

# Armed Conflict in Abkhazia

IREn5019 No War, No Peace: Frozen Conflicts in the Caucasus  
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# Abkhazia



# Clashes Between Abkhazian and Georgian National Agendas

- After Georgia regained its independence in 1918, there was a struggle between different forces in Abkhazia:
- supporters of North Caucasian peoples,
- supporters of the Turkish invasion,
- 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 that time, Abkhazia gained autonomy. However, this status was abandoned soon after disloyalty of Abkhaz People's Council to Georgian government in Tbilisi.
- This initiated a series of struggles that lasted until 1921, when the Red Army invaded Georgia.

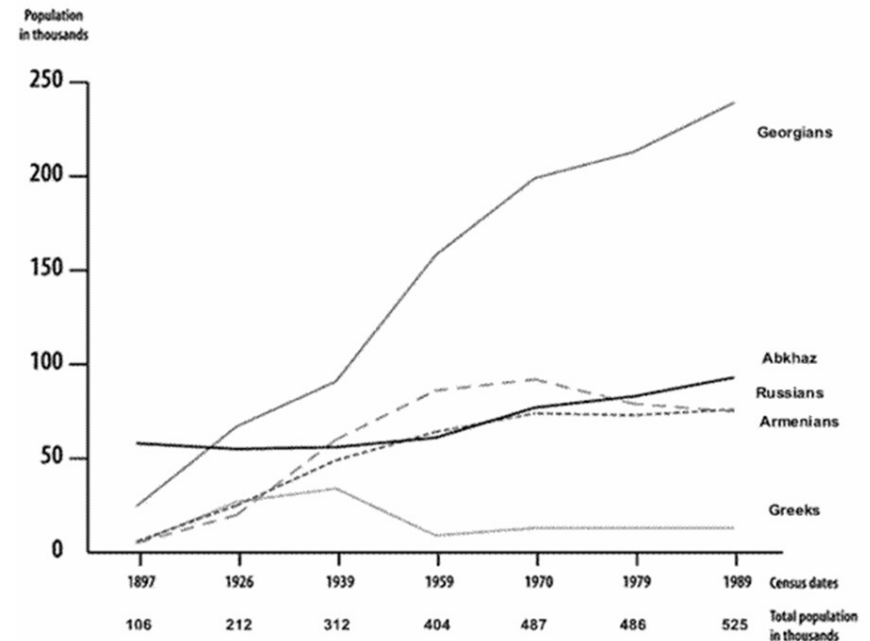
# Issues at Stake: Clashes Between Abkhazian and Georgian National Agendas

Between 1921 and 1931, the relationship between Georgia and Abkhazia was regulated by special treaty, according to which Abkhazia gave a piece of “sovereignty” to Georgia.

Abkhazians would have 28 seats out of 65 in parliament (26 seats would go to Georgians and 11 to other ethnic minorities)

A series of mass demonstration in Tbilisi followed. Georgians pointed out the underprivileged position of Georgians in Abkhazia.

Calls for independence increased the number of demonstrators to 100,000 in April 1989.



# Political struggle

- 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**:
  - 1. Georgian struggle for independence,
  - 2. Moscow fight against Georgian secession from the Soviet Union and
  - 3. South Ossetia trying to carve their special status and protect their rights vis-à-vis Georgian nationalism under the protection of Moscow.

# Issues at Stake: Clashes Between Abkhazian and Georgian National Agendas

- Lack of analysis and wise policy of Georgian political elites (which were fragmented and lacked unity and control over the escalation of tensions) led to the bloody and nasty conflict among Georgians and Abkhazians.
- The role of the **Supreme Council of Abkhazia, its Georgian faction, and the National Unity Council** was significant.
- The Georgian faction, for instance, started to boycott parliamentary sessions. It formed a parallel government, the National Unity Council, which had its own (illegal) armed units, the **Mkhedrioni**.
- For the opposite side, Tengiz Kitovani led the **National Guard** units. **The National Unity Council was against Gamsakhurdia, while the National Guard was initially loyal to the first president of Georgia.**
- To sum up, at this time, Georgia was fragmented not between pro-communist and pro-independence ideology supporters, but between pro- and anti-Zviad Gamsakhurdia forces.

