

**ETHNIC RELATIONS AND
MIGRATION PROBLEMS****INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION OF
ABKHAZIA AND SOUTH OSSETIA:
A (DE)STABILIZING FACTOR
IN THE CAUCASUS**

Yana AMELINA

*Head of the Sector of Caucasian Studies,
the Russian Institute for Strategic Studies (RISS)
(Moscow, the Russian Federation)*

Introduction

The August 2008 war and recognition, on 26 August, 2008, of the independence of the Republic of Abkhazia and the Republic of South Ossetia by the Russian Federation and, later, by several other countries created a new situation in the Greater Caucasus, which many of the regional and world geopolitical players have found unpalatable. Their active efforts to change the new reality run up against the recognition of independence of these two states,¹

¹ It should be said that the U.S., EU, and NATO insist that Russia revoke its recognition of independence, although they do not demand the same from Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru and Tuvalu (and probably Vanuatu), which

which Russia cannot revoke without losing its international prestige and influence in the Caucasus right up to possible secession of the Northern Caucasus. The above-mentioned players have no choice but to use force to liquidate the republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia; if this happens, complete and final destabilization of the Caucasus will be inevitable.

Meanwhile, neither the young republics nor the Russian Federation are making it a point to get more states to recognize the independence of the first.

also recognized the independence of the two breakaway republics.

Georgia and the Western Actors: “New Approaches” to South Ossetia and Abkhazia

Georgia, which is still deliberating the question of “restoring territorial integrity” (“reunification” with Abkhazia and South Ossetia contrary to the will of their populations), is the most active among the regional players determined to change the post-August 2008 landscape. This will inevitably call for the use of force despite Georgia’s ardent desire to join the EU and NATO and the large-scale economic and social reforms designed to confirm Tbilisi’s “European choice.” In view of the allied relations between Russia and each of the new states and the presence of Russia’s military bases in their territories, another attempt to restore Georgia’s “territorial integrity” by force will lead to its crushing military defeat, disintegration of its statehood, and the emergence of several puppet quasi-states in its territory.

Fully aware of this, Tbilisi will hardly venture to use arms any time soon. Georgia gained much more influence in the Northern Caucasus when it unilaterally abolished the visa regime with the Russian Federation; however the process stopped at the borders of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Tbilisi, however, could tip the balance in its favor by skillfully applying “soft power.”

Some of the American think-tanks can be described as the main world actors determined to help Tbilisi regain control over the two republics. They guided the North Caucasian “initiatives” of Georgia up to and including the use of the “Circassian card” and the attempts to re-orientate South Ossetia and Abkhazia away from Russia toward the West (as represented by the EU and U.S.). In fact, Washington is pursuing its own geopolitical aims: restructuring the Greater Caucasus by pushing Russia out of it and diminishing the role of Turkey and Iran by various, including military, means.

By necessity the European Union has become a vehicle of Western interests in the Caucasus: America’s political and financial support of Georgia and the obvious Russian-American rivalry in the region have made it ill-suited to this role.

While the officials of the United States, the EU, and NATO are talking about their support of Georgia’s territorial integrity and continue to call on Russia to revoke its recognition of the new republics, the White House is feverishly looking for a more pragmatic angle for its Georgian policy. In the spring of 2010, Alexander Cooley and Lincoln Mitchell of Columbia University offered a “new course”: they recommended different policies for these republics. They suggested that the Republic of South Ossetia, which depended on Moscow politically and economically, should be left within Russia’s orbit, while Abkhazia should become the target of an “engagement without recognition” policy.²

The EU has been applying this principle for over a year now to develop social, economic, cultural, and public contacts between Sukhum (in the sphere of civil society) and the EU member states (without recognizing Abkhazia’s independence) in the interests of Tbilisi and on the strength of a mutual understanding between the EU and Georgia.

