify any of these figures,⁴⁵ it is possible that its own

³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Tbilisi, January, 2010. Georgian sources contend he was responsible for planning and conducting the military operations in the Kodori Gorge against Georgians in August 2008. "What Military Preparations Were Made Prior to August 2008", Georgia Update, September, 2009. Available at <http://georgiaupdate.gov.ge/en/tagliavini/2e23d3845c1828554649713a4b935d3a/1f7a25eb986af811d07a77f9e992a40a/ddd63798b0268023b81b5422745f2d3b>.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, Apsnypress, January 2010. He was deputy commander of the Trans-Baikal Military District.

⁴¹ (in Russian), RIA Novosti, 9 July 2005, at www.rian.ru/politics/20050709/40877156.html; See also "What Military Preparations Were Made Prior to August 2008", Georgia Update, at <http://georgiaupdate.gov.ge/en/tagliavini/2e23d3845c1828554649713a4b935d3a/1f7a25eb986af811d07a77f9e992a40a/ddd63798b0268023b81b5422745f2d3b>.

⁴² A Russian analyst claimed the number of Abkhazia's regular forces was at 5,000 to 10,000, including police, security, border and customs forces. "Why Georgia will lose the next war" (in Russian), *Segodnia*, 27 February 2007, <http://segodnia.ru/index.php?pgid=2&partid=45&newsid=3622>; According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), *The Military Balance 2009* (London, 2005), Abkhazian forces are "1500 +"; Anna Matveeva and Duncan Hiscock (eds.), *The Caucasus Armed and Divided* (Saferworld, April 2003) estimated them at 3,000. Estimates of the number of "reservists" range run as high as 40,000-50,000, or practically the entire able-bodied non-Georgian adult male population.

⁴³ Crisis Group telephone interview, Apsnypress official, citing the official Abkhazian budget for 2010, January 2010.

⁴⁴ Compared to 5.4 per cent in Georgia and 3.8 per cent in Russia. Andrei Illarionov, "Russian-Georgian War: Documents and Materials" (in Russian), *Kontinent*, no. 140, 2009, at <http://magazines.russ.ru/continent/2009/140/illar.html>.

⁴⁵ Abkhazia had not previously calculated GDP figures, according to its economy ministry. Crisis Group interviews, Sukhumi, December, 2009. In 2006, the de facto finance minister said that 35 per cent of the budget was spent on the military and police. See Crisis Group Report, *Abkhazia Today*, op. cit.

military spending could be falling now that the tiny entity has signed defence agreements with Russia and Moscow has several thousand troops stationed there. "They are not investing in equipment, recruiting or training to any significant extent", said a Western military official with knowledge of the Abkhazian forces. There is little reason for them to, as Russia now provides for their defence".⁴⁶

Russian officials, as well as the authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, have repeatedly alleged that Georgia is engaged in an arms build-up and is preparing to start new hostilities in either of the entities. Georgian officials deny the charges and have noted that their government was not even allowed by Washington to purchase American defensive armaments, such as anti-aircraft equipment. EUMM observers, who do regular patrols up to the administrative boundaries with Abkhazia and South Ossetia and across the rest of Georgia, told Crisis Group that they have found no evidence to back claims of increasing Georgian military activity. "We have not seen any indication of this", an EUMM officer said.⁴⁷ Georgia has cut its defence budget by more than 50 per cent, from 1,547 billion lari (\$899 million) in 2008 to 750 million (\$436 million) in 2010.⁴⁸ Over the past few months, 600 mid-level officers, including 100 colonels, were discharged from the armed forces, partially in an effort to slash spending.⁴⁹

B. ECONOMIC ASPECTS

1. Dependence on Russian financial aid and investment

Even though Abkhazia's state budget has been steadily increasing over the past years,⁵⁰ its dependence on Russia for budget support is as important as its reliance on Moscow's military presence. In 2009, approximately 60 per cent (1.9 billion roubles, \$65.5 million) of the state budget was direct support from Moscow. For 2010, the monetary figure will remain the same but fall in percentage terms, to 49 per cent (1.9 billion roubles, \$63 million, out of a total budget of 3.875 billion roubles, \$128.5 million). This includes both infrastructure projects and direct budget support.⁵¹ Russia also pays local

⁴⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, Western defence official, Washington DC, February 2010.

⁴⁷ Crisis Group interviews, Tbilisi, February 2010.

⁴⁸ Civil.ge, 8 Oct 2009, www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=21552.

⁴⁹ Crisis Group interviews, Georgian military officials, European diplomats, Tbilisi, February 2010.

⁵⁰ Crisis Group telephone interview, Apsnypress official, January 2010.

⁵¹ Crisis Group telephone interview, Apsnypress official, citing official Abkhazian budget for 2010, January 2010.

pensions – many times larger than the Abkhazian government's \$17 monthly allocations – to Russian passport holders, directly from its own budget.⁵²

Russia also accounts for 99 per cent of Abkhazia's "foreign investment"⁵³ and is by far its largest trade partner. In 2008, (figures for 2009 are incomplete) Abkhazian exports totalled 890 million roubles, while imports were 6.2 billion, leaving a deficit of over 5 billion roubles (\$165.8 million).⁵⁴ Abkhazia mainly exports scrap metal, gravel, tea, tangerines, hazelnuts, wine and some flowers.⁵⁵ In 2008 there was some trade with Turkey (metals, lumber exports and fuel imports) and Romania (fuel imports), but Abkhazian officials gave no amounts or monetary value.⁵⁶ They estimated that 80 per cent of everything consumed in Abkhazia is imported from Russia.⁵⁷

Before the tightening of the administrative border with the rest of Georgia in August 2008, a thriving grey market had developed.⁵⁸ Many tariffs on imported goods in Georgia, a World Trade Organisation (WTO) state, are much less than in Russia. Georgian produce that is not typically grown for commercial purposes in Abkhazia, such as tomatoes, is also much cheaper than in Russia. When the war broke out, the price of tomatoes, which according to traders had until then mainly been brought in from Georgia, tripled in Abkhazia.⁵⁹

Abkhazian officials said that Russia has offered a free trade agreement, but they have so far been reluctant to sign it, because 600 million roubles (\$19.9 million) of budget revenue come from customs. They said negotiations were ongoing, so Russian tariffs on Abkhazian products are still in place. De facto President Bagapsh also said he wanted Abkhazia to join the Russia-Belarus union state and the customs union, which also includes Kazakhstan.⁶⁰

⁵² "Abkhaz opposition fear growing Russian influence", Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), 7 August 2009.

⁵³ Crisis Group interview, Abkhazian leader Sergei Bagapsh, March 2009.

⁵⁴ Crisis Group phone interview, Apsnypress official, January 2010.

⁵⁵ David L. Philips, "Restoring Georgia's sovereignty in Abkhazia", The Atlantic Council of the United States, July 2008.

⁵⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, Apsnypress official, citing official Abkhazian budget for 2010, January 2010.