# Issues at Stake: Clashes Between Abkhazian and Georgian National Agendas

- According to Eduard Shevardnadze, war in Abkhazia was planned and went through three major stages.
- During the first stage, **stereotypes and “enemy” images** were created that instilled arguments about historical injustices in regards to ethnic groups. These were used to manipulate the national consciousness in Abkhazia. Appeals of Abkhazian nationalists when addressing Russia for help against Georgia intentionally hid the fact that during the Caucasian wars, the Czarist Russian administration exiled thousands of Abkhazians to Turkey and proclaimed that Abkhazians were a “guilty nation.”
- At the second stage, pseudo-arguments were prepared to **legitimate the secession of Abkhazia from Georgia**. Laws and documents were created to implement this step.
- The final step was the **material-technical, organizational, military-political preparation of propaganda** for a direct military confrontation



# Issues at Stake: Clashes Between Abkhazian and Georgian National Agendas

- Official statistics show that the industrial development in Abkhazia and its employment rate were lower than in other parts of Georgia. However, in reality the opposite was true.
- Access to the Black Sea, tourism, and a monopoly on the distribution of citrus fruits, tea, and flowers (mimosa) to non-state markets helped accumulate a lot of wealth in this region. “The blossoming of corruption and the ‘shadow’ economy in the 1980s created a peculiar quasi-market mentality among the political elite who took high profits from the natural rent for granted.”
- Preservation of good relationships with Moscow promised more profits for leaders in Abkhazia than separation and paying taxes across the border.

# Issues at Stake: Clashes Between Abkhazian and Georgian National Agendas

- Important decisions in Abkhazia were made by local representatives of the leaders of the “Round Table” coalition, Aydgilara and Vladislav Ardzinba (chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia).
- The biggest problem was to establish trustful cooperation with the center in Tbilisi. The major challenge was that the State Council of Georgia perceived the members of the Georgian faction of the Supreme Council of Abkhazia as “Zviadists” – supporters of Zviad Gamsakhurdia.
- **Crises of legitimacy, political fragmentation, different perceptions on how to acquire independent statehood** were accompanied by the inability to handle the situation in two regions: Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

# 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.



# Manifestation of an Issue at Stake: Clashes Over Status

- The primary goal of the Aidgylara National Forum was political: the secession from Georgia and a change of status to Union republic in order to be a part of the (revised) Soviet Union.
  - Aspirations of the Abkhazian national movement were regarded as a threat to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia. Abkhazian calls for autonomy were interpreted by many Georgians as illegitimate, simply as evidence of Russian manipulation designed to undermine Georgian sovereignty.
- . For Abkhazians, it was Tbilisi rather than Moscow that became the focal point for criticism and the center of colonialism (Broers, 2009). The downgrading of Abkhaz status from Union Republic to Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (ASSR) in 1931 is seen to have occurred as a result of ‘Georgians in the Kremlin’.
- “War of laws” between Abkhazia and Georgia.

