

# Georgian Conflicts - Abkhazia

Mgr. Zinaida Shevchuk

# The demography in Georgia

• Ethnic group	% of total population
• Georgian	70.1
• Armenians	8.1
• Russians	6.3
• Azeris	5.7
• Ossetians	3.0
• Greeks	1.9
• Abkhaz	1.8
• Ukrainians	0.9



- - Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic in 1957-1991:
- - Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic
- - Ajarian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic
- - South Ossetian Autonomous Oblast

# Abkhazia



## Abkhazia

- 45% Georgians, Abkhaz made 17.8%, 14% were Russians and 14% Armenians.
- Abkhazian language is different from Georgian, it belongs to the North-Caucasian linguistic family and is akin to Chechen-Dagestan group.
- Orthodox and Muslim believers among Abkhazians.
- Abkhazia was one of the wealthiest regions of the Soviet Union and enjoyed a far high standard of living.

## Changes in the Ethnic Composition and Size of the Abkhazian Population in 1989-2003

Ethnic group	1989 <sup>19</sup>		2003 <sup>19</sup>	
	Number of people	Share of the population	Number of people	Share of the population
Entire population	525,061	100%	214,016	100%
Including:				
Abkhazians	93,267	17.8%	94,597	44.1%
Georgians	239,872	45.7%	44,041 <sup>20</sup>	20.6%
Armenians	76,541	14.6%	44,869	21.0%
Russians	74,914	14.3%	23,420	11.0%
Ukrainians	11,655	2.2%	1,797	0.8%
Greeks	14,664	2.8%	1,486	0.7%

# The role of ethnicity

- Since early Byzantine times, Georgianized Abkhaz princes ruled their region with varying degrees of autonomy. Although the Abkhaz language was linguistically distinct from Georgian, related to the languages of North Caucasian peoples such as the Circassians, Georgian was the official language of governance and the nobility.
- As Byzantium's control slipped in the 9<sup>th</sup> Century, the rulers of the Abkhaz Kingdom began efforts to unify their dynasty with that of their Georgian neighbours.
- In 1001 the royal lines were combined, creating what is known as the unified Georgian Kingdom. This entity lasted until the 16<sup>th</sup> Century when the Ottomans established suzerainty over the area that is modern Abkhazia.

# The role of ethnicity

- The Abkhazian claims for special status stems from their aspiration to attain separation from Georgia. After Georgia regained its independence in 1918, there was a struggle between different forces in Abkhazia: supporters of North Caucasian peoples, supporters of Turkish invasion, a pro Russian Bolsheviks and pro-Georgian Menshevik forces.
- In November 1917 the Abkhaz People's Council took place, which was originally in line with the interest of pro-Georgian supporters. At this time, Abkhazia gained a status of autonomy. However, this status was abandoned soon after disloyalty of Abkhaz People's Council. This paved the way to the series of struggles that lasted until 1921, when Georgia was invaded by the Red Army.



# Ethnicity as a driving force?

- The role of ethnicity was key aspect for self-identification of different nations living within the Soviet Union.
- Ethnicity was a “determinant of national belonging”, granting “ the titular nation of these Soviet Republics (in the South Caucasus) exclusive political rights and served to enforce a strong ideological connection between ethnicity and territory.”

# First phase of the conflict

- During the first year of Soviet rule in Georgia, Abkhazia gained a status of a Soviet Republic separate from Georgia. The relationship between Georgia and Abkhazia between 1921-1931 was regulated by special treaty, according to which Abkhazia gave a piece of “sovereignty” to Georgia.
- In 1931 Abkhazia became fully subordinated to Georgia since its status was reduced to the Autonomous Republic. Unsatisfied with its position, Abkhazians organized strikes and demonstrations, in order to upgrade its status. The public dissatisfaction was unambiguously restrained in 1931, 1957, 1965, 1967 and 1978. The demands of Abkhazia were to gain the status of an autonomous Soviet republic incorporated into the Soviet Union.

# Manifestation of the conflict interests

- In the beginning of the 1980s the national-liberation movements erupted all over the former Soviet territories.
- During the “perestroika” period in Abkhazia was marked by the tendencies of separatist movements. Among them was the creation of “Aidgilara”, “Slavianski dom” and “Krunk” with strong anti-Georgian ideology.
- The open manifestation of Abkhazian claims to secede from Georgian and join to Russia was a major issue at stake in 1988-1992. By declaration of independence on 25 August 1990 Abkhazia the In March 1989 mass rally in Lykhny to point out their demand for granting the status of union republic.