⁵⁷ Crisis Group interview, Abkhazian officials, Sukhumi, December 2009.

⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, international NGO official, Abkhazia, December 2009.

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, NGO official, Abkhazia, December 2009.

⁶⁰ "The Union State is the first step. We are closely watching the situation in Ukraine and pursue dialogue with Belarus hoping it would recognize our statehood which will eventually facilitate our entry into the Union State". RIA Novosti, 17 Feb 2010.

Georgia for years interdicted Turkish ships bringing commercial shipments of fuel or other products into Abkhazia.⁶¹ But since the Russian navy began to patrol "Abkhazian territorial waters" in late 2009, detentions of boats, crews and cargo have stopped.

As a mostly unrecognized territory, Abkhazia cannot raise funds in Western capital markets or benefit from international financial institutions (IFIs). There are no foreign banks, even Russian, operating in Abkhazia or automated teller machines.⁶² Russian roubles are the main currency, and Abkhazia has no plans to introduce its own. Abkhaz living in Russia have invested in joint ventures, primarily in agriculture and the food-processing industry.

2. Tourism potential

During the Soviet years, tourism was Abkhazia's prime source of income, and a lucrative one, with a captive market for whom foreign travel was often all but impossible and beaches scarce. For the stylish and well-heeled among the country's Communist nomenclature, a yearly pilgrimage to the region known as the "Red Riviera" was a matter of prestige. Abkhazia's palm-lined beaches, framed against glacial mountain peaks, were a frequent backdrop for the Soviet film industry.

Tourist arrivals peaked at two million in the 1980s but dropped to only a few tens of thousands after the 1992-1993 war.⁶³ In 2009, as fears of more conflict subsided, the numbers reportedly shot up to one million, from just 200,000 in 2005. Yet officials say this can be deceiving, as over half are curiosity-seeking "day-trippers" from Russia, who take a short bus ride down from Sochi, the Russian resort an hour north of Gagra, Abkhazia's main resort area. They visit a few major spots like the stunningly beautiful Orthodox monastery complex at Novy Afon and are back in Russia by evening. Thus, capital infusion into Abkhazia's economy from the tourist trade is less than might be expected.⁶⁴

⁶¹ Most recently, on 17 August 2009, Georgia detained a Turkish cargo vessel carrying fuel to the breakaway region's capital Sukhumi, triggering an Abkhazian protest. The captain, a Turkish citizen, was sentenced to a 24-year prison term by a Georgian court, and the vessel may be put up for auction. Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu paid a two-day visit to Georgia and Abkhazia and brought up the issue in meetings with President Saakashvili. The captain was released shortly thereafter. "Georgia detains vessel en route from Abkhazia", Civil Georgia, 20 August 2009, www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=21378; "Georgia releases Turkish ship's master", Anatolia News Agency, 8 September 2009.

⁶² Crisis Group observation, Abkhazia, 2009.

⁶³ Crisis Group interviews, Abkhazian officials, Sukhumi, December 2009.

⁶⁴ Crisis Group interview, Gagra city administration official, Gagra, December 2009.

Reversing the trend and reaping the rewards of tourists who are willing to spend more time and money will take time, investment and political stability. The Gagra area – the site of Abkhazia’s prime white sand beaches – has just 9,500 hotel rooms, many in facilities that have not undergone renovations in years. Two new hotels, with a capacity of 1,600 rooms, are going up, but there is, as yet, no sign of massive Russian investment in the tourism industry. Officials blame this partially on Russia’s economic downturn. The target is for the Gagra area to have as many as 60,000 hotel rooms – a number first set in the five-year plans at the end of the Soviet era.⁶⁵

Though the capital, Sukhumi, looks considerably more affluent than it did a decade ago, Abkhazia’s economy is still underdeveloped in comparison with its potential. The infrastructure has not seen extensive investment, with the exception of a new, relatively modern highway between Sukhumi and the Russian border. In the capital, where roughly 40 per cent of the population was ethnic Georgian and just 12.5 per cent Abkhaz before the 1992-1993 war,⁶⁶ some buildings have been restored, including slick hotels, retail outlets offering everything from lingerie to flat television screens and restaurants of all description. But even along the city’s seashore, many once elegant buildings remain dilapidated or pock-marked by early 1990s small-arms fire. The UN assesses that the modest recovery to date is built on weak foundations.⁶⁷

The fear that Abkhazia could be “overrun” by Russian investments and thereby easily “assimilated” is often heard, especially among the politically dominant Abkhaz.⁶⁸ Abkhazian laws forbid the private ownership of land, regardless of nationality. Abkhazians may privatise their homes or apartments, but the land underneath is technically owned by the state and given “for use” by citizens. Plots can be obtained under long-term leases, however, by either Abkhazian or foreign entities that provide approved plans to use them for entrepreneurial activity. The de facto government leased a considerable amount of land to the Russian border forces along the administrative boundary with Georgia. Foreign companies, including Russian ones, may purchase state enterprises through agreements that must include investment plans.

Abkhazian leader Bagapsh, speaking during a ceremony to mark the signing of the military base agreement with Russia, said in Moscow on 17 May that Abkhazian legislation will be changed to allow Russian citizens to buy homes in Abkhazia. The purchases would be restricted to new dwellings, and the property rights would be on a “lease” basis, because, as mentioned above, Abkhazia does not allow the private ownership of land.⁶⁹

Some Abkhazians worry about legal loopholes that might make it easy to get around citizenship requirements and could cause an influx of Russian would-be investors unconcerned with the legal grey area in which Abkhazia still exists. Residents say apartment prices increased somewhat in 2008 but levelled off again in 2009. There have been reports in the Georgian media of Russians “buying up” property in Abkhazia, but they remain largely unsubstantiated. Sources have reported that a few Russians who have gotten around the regulations and purchased housing in Abkhazia have been made to feel unwelcome by some locals, reflecting fears of an uncontrolled influx of outsiders.⁷⁰

Another illustration of these sensitivities are questions surrounding the future of the railway system. This issue has been particularly tense, with many Abkhazians opposed to its “sale” to Russia’s state railway company. Negotiations have been ongoing about a possible ten-year lease, under the condition that the Russian company fully rehabilitate the dilapidated line.

Provided negotiations with Georgia remain comatose, and Abkhazia has little ability to open itself westwards for direct investment and trade, Russia will continue to be the dominant economic actor for the foreseeable future.

3. The 2014 Sochi Olympics

Abkhazia is a fifteen-minute taxi ride to the airport of Sochi, the Russian city that will host the 2014 Winter Olympics. However, it remains to be seen to what degree Moscow will integrate Abkhazia into the games; Abkhazian officials proclaim that their entity is in effect included in the Sochi “Olympic Area”, but it is not entirely clear what this will mean in practice.

There is virtually no chance countries supporting Georgia’s territorial integrity will permit their athletes to be housed or to train in a region whose political status is the subject of controversy, conflict and, potentially, violence

⁶⁵ Ibid. The 60,000-room concept was first approved by Soviet central planners in the 1980s. City officials say that there is no reason to think that the area could not eventually support such a number, with proper infrastructure.