# War of Laws

			<p>Abkhaz counter-argument: Georgia's point of view contradicts Article 166 of the USSR Constitution (Abkhaz procurator to be appointed by Procurator-General of USSR). In the event of a conflict between Georgian and USSR constitutional legislation, the latter prevails. The ASC rejected the Georgians' argument.</p>
	<b>Powers of the President</b>	<p>Decision by the Georgian President to amend the Constitution regarding his own powers. The President is given the right to suspend laws adopted by ASC or to abolish Abkhaz decrees or orders when they conflict with the Georgian Constitution.</p>	
			<p>Abkhaz argument: the Georgian presidential decision contradicts the Abkhaz Constitution and the right of the ASC to act independently in its own areas of competence. The ASC regarded the amendment as having no legal force.</p>
	<b>Decree on education</b>	<p>Decision by the Georgian Ministry of Education to introduce the obligation for Abkhazia to use the new seals, stamps and signboards of the Republic of Georgia and to make sure Georgian children are not enrolled in non-Georgian schools.</p>	
			<p>Abkhaz argument: the Georgian decision contradicts the multinational nature of Abkhazia: parents are to choose the language of education. Besides, the new stamps, seals and signboards do not show the existence of an Abkhaz Ministry of Education. The APSC rejected the decrees on education.</p>
<b>August 1991: Failed military putsch in Moscow</b>			
September 1991	<b>Creation of State Customs Service</b>	<p>Georgian argument: the Abkhaz decision contradicts the new law on Customs Service of Georgia, Article 82 of the Georgian Constitution (laws of Georgia binding on Abkhazia) and Article 104 of Abkhaz Constitution (the Presidium cannot take legislative decisions). The decision was suspended by the President, then repealed by the GSC.</p>	<p>Decision by the APSC to create a state customs service in Abkhazia in order to develop economic relations with foreign countries.</p>

# War of Laws

	<b>Securing the economic basis for Abkhaz sovereignty</b>	<p>Decision by the APSC to transfer to the jurisdiction of Abkhazia the economic entities (institutions, enterprises and economic organisations) present on Abkhaz territory which were previously under the jurisdiction of the USSR or Georgia.</p> <p>Georgian argument: the Abkhaz decision contradicts the Georgian Constitution according to which all issues related to the ownership and management of property in the autonomous republic must be decided in agreement with the SC and government of Georgia. The President declared the decision null and void.</p>	<p>Decision by the APSC to transfer to the jurisdiction of Abkhazia the economic entities (institutions, enterprises and economic organisations) present on Abkhaz territory which were previously under the jurisdiction of the USSR or Georgia.</p> 
November 1991	<b>Military conscription</b>	<p>Decision by the APSC to adopt measures to strengthen the level of mobilisation and to introduce conscription to the military units deployed in Abkhazia.</p> <p>Georgian argument: the Abkhaz decision contradicts both the new Georgian law on the Ministry of Defence and creation of a National Guard and the Abkhaz Constitution, which does not provide for military service. As a result, the GSC repealed the decision.</p>	<p>Decision by the APSC to adopt measures to strengthen the level of mobilisation and to introduce conscription to the military units deployed in Abkhazia.</p> 
	<b>Creation of State Security Service</b>	<p>Decision by the APSC to create a state security service after the abolition of the Committee of State Security of the USSR and its structure in the republic.</p>	<p>Decision by the APSC to create a state security service after the abolition of the Committee of State Security of the USSR and its structure in the republic.</p>
<b>31 December 1991: Breakdown of the USSR</b>			
December 1991	<b>Decisions on military units</b>	<p>Two decisions were adopted by the APSC . One concerned the dislocation of military units and the establishment of border guards, internal forces &amp; navy forces, while the other concerned the resubordination of military units to an 'interim council on the coordination of activities and resubordination of military and police forces', which was headed by Ardzinba and was in charge of working out proposals on defence issues and military policy (in accordance with the regulations adopted in February 1992).</p>	
<b>6 January 1992: Gamsakhurdia ousted in a military coup</b>			