In March 2009, Peter Semneby, EU Special Representative for the Southern Caucasus from 2006 to 2012, explained to the then President of Abkhazia Sergey Bagapsh (without mentioning “engagement without recognition,” the latest Western invention) that the EU was prepared, without recognizing Abkhazia’s independence, to help Abkhazia implement humanitarian projects “to improve

² L. Mitchell, A. Cooley, “After the August War: A New Strategy for U.S. Engagement with Georgia,” *The Harriman Review*, Vol. 17, Nos. 3-4, May 2010, available at [<http://www.harrimaninstitute.org/MEDIA/01798.pdf>].

the living conditions in the republic.” The EU representative mentioned the visa question (the situation in this sphere had considerably worsened by that time) and “humanitarian projects in the sphere of health protection, education, and restoration of infrastructure,”³ in particular in the Gali region, which borders on Georgia. A year later Peter Semneby deemed it necessary to specify to President Bagapsh that by “engagement without recognition” the European Union meant “the implementation of all sorts of projects through the European Commission and student exchange programs,” as well as restoration of the severed contacts between the Abkhazians and Georgians in various, including economic, spheres.⁴

“Engagement without Recognition” Fails

Even before Russia recognized the independence of the two republics, Western states had tried to re-orientate the South Ossetian and Abkhazian leaders away from Russia toward the U.S. and the European Union. In the 2000s, EU officials frequented Tskhinvali and Sukhum, while OSCE missions worked in the zones of the Georgian-Ossetian and Georgian-Abkhazian conflicts; this was also when several small economic projects were implemented.

The EU stepped up its activity after February 2008 (when Kosovo became independent) and remained quite active until the August 2008 war. It was then that the Europeans (who coordinated their actions with the United States) tried in earnest to re-orientate civil society and, in some cases, statesmen in both republics away from Russia toward the EU. It was believed that after a while both conflicts would be resolved in favor of Georgia’s territorial integrity.

In 2008, it was planned to allocate €500 thousand and €100 thousand to Abkhazian and Ossetian NGOs, respectively, within the European Commission for Georgia Program called Non-State Actors and Local Authorities in Development.⁵ The war disrupted the program (which had barely started) and the process of re-orientation of civil society, which consisted mainly of marginal figures with no real weight in the so far unrecognized republics. A year after the war, the “engagement without recognition” formula was employed as better suited to the new reality.

At first the new approach caused no negative feelings in Abkhazia; after a while, however, moderation developed into skepticism. The EU expected that the political issues (the status of Abkhazia, Georgia’s territorial integrity, etc.) would remain suppressed or not included on the political agenda. Very much in line with this policy, the EU emissaries exerted efforts (both directly and indirectly) to make implementation of the humanitarian programs hinge on Abkhazia’s agreement with the Georgian point of view. Predictably, this caused nothing but irritation in Sukhum; in 2012, Abkhazia clamped down on all sorts of EU structures working in its territory. If the EU continues lobbying Georgian interests (the main reason for the EU’s presence in Abkhazia), relations between Abkhazia and the EU might be severed once more (they were severed after the August war in South Ossetia).

³ “Evrosoiuz gotov finansirovat gumanitarnye proekty v Abkhazii,” Novy Region Information Agency, 18 March, 2009, available at [<http://www.nregion.com/txt.php?i=30036>].

⁴ “Spetspredstavitel ES na Yuzhnom Kavkaze Peter Semneby provodit vstrechi v Abkhazii,” Kavkazkiy uzel Information Agency, 14 July, 2010, available at [<http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/171616/?print=true>].

⁵ See: A. Bitarov, “Yuzhnaia Ossetia-2008: Evrosoiuz i ‘tretya sila’,” Osinform Information Agency, available at [<http://osinform.ru/6411-andrej-bitarov-juzhnaja-osetija-2008.html>].

It should be said that neither the U.S. nor the EU recognized the parliamentary and presidential elections in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, or their results,⁶ which says a lot about their real attitude toward the young republics.

The European Union is persisting in its efforts to consolidate its position in Abkhazia, even though President Alexander Ankvab described relations with the EU as “far from perfect” and said that he had no illusions about their future.⁷ It seems that the “engagement without recognition” policy is doomed to failure in Abkhazia; if spread to South Ossetia it will fail there too.

President Ankvab explained why further attempts to talk to the EU were senseless: “No projects created within the Georgian political milieu will be accepted in Abkhazia. We have covered a fairly hard road and met many more difficulties than Europe can imagine.”⁸

The new American-European strategy failed not only because it was closely tied to the interests of Tbilisi, but also because the Georgian leaders refused to abandon the thesis of Russian occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and insisted on Georgia’s territorial integrity. This has left the European Union with no other options.