⁶⁶ Georgian and Abkhazian official statistics agree on this figure.

⁶⁷ “UN Facilitated Review of Socioeconomic Needs in Abkhazia, Georgia”, UN Country Team (UNCT) in Georgia, March 2008, <http://documents.wfp.org/stellent/groups/public/documents/ena/wfp178374.pdf>.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Abkhazia, December 2009.

⁶⁹ “We will allow laws that will allow Russian citizens to purchase dwelling under construction”, Bagapsh said. Itar-Tass, 18 February 2010.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

or acts of sabotage.⁷¹ While some tourists might use facilities in Abkhazia during the games, there is no indication of the necessary massive investment and infrastructure efforts.

Georgia submitted a petition to the International Olympic Committee (IOC) in 2008, asking it to withdraw the games from Sochi in objection to Russia's military actions, the situation in Abkhazia and its close proximity to the Olympic venue. The IOC responded that ensuring security was the responsibility of the host country.⁷² Even countries considered friendly to Tbilisi have dismissed the idea of linking questions about the games to the conflict over Abkhazia or Russia's failure to abide by ceasefire agreements.

Russian media outlets have carried reports that Moscow plans to deploy several "key facilities" of the Olympic complex to build infrastructure in Abkhazia. This appears to refer to the supply of construction materials and planned infrastructure rehabilitation (the Sochi-Sukhumi railway, for instance). Abkhazian officials told Crisis Group that gravel is now one of the main commodities being mined in the entity and exported to Russia, mostly to Olympic building sites.⁷³ There are proposals to create a large cement plant in Abkhazia to serve the construction industry. Some residents have complained about its potential ecological impact. But Abkhazian officials say they hope to attract more than 10 per cent of the overall Olympics investment and that construction of the cement factory would be worth \$170 million.⁷⁴

⁷¹ The most noted Abkhazian resort area, Gagra, was also the site of significant fighting during the 1992-1993 war. Georgian IDPs are refused the right to return home on the basis of their ethnicity, and there are many burned out or empty homes along the main road.

⁷² "Security arrangements fall under the responsibility of the local authorities of the host cities, which ensure that everything that is humanly possible is done to protect the athletes, the spectators and all the people involved in the staging of the Games", said an IOC spokesperson in Athens. "Sochi 2014 Games security up to Russia, says IOC", Reuters, 20 November 2008.

⁷³ Crisis Group interviews, Abkhazia, December 2009.

⁷⁴ "Georgia's rebel Abkhazia looks to cash in on Sochi Olympics", Agence France-Presse, 4 October 2007.

III. LIFE IN ABKHAZIA

A. POPULATION AND CITIZENS

The figures are highly controversial and politicised, but it is clear that the entity's population has decreased substantially since the Soviet period when it was over half a million.⁷⁵ An Abkhazian census in 2003 estimated it to be 214,000.⁷⁶

Abkhaz are particularly concerned with remaining the largest group in their entity – which they were not before 1993. The 2003 figures identified the Abkhaz as the predominant ethnic group (96,000), with 44,800 Armenians, 23,500 Russians and 43,600 Georgians.⁷⁷ But de facto President Bagapsh, during a visit to the Russian North Caucasus republic of Karachaevo-Cherkessia in 2005, said that fewer than 70,000 Abkhaz remained in Abkhazia.⁷⁸ For this reason, Abkhazian authorities are keen to promote return from a diaspora that they estimate at 700,000.⁷⁹ They say about 1,000 Abkhaz have returned from Turkey since the 1992-1993 war, but only a handful since the 2008 recognition by Russia.⁸⁰

The number of ethnic Georgians in Abkhazia could be quite close to the number of Abkhaz. Abkhazian officials claim that there are as many as 60,000 Georgians in Gali, both those who reside permanently and those who travel back and forth over the administrative frontier. Relief agencies say that there are about 40,000 Georgians

⁷⁵ The 1989 Soviet census put Abkhazia's population at 525,061, including 239,872 ethnic Georgians (45.7 per cent), 93,267 Abkhaz (17.8 per cent), 76,541 ethnic Armenians (14.6 per cent), 74,914 ethnic Russians (14.3 per cent), and 40,467 others (7.6 per cent).

⁷⁶ Official statistics as given by Apsnypress of the 2003 population estimate, January 2009. For more on the 2003 data, see Crisis Group Report, *Abkhazia Today*, op. cit., p. 9.

⁷⁷ This included only those Georgians who were living in Gali on a permanent basis, not transients, who tended to move back and forth between that district and the Zugdidi district on the other side of the administrative border. 3,600 of the 43,600 Georgians identified themselves as "Megrelians", a Georgian sub-ethnos.

⁷⁸ Bagapsh was quoted on the Russian news agency Regnum. He promised residents of Karachevo-Cherkessia Abkhazian citizenship if they moved to the region and said economic problems were hampering the repatriation of Abkhaz diaspora communities in Turkey and other countries. "Bagapsh Speaks of Abkhazia's Economy, Demographic Situation", Civil Georgia, 10 October 2005. www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=10923.

⁷⁹ Many of these are from families that were exiled by Tsarist armies in the 1880s. Crisis Group interview, deputy head of the repatriation committee, Sukhumi, July 2006.

⁸⁰ Crisis Group interviews, Abkhazian officials, December 2009.

there.⁸¹ Abkhazian sources claim that an additional 10,000-15,000, mostly elderly people, those in mixed marriages and those with Abkhaz relatives, live outside Gali. This would bring the total of Georgians to between 55,000 and 75,000, compared to a 1989 census figure of 239,872.

Largely due to the relatively large numbers of the ethnic Georgian population, the Abkhazian leadership denies their right of return to areas outside the Gali region. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), citing Georgian internal displaced persons (IDP) statistics, says there are officially 212,000 Georgian IDPs from Abkhazia. Abkhazian officials insist the number is closer to 150,000.⁸²

In his government's most explicit statement on ethnic Georgian return yet, Abkhazian leader Bagapsh, speaking in Moscow on 16 February 2010, said, "as for bringing the rest of the refugees back, this is problematic. We will not settle for this so that a war does not break out tomorrow again".⁸³ The return of more Georgians "could create instability and the potential for violence", according to an Abkhazian official.⁸⁴ Another said, "they cannot be allowed to return at this time because they could become a fifth column".⁸⁵ Abkhazian residents and NGO workers say local societal attitudes are generally opposed to return of the Georgian IDPs, whose property was officially nationalised by decree during the 1990s.⁸⁶ They cite fears of Georgians "again becoming the largest ethnic group".⁸⁷

The authorities in Sukhumi should realize that their claims to legitimacy are undermined when they engage in what is in effect collective punishment of ethnic Georgians in

violation of the Geneva Conventions and that such categorical and uncompromising statements further erode Abkhazia's credibility as an entity that respects international norms. They should undertake to develop a plan that envisages under what conditions and when IDPs will be allowed to return to parts of Abkhazia beyond Gali.