- They signed a declaration demanding the restoration of Abkhazia's 1925 constitution, upgrading its status to a sovereign Soviet Republic, effectively seceding from Georgia. The publication of this declaration in local newspapers immediately sparked furious anti-Abkhazian mass demonstrations in Tbilisi. Many of those who took part were ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia, but as they continued for weeks, the demonstrations began to take on a wider, pro-independence character. What had initially begun as a rally against Abkhaz secession from Georgia, turned into a rally for Georgian secession from the Soviet Union. This mixture of sentiments would characterize much of the developments to come.

# The political landscape in Georgia

- National independence movement in Georgia - slogan of independence from the Soviet Union.
- 9 April, 1989 - the moral death of the Communist regime in Georgia.



# Political development within Georgia

- The beginning of Georgia's campaign for independence was characterized by a permanent jostling for power between the former members of the communist Nomenklatura elite, a part of who were inspired by nationalistic ideas.
- The process of dissolution of Soviet Union opened an opportunity for bloody confrontations. It was believed that “Russian empire” would use a military force to defeat Georgian national movement.
- The radical wing of Georgian political spectrum at this time emphasizes the need to struggle for restoration independence. As the Chairman of Georgian Supreme Council (or Parliament) on November 14, 1990 Zviad Gamsakhurdia exposed the high national consciousness for freedom and declared that this is the beginning of the more significant war for independence.

# Political development within Georgia

- According to Ghia Nodia: “Georgia’s nationalist movement was probably the most radical in style in the former Soviet Union, at least among the movements at the union republic level. However, this radicalism was primarily targeted at the imperial centre, not ethnic minorities “.
- The nationalist mobilization and radicalization of newly creating Georgian government, however, boosted separatist movements of non-Georgian ethnic groups. The dynamics of the Georgian-Ossetian armed conflict was shaped by a number of factors, including the **extreme position of Georgian nationalists** in 1989, Zviad Gamsachurdia the leader of coalition “Round Table – Free Georgia” and the first president of Georgia, the **lack of clear idea of Georgian establishment about the autonomous regions** and the great faith of Abkhazian leaders in being supported by the Russian Federation.

- Thus, the process to attain national liberation was twofold: **Georgian political leaders aspired to attain independence from the Soviet Union** and disregarded the grievance of the national minorities. At the same time **Abkhazia struggled for the preservation of its specific status** it enjoyed within the Soviet ethno-federal system.
- After the demise of the Soviet Union, Abkhazians feared that the Georgian national movement would undermine their right of self-determination and this would lead to the assimilation with the titular nation.
- In the result the **triangle struggle have occurred**: Georgian struggle for independence, Moscow fight against Georgian secession from the Soviet Union and South Ossetia trying to carve their special status and protect their rights vis-à-vis Georgian nationalism under the protection of Moscow.



# The political landscape in Georgia

- In May 1991, Zviad Gamsakhurdia was elected as a president with 86 per cent of the vote.
- This period defined Georgia's political agenda, its public discourse and the character of its political institutions. The agenda was dominated by two ideas: **nationalism and democracy.**

# The political landscape in Georgia



- Gamsakhurdia's rule embodied a paradox typical of many young and immature democracies: it had a strong popular mandate but was very soon denounced as authoritarian. The fact that Zviad Gamsakhurdia was a strong ethnic nationalist who openly called the slogan „Georgia for Georgians“ greatly fuelled the tensions.

# The political landscape in Georgia

- Adding to the difficulties in achieving political pluralism was the problem of ethnic pluralism.
- The Georgian national liberation movement lacked a clear idea about how to deal with the issues of the autonomies.
- Radicalism and aversion to compromise were as widespread among the Abkhaz and Ossetian nationalists as among their Georgian counterparts.
- Zviad Gamsakhurdia's nationalistic agenda was primarily directed against Soviet regime in Georgia and problem with Ossetia were considered to be the part of that struggle. Claims of minority were interpreted as dictated from Kremlin and there were no trust-building efforts for compromise.