# War of Laws

Dismissal of the Georgian Parliament and creation of a temporary legislative organ on the Georgian side, the Consultative Council			
January 1992	Decisions regarding the Procuracy		Decisions by the ASC to transfer the procuracy and the Ministry of the Interior to the jurisdiction of Abkhazia & to subordinate the environment procuracy and transport procuracy to the procuracy of Abkhazia.
February 1992	Reinstatement of the 1921 Georgian Constitution	Decision by the Georgian Military Council to reinstate the 1921 Georgian Constitution.	
	Military commissariats		Decision by the APSC to subordinate the Military Commissariats of Abkhazia to the 'interim council on the coordination of activities and resubordination of military and police forces' (see above).
<b>March 1992: Return of Shevardnadze to Georgia</b>			
<b>Creation of the State Council, endowed with both legislative and executive powers and led by Shevardnadze</b>			
March 1992	Resubordination of state management organs		Decision by the APSC to withdraw the Security Committee of Abkhazia, State Committee on State Property Management and Privatisation and State Committee for Environmental Protection from the jurisdiction of the Committee of Ministers (which was headed by a Georgian) and to subordinate them to the ASC.
	Jurisdiction over the economy	Georgian argument: the Abkhaz decision contradicts the 1991 Georgian law declaring that those enterprises were the property of Georgia. The State Council repealed the decision.	Decision by the Abkhaz Council of Ministers to place the State management enterprises, organisations and agencies present on Abkhaz territory under the jurisdiction of Abkhazia.



# War of Laws

May 1992	Formation of a border zone	Decision by the State Council to establish a border zone throughout the territory of the Georgian republic and put in place border facilities and means of communication. According to the decision, Abkhazia should support Georgia in its endeavour to ensure the protection of the border zone.	
			Abkhaz argument: the Georgian decision contradicts Articles 11, 72 and 93 of the Abkhaz Constitution and the Declaration on State Sovereignty of July 1990. The ASC repealed the decision.
<p>May 1992: the Georgian deputies walk out of the Soviet Council of Abkhazia</p> <p>24 June 1992: Signing of the Sochi Agreement on the Principles of Settlement of the Georgian-Ossetian Conflict</p>			
July 1992	Adoption of the 1925 draft Abkhaz Constitution	Georgian argument: the Abkhaz decision misinterprets the legal/state relationships between Abkhazia and Georgia and contradicts Article 162 of the Abkhaz Constitution (need for a qualified majority). The State Council repealed the decision.	Decision by the ASC to adopt the Constitution drafted by the Abkhaz authorities in 1925.
	Change of name		Decisions by the ASC to change the name of the SSR to Republic of Abkhazia and to adopt new state symbols (new national emblem, anthem and flag).
	Transit duties		Decision by the ASC to impose transit duties on the owners and users of means of transport who are not resident in Abkhazia but who use the republic's territory, air and maritime spaces for the transit of cargo and passengers.



# 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 Abkhaz side was supported by volunteers from the Confederation of the Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus and the Russian Ministry of Defense.
- Russian military support to Abkhazians became evident when Abkhaz troops acquired sophisticated heavy weapons, T-72 and T-80 tanks, Su-25 and Su-27 aircrafts, artillery, and a Grad rocket system.

# Full scale war

- 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.

# Cease fire agreement

- On 27 July, another **Russian-brokered cease-fire was signed by the belligerent parties in Sochi**, 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.

# Peace negotiations

- 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.



*Переговоры в Москве. 3 сентября 1992 г.*



# UNOMIG

## April 2007

- HQ** UNOMIG Mission HQ
- HQ** Gali Sector HQ
- HQ** Zugdidi Sector HQ
- LO** Tbilisi Liaison office
- Security zone (SZ)
- Restricted weapons

**BEFORE WAR**

**RUSSIA**

**GEORGIA**

**South Ossetia**

**North Ossetia Chechnya**

**South Ossetia**

**Tskhinvali**

**Tbilisi**

**Irkhumi**

**Abkhazia**

**Black Sea fleet**

**Russian forces**

**Azerbaijan**

**Batumi**

**Adjara**

**GEORGIA**

**Tbilisi**

**Armenia**

**Turkey**



**Georgian army**



**Russian peacekeepers**



**South Ossetian forces**

# Peace negotiations

- 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.