Even for those Georgians who have returned, citizenship is a very controversial issue. For many years, local authorities pressured ethnic Georgian residents to acquire Abkhazian "citizenship", a process requiring them to sign a form renouncing Georgian citizenship.⁸⁸ In July 2009, the Abkhazia parliament conferred such citizenship on ethnic Georgians who were residents of the Gali region before 2005.⁸⁹

Opposition groups condemned the initiative in a joint statement that also reflected the demographic fears the Abkhaz have about losing their status as the largest ethnic group.⁹⁰ "Since that moment [adoption of the amendment], the number of citizens of Abkhazia of Georgian origin has become equal to the number of citizens of Abkhaz origin".⁹¹ The opposition claimed that the parliament's decision was made ahead of the December presidential elections to capitalise on votes of ethnic Georgians in the Gali district.⁹² As a result of the uproar, the authorities were forced to reverse the decision. Just 3,200 Abkhazian "passports" were handed out in the Gali region, and the process was suspended on 1 October.⁹³

Abkhazian authorities now limit movement over the Inguri bridge, the lone administrative border crossing to the rest of Georgia, essentially to those with Abkhazian or Russian passports. Those holding only Georgian passports are required to obtain a special permit, which can be time-

⁸¹ Crisis Group interviews, NGOs, Gali region, December 2009.

⁸² Abkhazian officials claim the number of remaining Georgian IDPs who are not allowed to return is closer to 150,000. Most of the discrepancy seems to be due to the return of some 40,000-50,000 IDPs to the Gali region in eastern Abkhazia, the only part of Abkhazia to which they have been allowed to return. Many of these "Gali" IDPs reside in the area only part-time however, due to security problems and frequent violence, and the UNHCR classifies them as "people in an IDP-like situation". Therefore, the UNHCR uses the figures calculated on a yearly basis by the Georgians. At present, that number is 212,113.

⁸³ Bagapsh added: "We have already been there when there were only 17 per cent of us in our country, and they wanted to destroy us for that". RIA Novosti, 16 February 2010.

⁸⁴ Crisis Group interview, Abkhazian official, Sukhumi, December 2009.

⁸⁵ Crisis Group interview, Abkhazian official, Sukhumi, December 2009.

⁸⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Abkhazian NGO representatives, Sukhumi, December 2009.

⁸⁷ In the past, some Abkhaz have said that more Georgian returns would be possible after more diaspora Abkhaz have been assisted to come back, but it is highly unlikely that large groups from the diaspora will now move to Abkhazia.

⁸⁸ The official application for "Abkhazian citizenship" requires an individual to check a box indicating renunciation of Georgian citizenship. Georgian officials say this has no legal validity. Some Abkhazian officials also conceded that the legal effect of such a renunciation was questionable. Crisis Group interviews, Sukhumi and Tbilisi, December-January 2009.

⁸⁹ "Abkhaz opposition against granting citizenship to Gali residents", Civil Georgia, 4 August 2009, <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=21326>; see also <http://rian.ru/world/20090805/179804951.html>.

⁹⁰ Joint statement, Republican political party, "Forum of People's Unity of Abkhazia", public organisation of World War II veterans of Abkhazia, "Arua", and the public movement "Ahatsa" (in Russian), 3 August 2009, at www.aruaa.org/statment/statement_31.07.09.html.

⁹¹ "Opposition against the recognition of all residents of the Gali district as citizens of Abkhazia" (in Russian), Apsnypress, 3 August 2009.

⁹² Abkhazia: Furore over Gal Georgians' status", IWPR, 14 August 2009.

⁹³ Crisis Group interviews, international organisation representative, Gali, December 2009.

consuming. Local residents say that it is sometimes possible to cross without these documents, including by using old Soviet passports or paying small bribes. Russian border units along other parts of the administrative border also sometimes solicit bribes to let Gali residents cross at unofficial points. Others do not let them cross even when offered money. There has been some improvement, however, in ethnic Georgians' mobility inside Abkhazia. Some now work as labourers in Sukhumi or Gagra, mainly in the construction industry.

The end result is that it is unclear what status ethnic Georgians in Gali have.⁹⁴ A former high-ranking Abkhazian official, a key opponent of automatic Abkhazian "passports" for Gali residents, remarked:

"The status of the people in Gali is something that we will have to figure out legally, as is done with non-citizens of other countries. We cannot give everyone citizenship automatically. Signing a piece of paper that states a person is renouncing his or her Georgian citizenship and will adhere to the laws of independent Abkhazia is meaningless".

Until the Abkhazians suspended distribution of passports in Gali, the Georgian government had been equally vocal against what it called "forced passportisation".⁹⁵

Ethnicity plays a paramount role in the political landscape. Abkhaz dominate the region's formal political and economic system, even though they are less than half the population.⁹⁶ For example, 25 of the 35 parliamentary deputies are Abkhaz, while ethnic Armenians and Russians hold three seats each. Ethnic Georgians from the Gali region have two seats.⁹⁷ Two seats are held by repatriated members of the Abkhaz diaspora (which is mostly concentrated in Turkey).

There are also two main self-identified "groups" among the Abkhaz – the "Ochamchire" from the south of the region and the "Gudauta" from the north. Political rivalries

between them can be considerable. De facto President Bagapsh, for instance, is an Ochamchire Abkhaz, while Vice President Alexander Ankvab is associated with the Gudauta group.

Ethnic Armenians, despite their fairly large numbers, hold few important political posts or other key positions. The de facto head of the Armenian business community in Abkhazia, Tigran Tsaturyan, had amassed a business fortune in Russia and Abkhazia, but with his death in 2004, Armenian economic influence has waned.⁹⁸

B. THE 2009 PRESIDENTIAL POLL

On 12 December 2009, incumbent Sergei Bagapsh of the United Abkhazia party scored a predictably easy win with 59 per cent of the vote in the first presidential elections held since Russia's recognition.⁹⁹ Former vice president and KGB official Raul Khadjimba came in second with about 15 per cent. A little known historian, Zaur Ardzinba (a distant relative of Vladislav Ardzinba, the Abkhaz leader in the 1992-1993 war and former de facto president) was third with 10 per cent. Perhaps the biggest surprise was the poor showing by Beslan Butba, a millionaire who amassed his fortune in Russia during the early 1990s and, his opponents alleged, spent vast sums of his own money on the campaign. Butba, who owns the only independent TV station in Abkhazia as well as a hotel and other businesses, received just 8 per cent.

Turnout was reported at about 73 per cent of 127,000 registered voters. Khadjimba and Butba complained of irregularities and media bias but neither took legal action. The vote was not recognised by Georgia, the EU or the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), because of their support for Georgia's territorial integrity and the fact that between 150,000 and 212,000 Georgian IDPs from Abkhazia were denied the right to participate. As explained above, most ethnic Georgians in the Gali district of Abkhazia were also denied the right to vote.