- Meanwhile, Abkhaz demonstrations were decidedly pro-Soviet, and Abkhaz leaders tried to ‘project an image of loyal Soviet citizens resisting anticommunist Georgian nationalism’, by lobbying Moscow for support.
- Under the condition of accumulating anti-Gamsakhurdia forces, the president of Georgia played the nationalistic card to preserve in power, at the expense of democratization and minority groups in country. However, the further development was not only unsuccessful to establish political pluralism in Georgia, but failed to “unite the nation” by compelling the spirit of armed conflict in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

- Perhaps due to Ardzinba's new close relationship with Russian commanders in the area, as well as increasing pressure from political rivals in Tbilisi, Gamsakhurdia decided to attempt a compromise with the Abkhaz separatists.
- In August 1991, a power-sharing deal was reached for the makeup of the new Abkhaz parliament based on ethnic quotas, where ethnic Abkhaz, 17.8% of the population, were guaranteed 28 of the 65 seats, while ethnic Georgians, 45.7% of Abkhazia's population, were guaranteed only 26 seats. Tbilisi's support for this configuration would not last, however, as Gamsakhurdia's erratic policies led to the mutiny of the Georgian National Guard he had created for the war in South Ossetia. In December 1991, five hundred National Guard soldiers laid siege to the parliament building in Tbilisi, forcing Gamsakhurdia into exile.

- To gain legitimacy, the new forces in power invited former Soviet foreign minister and Georgian party boss, Eduard Shevardnadze to lead the transitional State Council. Shortly after, Gamsakhurdia slipped back into Georgia, to Mingrelia, where forces loyal to him, the so-called 'Zviadists', began an insurgency in the Georgian province bordering Abkhazia.

# First phase: towards escalation

- One of the first manifestations of this process started with confrontation over amendments in the Georgian Constitution - the law on the status of the state language, which strengthened the need to the language in all public sphere.
- In August 1990 election law was passed, which excluded the small region based parties from the participation in the parliamentary elections. These policies were interpreted as antidemocratic, cutting the influence of minorities in the power-sharing institutions in Georgia.

# Armed conflict in Abkhazia

- The first major blood in the Abkhazian-Georgian conflict spilled on 15-16 July, 1989, when 11 Georgians, 5 Abkhazians, and one Greek were killed and many more injured in clashes near the city of Ochamchira.
- Escalation of the conflict between the Abkhazians and the local Georgians continued to embrace the entire population of the autonomous republic. In August 1990 to the declaration of sovereignty by Abkhazia.
- After Gamsakhurdia's overthrow in January 1992 the situation in Abkhazia deteriorated further.
- Depending on the source, between 2000 and 5000 Georgian National Guard troops crossed the border and headed for Sukhumi, while another 1000 troops landed in Gagra, in northwestern Abkhazia, to seal off the border with Russia. Abkhaz resistance proved much stiffer than anticipated and heavy fighting broke out in and around Sukhumi
- On 14 August, 1992, the government of independent Georgia sent its troops to Abkhazia



# Full-scale war

- On 18 August full hostilities resumed and Georgian forces re-took Sukhumi, forcing Ardzinba and the separatist Abkhaz leadership to flee to Gudauta, the site of a Russian base in western Abkhazia. Georgian National Guard units occupied the Abkhaz parliament and a military administrative council of 8 officers was set up. Shevardnadze declared on television that, 'Now we can say that Georgian authority has been restored throughout the entire territory of the republic'.

# The Georgian Civil War (October-December)



- Railroad
- Airport
- Road
- 
- Georgian government offensive
- Separatist offensive
- Russian landing at Poti in support of Georgian government forces (November 4)
- Russian air attacks
- Territory controlled by the breakaway republics of Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Chechen Republic of Ichkeria on October 25
- Territory controlled by Zviadists on October 25, that was lost to the separatists and the Georgian government
- Territory controlled by the Ajarian semi-independent government



- In February 1993, the situation grew chaotic, as Gamsakhurdia's Zviadist insurgents began raids on the Georgian rear and Russian planes bombed Sukhumi.
- Early July 1993 saw an amphibious landing of Abkhaz forces near Sukhumi and a renewed attack on the city, prompting Zviadist fighters to come to the aid of regular Georgian forces.

- On 27 July, another Russian-brokered cease-fire was signed by the belligerent parties in Sochi, just across the Russian border, that led to the withdrawal of Georgian troops from positions in Abkhazia.
- Thinking the conflict was over, Georgian civilians returned to Sukhumi, while Georgian troops staggered back into Mingrelia, many of them joining Gamsakhurdia's insurgency. As Zviadist attacks on regular Georgian and Abkhaz forces grew in early September 1993, the Abkhaz forces launched their largest offensive of the war, breaking the terms of the cease-fire and capturing Sukhumi on 27 September.
- Shevardnadze's pleas for Russian help produced only condemnation and nominal sanctions of the Abkhazians, as they routed the remaining Georgian forces and drove some 200,000 Georgian civilians across the Inguri River into Georgia proper.