# The consequences of conflict

- 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.

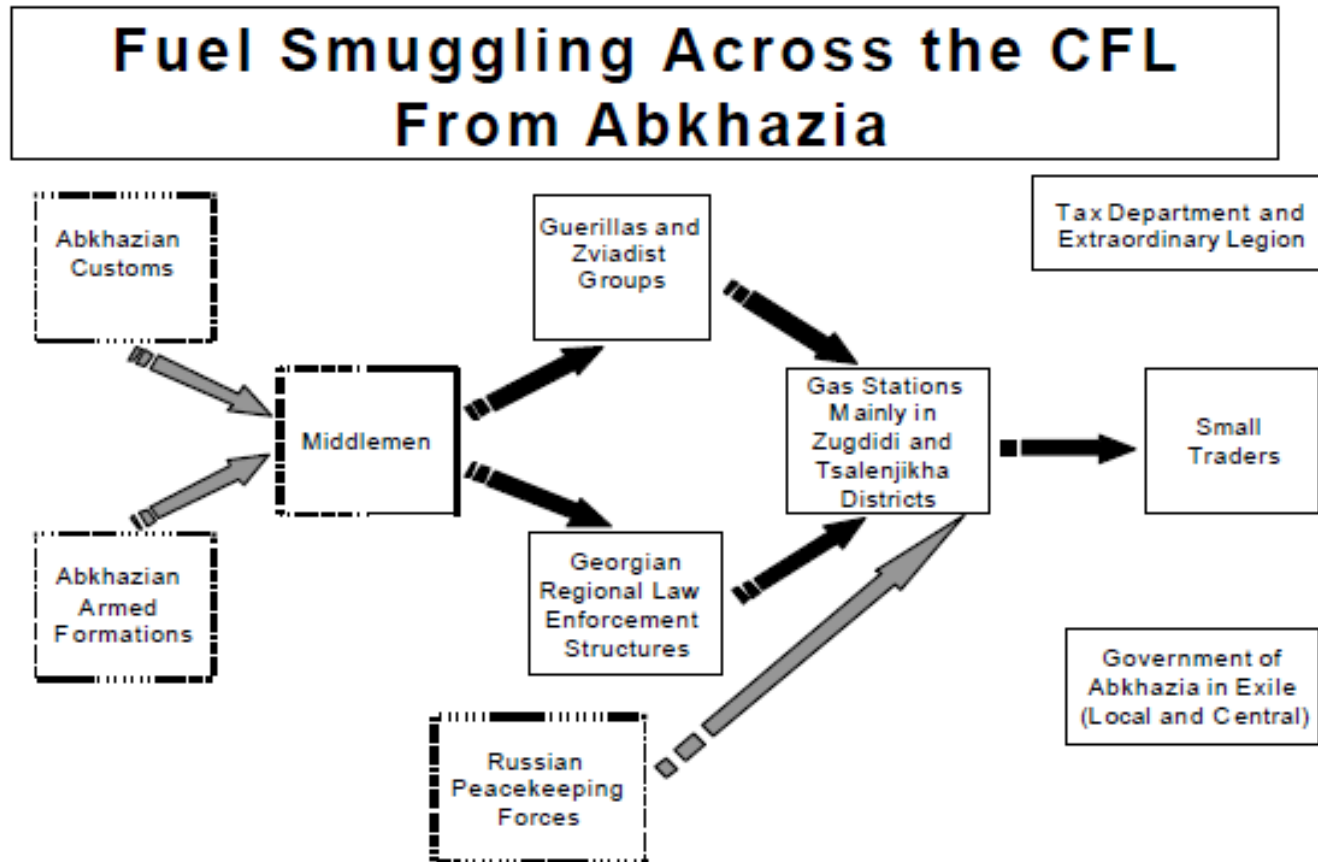
# The consequences of conflict

- 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.