All candidates emphasised that they would deepen the alliance with Russia. Though he was not Moscow's preferred candidate at the time of his initial election in 2004, Bagapsh appeared to benefit from the fact that he was in power when Russia recognised the entity. Personalities

⁹⁴ The vast majority of returned IDPs in Gali have no fixed legal status, as they hold Georgian passports, not Abkhazian or Russian documents. Crisis Group interviews, NGOs in Gali and Abkhazian officials in Sukhumi, December 2009.

⁹⁵ Additionally, concerns related to the alleged forceful conscription of ethnic Georgians in Gali into Abkhazian military units remains an issue. Locals say the number of forced conscriptions is low, as small bribes are often exchanged for dismissal of local young Georgian men from Abkhazian units. Crisis Group interviews, locals, Gali, December 2009.

⁹⁶ Abkhazian government figures as given by Apsnypress, January 2010.

⁹⁷ "The Parliamentary Elections held in Abkhazia 4 March", Apsnypress, 5 March 2007, www.apsnypress.info/news2007/march/5.html.

⁹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, Sukhumi, December 2009.

⁹⁹ According to its 1999 constitution, Abkhazia is a presidential republic. The 35-member parliament can initiate legislation and submit it to the president for approval, and the executive can submit his own legislation. Parliamentary approval requires an absolute majority – 18 votes – in the 35-member body. The constitution stipulates that only Abkhaz can be elected president, and presidential candidates must pass an Abkhaz language test.

were a big part of the campaign, with Bagapsh perceived as representing “experience” and Butba drawing attention to the fact that he had not been part of the Soviet nomenclature in his youth. Fighting corruption was a frequent slogan, but none of the candidates detailed how they would do this. Pledges to improve living standards were common, and some proposed to raise the relatively low Abkhaz birth rate or develop programs to encourage return from the diaspora. There was no appreciable discussion of anything related to Georgia, and each candidate emphasised that independence was non-negotiable.

C. EXTERNAL RELATIONS

In practice, Bagapsh’s re-election means continuity, but had anyone else won, there would not have been an appreciable change in positions with respect to Russia or Georgia. All candidates bent over backwards to prove their loyalty to Moscow. Posters for Bagapsh often featured him walking alongside Prime Minister Putin. Given Russia’s defence agreements with Abkhazia, its sizeable troop presence and economic inputs, any candidate or political force calling for a more equal relationship with Moscow would be unlikely to attract wide support. “We are under no illusions about the asymmetrical relationship we have”, a high-ranking Abkhazian official told Crisis Group. “We have two main concerns: security and our economy. Our relationship with Russia meets our needs in both areas. We have the amount of independence that we require”.¹⁰⁰

A former top Abkhazian official who quit the government in 2009 and in effect is now in opposition agreed: “We are not naive. We know that we cannot have a fully equal relationship with Russia, and neither do we need it. It is a limited form of sovereignty. There is no reason why we cannot have a relationship similar to that which exists, for instance, between France and Monaco”.¹⁰¹

Nonetheless, there are muffled rumblings and apprehensions regarding the danger of over-reliance on Moscow. While former Vice President Raul Khadjimba, usually seen as the most loyally pro-Russian major Abkhazian political figure, said he, like all the other candidates, favoured deepening ties with Russia, he referred to concerns that Abkhaz could eventually be overwhelmed by a massive influx of money and people. He added: “We cannot allow Abkhazia to be turned into an amorphous space on the map”.¹⁰² Later that day he was more ex-

plicit with Crisis Group: “If we keep up the current tendency, we will lose ourselves. We will disappear”.¹⁰³

Plans by the government to let Russian energy firms search for reserves in Abkhazia’s “territorial waters” raise sensitivities. An aide to a presidential candidate said they posed a grave danger to the picturesque coastline. The issue did not seem to find much traction among voters, however. Bagapsh defended exploration of the offshore shelf. “Every country along the Black Sea is drilling, and we are not”, he told Crisis Group. Just over two weeks after the elections, the de facto authorities signed a five-year contract for offshore gas and oil exploration with the Russian energy firm Rosneft. Georgia protested vociferously.¹⁰⁴

In the past, Bagapsh has argued for a “multi-vector” foreign policy, but given his recent statements, he appears to be tying Abkhazia ever more to Russia. “Abkhazia is oriented at a dialogue with all the countries of the region. However, our main and only strategic ally is Russia”, he said in Moscow on 16 February. “Abkhazia’s policy in this issue is not determined by its president; this has been decided by our grandfathers. What we feel in our relations with Russia has not changed after the recognition of our independence”.¹⁰⁵ Moscow also seems keen to ensure that there is no alternative to its overwhelming financial and military influence. Putin, visiting in August 2009, said, Abkhazia “doesn’t need to be recognised by any country other than Russia”.¹⁰⁶

The few other countries to recognize Abkhazia – Venezuela, Nicaragua, and the world’s tiniest by population, Nauru – all are the beneficiaries of Russian support or at least have especially close bilateral relations. Sukhumi has cultivated commercial ties with business people in Turkey and Jordan, often among diaspora Abkhaz living there since before recognition. Turkey sent its deputy foreign minister to Sukhumi in the wake of the detention of a Turkish fuel tanker by the Georgians in late 2009, but there is almost no prospect of Turkey or Jordan recognising Abkhazia in the near future, let alone any EU or other Western countries.

The main interaction that Abkhazia has had with the EU has been as a recipient of humanitarian, development and infrastructure projects. The European Commission (EC) was its main Western donor before 2008 and cur-

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, high-ranking Abkhazian official, Sukhumi, 9 December 2009.

¹⁰¹ Crisis Group interview, Abkhazian opposition figure, Sukhumi, 9 December 2009.

¹⁰² Khadjimba, press conference, Sukhumi, 10 December 2009.

¹⁰³ Crisis Group interview, Sukhumi, 10 December 2009.

¹⁰⁴ “Georgia denounces energy pact between Rosneft, Abkhazia”, RFE/RL, 29 December 2009, www.rferl.org/content/Georgia_Denounces_Energy_Pact_Between_Rosneft_Abkhazia/1916842.html.

¹⁰⁵ Itar-Tass, 16 February 2010.

¹⁰⁶ “Putin promises Abkhazia economic and military support”, *The New York Times*, 12 August 2009.

rently funds humanitarian and emergency aid projects,¹⁰⁷ as well as a follow-up rehabilitation program for the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict zone worth €4 million.¹⁰⁸ Commission officials who visited in January 2010 felt their interlocutors were keen to continue and deepen cooperation that can promote development, such as with small- and medium-sized enterprises, even though all EU member states insist that Abkhazia is part of Georgia.