# Abkhazia

- The peace negotiations were held in the Russian Sochi, in the summer of 1993.
- 27 July 1993 signed a document called the Agreement on a ceasefire in Abkhazia and the mechanism to ensure compliance. Only on the basis of the interruption of firing, a Russian - Georgian - Abkhazian monitoring group to supervise the ceasefire, the return of Abkhazian parliament in Sukhumi and an agreement on the deployment of UN observers in the region. In August of that year, then the UN Security Council Resolutions No. 849 and No. 854 has been deployed in Abkhazia, the UN Observer Mission - UNOMIG, active on its own territory of Georgia. Its mandate was renewed several times until June 2009, when Russia blocked a further extension.





# UNOMIG

## April 2007

- HQ UNOMIG Mission HQ
- HQ Gali Sector HQ
- HQ Zugdidi Sector HQ

BEFORE WAR

RUSSIA

North Ossetia Chechnya

South Ossetia

Tskhinvali

Tbilisi

GEORGIA

South Ossetia

Russian forces

Azerbaijan

GEORGIA

Tbilisi

Armenia

Turkey

Abkhazia

Imeretuli

Black Sea fleet

Batumi

Adjara



Georgian army



Russian peacekeepers



South Ossetian forces





- During the Abkhazian-Georgian war of 1992-1993, the Abkhazian side alone lost at least 2,000 people, mainly ethnic Abkhazians (servicemen and civilians). According to other sources, approximately 2,700 Abkhazian servicemen perished in this war, a figure which reached 12,000 when volunteers from other regions of the former Soviet Union were added.
- Abkhazians formed the backbone of the Abkhazian armed formations, but a large number of local Armenians and many Russians, as well as volunteers from among the mountain peoples of the Northern Caucasus, Cossacks, and Russians from the southern regions of Russia, also participated in the war against Georgia.

- According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, the total losses during this war amounted to approximately 12,000,-while according to the data of the Abkhazian and Georgian authorities, 1,510 servicemen and “several hundred civilians” from the Abkhazian side (mainly Abkhazians) and 3,365 servicemen and “approximately 7,000 civilians” from the Georgian side were killed,-that is, mainly Georgians.

- According to the Red Cross, the conflict claimed between 10,000 and 15,000 lives and left over 8000 wounded. Other sources, emphasizing ethnic cleansing, cite the figure for deaths as between 25,000 and 30,000.
- 1992-93 Georgia-Abkhazia War is what can be termed as a 'forgotten conflict'.
- 1998 large scale skirmish – Pankisi Gorge – law intestity conflict.

- When discussing the underlying causes of the conflict the majority of Abkhaz researchers think that the problem of identity – ethnicity lies at its heart.
- The Abkhaz see Georgian policy on Abkhazia as an attempt to put an end to the very existence of the Abkhaz nation. By denying the existence of the Abkhaz as a separate nation, which is what a number of Georgian ideologues are engaged in at present, and by trying to impress on the Abkhaz the idea that they are, in fact, Georgians, the Georgians infringe upon the identity of the Abkhaz, one of the basic human needs. Even when it is recognized that the Abkhaz have a right to their own identity, they are denied the right to their territory, namely, Abkhazia.

- It is a fact that during social upheavals such as, for instance, the collapse of the Soviet Union and of communist ideology, national awareness begins to play a pivotal role.
- The importance of ethnic identity greatly increases in a context when other identities, for example, state, civil and so on, become devalued.

?

- It is an ethno-political conflict, driven by incompatible ‘national projects’ to form nationstates on the same territory;
- It is an ethno-political conflict born out of the contradiction between two principles of international law: the right of nations to selfdetermination and the principle of territorial integrity;
- The conflict is political in nature, but this political conflict resulted in an inter-ethnic clash at a later stage.
- It is a conflict about resources: about land, natural and human resources. Often these “resource interests” are not expressed directly but find an indirect expression through political and ideological aspirations;
- The conflict is multilayered, but the main layer is psychological. At the heart of the conflict lie misperceptions and false beliefs: the Georgians believing Abkhaz land to be their own; the false belief in Georgian society that the Abkhaz are really Georgians and have never had a state of their own; denial of the fact that the Abkhaz and Georgians are two different nations.

- *Historical arguments can be made both for Abkhazia's unity and autonomy from Georgia, but the conflict cannot be solely blamed on Soviet 'ethno-federalism'. It must, however, be understood within the context of Georgian independence. Ethnic tension between Abkhazians and Georgians was a necessary but not sufficient cause for the conflict. It took an unstable transition in Moscow, and chaotic Russian involvement in the run-up to the conflict, to turn tension into violence.*

- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VqfPymWfKbA>