# The consequences of conflict

- According to Georgia's Ministry of State Security, Abkhazia has control over the most profitable products, including smuggling of oil, petroleum, and cigarettes.
- Criminal activities in Abkhazia occur for self-enrichment purposes rather than for political reasons. Any effort to resolve the conflict has met with more hostilities by criminal groups, as it happened in May 1998 and January 2001
- The "Forest Brothers" (a Georgian partisan group) and Abkhazian separatists fought each other due to the contrabanding of tobacco when 2 Georgians were killed and 3 others were captured. The Georgians in return captured 5 Abkhazians.

# Mechanism of Smuggling in the Gali and Zugdidi Districts in Georgia



# The consequences of conflict

- The stalemate in the relationship between Georgians and Abkhazians has not produced a **reconciliation or any shift in the perceptions** of the conflict parties.
- Instead, it reinforced Georgia's claims of territorial integrity and has resulted in a complete deadlock regarding negotiations of Abkhazia's status. On the one hand, Abkhazia is de jure part of Georgia; on the other hand, Abkhaz leadership had established their own statehood on the basis of pre-war institutions, including legislative and executive bodies.

## Evolution of the Issue at Stake: De facto, De jure and Desired Status of Abkhazia

	<i>De facto status</i>		<i>De jure status</i>	<i>Desired status</i>	
	<b>Effective government</b>	<b>Territory</b>		<b>Abkhaz</b>	<b>Georgian</b>
<b>Pre-war period (1989-1992)</b>	<i>Federated state:</i> Soviet state institutions of an autonomous republic; few actual areas of competence	Territory fixed in the constitution at the north-west of the Georgian SSR	<i>Autonomous republic (ASSR) within Georgia without right to secede or to change its status or territory unilaterally</i>	<i>Union republic; recognition of sovereignty</i>	<i>Status quo or less (cultural autonomy)</i>
<b>War period (1992-1994)</b>	<i>Insurgency:</i> state institutions fleshed out, adapted for war situation	Territory fluctuating with military operations	<i>De jure part of Georgia:</i> compelled to respect Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity.	<i>Confederation</i>	<i>Federal arrangement or less</i>
<b>Post-war period (1994-2008)</b>	<i>De facto state:</i> state-like institutions including law enforcement agencies; rather poor capacity to provide services	Soviet territory demarcated by a <i>de facto</i> border (1994 ceasefire agreement) and not totally under control (upper Kodori valley)	<i>De jure part of Georgia:</i> bound to respect Georgia's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity	<i>Confederation; free associated state up to 1999; internationally recognised state as of 1999</i>	<i>Federal arrangement</i>

# Changing the Paradigm – Backwards Instead of Forwards

- The second phase of escalation of the conflict in Abkhazia came in the spring of 2008 when the Georgian Unmanned Aerial Vehicle “Hermes-450” was shot down over the Gadida village in the Gali region by a Russian MIG-29 fighter plane.
- In the Ochamchire and Tkvarcheli regions and an additional 400 Volgograd railway troops were deployed

# A new peace plan

- „Unlimited autonomy, wide federalism and very serious representation in the central governmental bodies of Georgia... We offer them (Abkhazia) the position of vice-president of Georgia and we offer them the right to veto all those decisions by the central authorities which concern or will concern their constitutional status, as well as all important preconditions related with the preservation and further development of their culture, language and ethnicity“ stated M. Saakashvili.



# A New State Strategy

- On 27 January 2009, the Georgian Cabinet of Ministers created **a new State Strategy on Occupied Territories: engagement through cooperation.**
- The new strategy, which included an Action Plan, aimed at economic cooperation with Abkhazia, educational opportunities, and a peaceful resolution of the conflict. The primary objective of the document was to illustrate a goal to overcome the isolation of Abkhazia by establishing linkages among the “divided societies.” The ultimate goal, of course, was to solidify the territorial integrity of Georgia.

# The status issue remains as the most crucial aspect