The EU is interested in finding ways to do more to support Georgian-Abkhazian contacts. It continues to have a police adviser working in and out of Abkhazia, for example. Member state ambassadors accredited to Georgia since Russia's recognition are no longer invited by Sukhumi to visit. Several have in any case been reluctant to go there (as they did before August 2008), lest this appear to imply recognition. However, in December member states agreed to "parameters for [the] EU's non-recognition and engagement with Abkhazia and South Ossetia" that should alleviate those concerns.¹⁰⁹ The parameters aim to carve out political and legal space within which the EU can interact with Abkhazia and South Ossetia without crossing status red lines, thus emphasising a strategic interest to engage so as to increase its leverage to move conflict resolution forward. Rather than isolating Abkhazia, EU and member state officials should continue to attempt to engage directly with de facto Abkhazian officials and NGOs.

Not all Abkhazians share the government's generally positive view towards EU member states, largely because they are seen as "pro-Georgian". "The attitude among many people here is now more hostile towards the EU than

even the U.S.", said a prominent opposition figure.¹¹⁰ This may be partially due to the presence of EU military monitors in Georgia (EUMM) and their insistence that they be allowed to patrol in Abkhazia, which the de facto authorities have ruled out. Even Abkhazian officials refer to EU funding as "a drop in the bucket" compared to what is received through the lifeline from Russia.¹¹¹

D. RULE OF LAW AND HUMAN RIGHTS

Given Abkhazia's relative isolation, small size and lack of international recognition, there is a dearth of local information on democracy and civil society issues. Local NGOs say fundamental reforms are needed in the judiciary, which as in many post-Soviet entities is often politicised. The judicial code is almost completely modelled on Russia's.¹¹²

There have been several high-profile assassinations and attempted assassinations of political figures in recent years. In almost none have the culprits been identified or arrests made. In January 2009, the deputy interior minister and chief of criminal investigations, Zakan Dzhugelia, was killed when an unknown gunman shot him at an outdoor cafe in central Sukhumi. There have been no arrests.¹¹³ In October, the head of the central bank escaped unharmed when assailants fired on his car with a grenade launcher as he travelled from Gudauta to Sukhumi. That case likewise remains under investigation.¹¹⁴ Also in October, the head of the security ministry's counter-intelligence service, Eduard Emin-zade, was assassinated. He had escaped serious injury just three months earlier, when his car came under fire. The Abkhazian authorities said the assailant later fled over the administrative border into Georgia's Zugdidi region.

Vice President Alexander Ankvab survived four assassination attempts between 2005 and 2007, the last when a bomb detonated next to the car in which he was travelling.¹¹⁵ In none of these cases have there been arrests.¹¹⁶

¹⁰⁷ Since August 2008, large EC efforts in Abkhazia have included the ECHO humanitarian aid program (€ million, over twelve months, January 2008-January 2009); projects under the Instrument for Stability, including housing rehabilitation for returnees in Gali (UNHCR and others, € million, over eighteen months starting in October 2008); income-generation (international NGOs, €1.57 million, from January 2007 to January 2011); social and community support; and civil society projects. For more on the EC in Abkhazia, see www.delgeo.ec.europa.eu/en/programmes/Nov09.doc.

¹⁰⁸ Phase Three, expected to start in 2010, is a continuation of the EC economic rehabilitation program implemented in 2005-2008 and consists of three main components, with integrated civil society support: reconstruction of basic infrastructure (such as healthcare facilities, schools and drinking water supply); income-generation and community-based projects; shelter assistance (such as durable housing solutions for IDPs, returnees and local population). The implementing partners will be the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and UNHCR. See *ibid.*

¹⁰⁹ "Non-paper on the parameters for EU's non-recognition and engagement policy for Abkhazia and South Ossetia", agreed by Political and Security Committee (PSC) Ambassadors of EU member states, December 2009, Brussels.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interview, Abkhazian opposition figure, Sukhumi, December 2009.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interviews, Abkhazian officials, Istanbul, June 2009.

¹¹² Crisis Group interviews, Abkhazian NGO officials, Gali and Sukhumi, December 2009.

¹¹³ "Abkhaz official gunned down", *Russia Today*, 27 January 2009, http://rt.com/Top_News/2009-01-27/Abkhaz_official_gunned_down.html.

¹¹⁴ "Abkhazia's National Bank chief survives assassination attempt", *RIA Novosti*, 28 October 2009, <http://en.rian.ru/world/20091028/156616575.html>.

¹¹⁵ "A fourth attack on the Abkhazian PM", *Kommersant*, 10 July 2007, www.kommersant.com/p781327/assassination_breakaway_republics.

Bagapsh blamed criminal elements, and Ankvab ruled out any connection to the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict, for an attack that took place in 2005, at a time when they were reported to be carrying out a shake-up of officials with connections to the former de facto president, Vladislav Ardzinba.¹¹⁷

Recently, there have been several reports by ethnic Russians of their homes or apartments being confiscated under obscure laws that in some cases, they say, allow persons who have left Abkhazia for even short periods to be deprived of their property or to have it nationalised. Russian media have reported on the issue, and Russian human rights groups have said there has been a recent spate of appeals to them about the loss of property in Abkhazia.¹¹⁸ But the single biggest human rights issue is the inability, described above, of the 150,000-212,000 Georgian IDPs to return to their homes and to regain their property.¹¹⁹

E. THE MEDIA

The Abkhazian media consists of one state-run television outlet, which broadcasts for six hours a day in Russian and Abkhaz and one private station, Abaza-TV, which actively supported opposition candidate Beslan Butba during the presidential election but reaches only the capital Sukhumi.¹²⁰ There are several newspapers, all weeklies with the exception of the official government journal, *Respublika Abkhazii (Arespublika Apsny)*. The two main independent newspapers are *Chegemskaya Pravda* and *Novaya Gazeta*. Both struck a pro-opposition tone during the election. The circulations of the three range from 1,000 to 4,000, and their impact is believed to be outweighed by television.¹²¹

There have been several claims of harassment of journalists by the authorities. In September 2009, a court in Sukhumi gave journalist Anton Krivenyuk a three-year suspended sentence for allegedly libelling Bagapsh in a Russian newspaper article about the de facto president's actions in the proposed sale of the state railway company.

Krivenyuk continues to deny the charges.¹²² Though the sentence was suspended, some Abkhazian journalists interpreted the timing of the case as intended to intimidate the opposition.

All major Russian television channels broadcast to Abkhazia, and it is from these that most Abkhazians get international news. There is little or no access to Georgian channels, other than by satellite, with the exception of the Georgian-populated Gali region. Internet access is growing and has improved since Russia's recognition, with local providers using lines that access the web via Russia and Russian ISPs.

In neither the government nor the independent media does there seem to be any major questioning of Abkhazia's deep relationship, with Russia, though this may be because it largely reflects public attitudes.¹²³ Media views toward Georgia appear to be generally negative. At best, news events in Georgia are presented neutrally.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interviews, Abkhazian officials, Sukhumi and by telephone, December 2009-January 2010.

¹¹⁷ "Abkhaz PM survives assassination attempt, amid cabinet row", *Civil Georgia*, 1 March 2005, www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=9215.

¹¹⁸ www.mk.ru/politics/article/2010/02/03/423511-abhaziya-obrela-nezavisimost-ot-rf.html; Crisis Group interviews, Russian human rights organisations, February 2010.

¹¹⁹ See Section III.A above.

¹²⁰ Its broadcast facilities are in the same building as Butba's election headquarters was.

¹²¹ Other newspapers are *Novy Den (New Day)*, *Echo Abkhazii (Echo of Abkhazia)*, and *Nuzhnaya (Needed)*.

¹²² "Abkhazia media fear free speech under threat", *IWPR*, 25 September 2009.

¹²³ Questions have been raised in a few cases about the potential sale of state assets, such as the railway.

IV. BEYOND ABKHAZIA

The sixteen-year UN observer presence in Georgia (UNOMIG) ended in June 2009 after Russia vetoed its extension in the Security Council.¹²⁴ Russian officials had begun to raise objections to language in old resolutions that referred to the territorial integrity of Georgia only a few weeks earlier, and the veto was largely unexpected, since it was generally considered that not only the Georgians, but also the Abkhazians, wanted to keep the mission operating.¹²⁵

UNOMIG, which included approximately 115 unarmed observers who patrolled an area straddling the administrative border between Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia, had sometimes been criticised as bloated and ineffective. But it was the only real international security presence on the ground, and its departure has left a vacuum. The effect was also economic, with the loss of more than 100 jobs for local staff. The UN Human Rights Office in Abkhazia, Georgia (HROAG) was also forced to close.

International NGOs in the Gali district said that many Georgians left after UNOMIG began its wind-down but soon returned. They noted that Russian troops there have tried to engage in goodwill gestures with the local population in order to counter nervousness, but recent incidents involving Georgian claims that those troops are arresting locals attempting to travel between Gali and the Zugdidi region have again heightened tensions.¹²⁶

The UN Secretary-General continues to exercise good offices through a special envoy¹²⁷ and facilitates dialogue through the Geneva talks. In this context, a small UN roving team – four or five persons based in Geneva – continues to visit Abkhazia regularly to facilitate cooperation on the ground, prepare Geneva discussions and participate in the meetings of the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms (IPRMs) in Gali. While limited, this offers the UN an opportunity to stay engaged and informed.

Abkhazian officials (backed by Russia) have, as noted above, consistently refused to allow EU monitors (the EUMM) to patrol in Abkhazia. They have only been able to enter Gali to attend IPRM meetings. Officially, Sukhumi says it refuses entry to the EUMM because it has been ineffective in reacting to Georgian “actions” on Georgian territory.¹²⁸ Russia also has little desire to see EU monitors enter what has clearly become its military zone of control.

A. THE GENEVA DISCUSSIONS

The 2008 ceasefire agreements stipulated the opening of international discussions on “security and stability”. Since October 2008, talks in Geneva, co-chaired by the EU, OSCE and the UN and with the participation of Georgia, Russia, the U.S. and Abkhazian and South Ossetian representatives, have at least begun to acknowledge security and displacement issues. However, the parties are bogged down over modalities and have produced little substance. A leading Abkhazian government official said that the “only reason we are participating in the Geneva discussions is because every time we sit down at the table, it is another act of recognition of our independence”.¹²⁹

The one concrete result of the nine rounds to date has been the 18 February 2009 decision to put in place the two IPRMs that allows for regular meetings in the Abkhazian and South Ossetian theatres between all the local actors responsible for security issues and the maintenance of peace and security. These are complemented by a “hotline” that is a permanent channel of communication between all parties. The mechanisms, which recently completed their fifth and sixth rounds, have had sometimes difficult exchanges, but they are a useful forum where the sides can discover their own interests.¹³⁰

Russia has long insisted on the need for Tbilisi and Sukhumi, as well as Tbilisi and Tskhinvali, to sign non-use of force agreements. “It is principally important that

¹²⁴The decisive vote involved a two-week technical rollover of the mission, rather than the typical six-month extensions that had been approved by the Security Council in the past.

¹²⁵For more on the chronology and politics of the closure of the UNOMIG mission, see Crisis Group Briefing, *Georgia-Russia still Insecure and Dangerous*, op. cit., pp. 5, 14.

¹²⁶“Statement of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia on the detention of Georgian citizens near the village of Nabakevi, 12 February 2010”, http://mfa.gov.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=59&info_id=11584.

¹²⁷Until January 2010, this was Ambassador Johan Verbeke. No replacement had been named as of this writing.

¹²⁸The then de facto foreign minister, Sergei Shamba, said, “the EU does not react [to] Georgia’s military build-up in the border zone ... therefore, we do not consider the activities of the EU are effective”. “Sergei Shamba: We have no confidence in Americans” (in Russian), RIA Novosti, 4 August 2009, www.rian.ru/interview/20090804/179712637.html.

¹²⁹Crisis Group interviews, Abkhazian officials, Sukhumi, December 2009.

¹³⁰“The Geneva discussions are now entering a second phase, whose purpose is to attain a more developed security regime and humanitarian protection framework, designed to increase regional security. This is the clear goal of the ongoing discussions regarding the ‘basic elements for a framework agreement on the non-use of force’”. Pierre Morel, “Geneva, one year later: which peace for Georgia?”, *Guardian*, 15 October 2009.

this document is signed or approved by the representatives of Georgia, on the one hand, and the representatives of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, on the other”, Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin wrote in his article published by the Russian daily *Izvestia*.¹³¹ Georgia says that such an agreement should only be signed between Russia and Georgia and should also envisage “de-occupation” of its two breakaway regions.

In advance of negotiating such an ambitious political document, it may be more practical for the sides to focus on humanitarian and communication issues. Finding a way to regulate crossing of the administrative boundary to ensure freedom of movement is important, as is the mutual recognition of Georgian and Abkhazian civil documents, such as birth certificates, driving licences and professional degrees. Geneva may also be a useful status-neutral environment for Georgians and Abkhazians to discuss development and humanitarian programs directly with the UN, EU and, potentially, Russia and for all sides to keep each other informed of planning and implementation.

An expansion of civil society contacts would positively impact the situation. This includes both NGO- and internationally-sponsored initiatives, when possible especially those that involve contacts in Georgia and Abkhazia rather than abroad. One consequence of the nearly two decades of hostility is that few young Georgians have ever met an Abkhaz, and most young Abkhaz have not met Georgians.

B. GEORGIA’S LATEST OVERTURES – THE “STATE STRATEGY”

In late January 2010, the Georgian government publicly unveiled its long-awaited “State Strategy on the Occupied Territories: Engagement through Cooperation”.¹³² The document emphasises repeatedly Georgia’s territorial integrity, sovereignty and eventual goal of “de-occupation”, and ignores Abkhazian self-determination aspirations.¹³³ Still, the paper contains divergences from past policy. For example, it abandons some official standard terminology, such as “puppet regime”, referring instead to “the populations and/or authorities in control of Abkhazia ...” The document acknowledges differences between the central government and the “local populations” – in other words, a lack of trust in Tbilisi. The accent on the status

question means the Abkhazian leadership sees the initiative as not very different from previous efforts by the Georgian government to engage on political terms dictated by Tbilisi.¹³⁴ Still, some of the conciliatory language in the strategy paper was a hard sell to some Georgian politicians.¹³⁵

The State Strategy emphasises economic cooperation, encouragement of trade and infrastructure rehabilitation between Georgia and Abkhazia (and South Ossetia) and repudiates isolation as a tool for putting pressure on the regions. It also encourages freedom of movement and restoration of transport links, while disavowing force as a way to resolve status issues. The Georgian government next intends to work on an “action plan” that it says will be ready later in 2010 and offer specific ideas for re-establishing trade, travel and humanitarian links.

A problem with the past Georgian approach was insistence on joint, not parallel, initiatives. The new strategy advocates the same, with a focus on those that “cross dividing lines”, rather than are stand-alone in Abkhazia or link the entity with other countries, such as Turkey, or the EU. Tbilisi has also insisted on approving all funding going to Abkhazia, especially since the 2008 passage of its “Law on Occupied Territories”, which requires economic activities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to be cleared with it first.

Whether it will continue to do so when the new strategy is implemented is unclear, but at the end of 2009, as it was consulting with international partners on the new strategy, the Georgian government lifted obstacles to European Commission funding in Abkhazia. An EU official told Crisis Group that snags over the Brussels follow-up rehabilitation program for the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict zone had been due to “modalities in working commissions with the Georgians” and that the “Law on Occupied Territories” did not pose any specific obstacles. “We now tell the Georgians what projects we will be working on in Abkhazia, and it is up to the Abkhazians to approve them”.¹³⁶ This rather informal system works as long as EU/EC projects in Abkhazia are mainly of a humanitarian nature.

¹³¹ Grigory Karasin “Caucasus in Geneva Format” (in Russian), *Izvestia*, 10 November 2009, www.izvestia.ru/comment/article3135153/.

¹³² “Govt Endorses Abkhaz, S.Ossetia Strategy”, Civil Georgia, 28 January 2009, www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=21923.

¹³³ Somewhat paternalistically, it underlines that those living in Abkhazia are all citizens of Georgia who have been isolated and divided by occupation.

¹³⁴ In March 2008 for example, President Saakashvili unveiled an initiative for resolution of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict that offered Abkhazia “unlimited autonomy, wide federalism and very serious representation in the central governmental bodies of Georgia”. “Georgia Offers New Peace Plan for Abkhazia”, Update Service of the Government of Georgia, 28 March 2008, p. 1.

¹³⁵ According to high-ranking Georgian officials, some parliamentary deputies objected to what they felt was “soft” language” and wanted a more hardline approach. Crisis Group interviews, Tbilisi, December 2009.

¹³⁶ Crisis Group telephone interview, EC official, Tbilisi, February 2010.

Nevertheless, Sukhumi's reactions to the Georgian document have been swift and hostile. "We will not even talk about this issue. In response to this document, we will tighten border control along the Enguri River, and we will not [allow] creation of a 'fifth column' in the Gali district. I can imagine how many people are already recruited" by the Georgians, Bagapsh said.¹³⁷ The authorities turned down a Georgian proposal for restoring regular bus service across the administrative border. In dismissing even this modest idea, the de facto foreign minister cited his objections to the wording of the State Strategy, in particular references to Abkhazia as being "occupied" by Russia and Georgia's territorial integrity.¹³⁸ Abkhazians have called the document another Georgian public relations stunt done primarily for international consumption.¹³⁹

Sukhumi should reconsider its outright rejection of all the State Strategy projects, as Abkhazians could clearly benefit from some of the economic and trade proposals, which could lead in turn to further development and an end to isolation. But at the same time, Tbilisi should focus on taking practical steps to make these projects possible without linking them to status. As Crisis Group recommended in June 2008, Georgia should:

... pursue and consistently implement without status preconditions measures designed to build confidence over time, such as a free trade zone along both sides of the ceasefire line and steps to allow the Abkhaz to develop ties beyond Russia, including the removal of sanctions, and reopening of airport, railroad and seaport links.¹⁴⁰

V. CONCLUSION

Despite Russia's recognition of its "independence", Abkhazia is undoubtedly more dependent than ever on Moscow. Russia's military and economic support has greatly enhanced its own position in the entity. Despite some nervousness among political forces and the population in general – especially the ethnic Abkhaz – about potentially overwhelming Russian influence and economic might, they seem content with an asymmetrical bilateral relationship and limited independence in which Russia guarantees security and financial help in exchange for strategic advantages and control in effect over the most important aspects of Abkhazia's "foreign policy". Russia is open about its overwhelming control. On 17 February 2010, the same day as the military agreement with the de facto authorities was formalised, the State Duma passed a resolution hailing "the 200th anniversary of Russia's patronage over Abkhazia".¹⁴¹

Given the lack of diplomatic relations between Georgia and Russia, the particularly bad relationship between President Saakashvili and Prime Minister Putin and the mutually exclusive discourses on territorial integrity and independence in Tbilisi and Sukhumi, it is unrealistic to expect breakthroughs in the near term. But Georgia and Russia share deep historical links. Regardless of the antipathy between their current leaderships, at some point both will come to appreciate their common interests in a rapprochement.

Tbilisi has indicated in its new State Strategy that only peaceful means will be used to resolve issues related to Abkhazia. This is a step forward. An emphasis on proposals and projects that avoid the contentious issue of status for now is the only way any significant progress can be made.

It is in the interests of all sides to agree to disagree about legalistic status topics that can only be resolved over a long time. Georgia should stick to its commitments not to seek the isolation of Abkhazia. A start on rebuilding transit, trade, people-to-people and humanitarian contacts can gradually help both Georgia and Abkhazia economically and enlarge Sukhumi's latitude for economic interaction, which is now limited to Russia. Tremendous patience and a willingness to admit past serious mistakes will be needed.

**Sukhumi/Tbilisi/Istanbul/Brussels,
26 February 2010**

¹³⁷ "Sokhumi slams Tbilisi's strategy paper", Civil Georgia, 3 February 2010, www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=21944.

¹³⁸ "Shamba: Georgia not ready for a constructive dialogue with Abkhazia" (in Russian), Kavkazskiy Uzel, 20 January 2010. www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/164450/.

¹³⁹ Crisis Group telephone interview, Abkhazian officials, February 2010.

¹⁴⁰ Crisis Group Report, *Russia and Georgia: Clashing over Abkhazia*, op. cit., p. ii.

¹⁴¹ "Russia gains military base in Abkhazia", RFE/RL, 17 February 2010, www.rferl.org/content/Russia_Gains_Military_Base_In_Abkhazia/1960545.html.

APPENDIX A

MAP OF GEORGIA

Administrative map of Georgia



APPENDIX A

MAP OF WESTERN GEORGIA