“Weaker Dependence on Russia:” Is this True?

The “engagement without recognition” strategy should be developed beyond the economic and cultural sphere. In an interview, American political scientist Paul Goble designated a scenario of its further development: “The step that would most disturb Moscow would be if the West and the U.S. in particular were to recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia. ...It would be more interesting if Georgia has recognized Abkhazia.”⁹ He is convinced that it would weaken Sukhum’s dependence on Moscow. He gave the West five years to retreat from its position—three of the five years have already passed. It should be said that his deliberations and the frantic efforts of other Western analysts to find ways and means to weaken Russia’s influence in the Caucasus are utopian.

Significantly, it was South Ossetia (which the West dismissed as a hopeless case) rather than Abkhazia that demonstrated “weaker moral-psychological dependence” on Russia when mid-level Russian officials unceremoniously interfered in the 2011-2012 presidential campaign. Their clumsiness raised a wave of anti-Kremlin and, to some extent, anti-Russian sentiments (in the broad sense of the word) in the republic.¹⁰

This was partly corrected when Leonid Tibilov, elected president of the Republic of South Ossetia, invited some of Alla Jioeva’s supporters to join his team (Alla Jioeva as a presidential candidate won the “first round” of presidential election). The future depends on the people appointed by the federal center to supervise relations between Russia and South Ossetia and on the pace of economic reconstruction; the new teams in power in the Russian Federation and South Ossetia breed cautious optimism.

⁶ Presidential elections were held in Abkhazia in 2009 and 2011 and parliamentary elections in 2012. The president of South Ossetia was elected after two rounds—in 2011 and 2012.

⁷ See: “Alexander Ankvab ne pitaet illiuziy po povodu uluchsheniia otnosheniy s Evrosoiuzom,” Apsnypress Information Agency, 21 February, 2012, available at [<http://apsnypress.info/news/5479.html>].

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ “How the Russian-Georgian War Has Changed the World—Interview with Paul Goble,” VOA News, 11 August, 2010, available at [<http://www.abkhazworld.com/news/interview/539-paul-goble-interview-voa-news-august-2010.html>].

¹⁰ See: Ya. Amelina, “Uroki prezidentskoy kampanii v Yuzhnoy Osetii i perspektivy razvitiya osetinskoy gosudarstvennosti,” Regnum Information Agency, 12 December, 2011, available at [www.regnum.ru/news/polit/1478599.html].

In Abkhazia, too, there are mild anti-Russian sentiments among the Abkhazian intelligentsia, part of the academic and educational communities, journalists, writers, etc. They find no support at the state and the grass-roots level, but crop up as publications of biased versions of Abkhazia's national history in which Russia is presented as the main villain, the source of corruption, and other negative phenomena previously unknown in Abkhazia. It is constantly asserted that Russia needs Abkhazia more than Abkhazia needs Russia, which means that Abkhazia is free to develop contacts with the West and Turkey without looking back at Moscow. The independent media indulge in criticizing practically all the Russian-Abkhazian treaties as unequal, unprofitable, and anti-state.

These sentiments can be observed among the ordinary people as well. In the last two or three years, Russian tourists have begun complaining on the Internet about the far from friendly treatment they receive in Abkhazia, and this is despite the fact that a large part of the local population lives on the money tourists from Russia spend in the republic during the tourist season.

It is no wonder that official statistics have registered a steady decline in the number of Russian tourists in the republic; and this trend continues.

The Adighe-Abkhazian Brotherhood Falls Apart

At the same time, Sukhum successfully resisted Tbilisi's attempts to draw it into a campaign of recognition of the so-called genocide of the Circassians, a hope to start a common Adighe movement: by that time the subject had been banned in Abkhazia for five years. On 20 May, 2011, the Georgian parliament recognized the so-called Circassian Genocide to take its revenge on Moscow for its loss of influence in the former autonomous territories. The soil was properly tilled: the deputies convened two international conferences allegedly to discuss the events of the mid and late 19th century and the Caucasian War, which attracted radical leaders of the Circassian national movement and political scientists from the U.S. and Europe.

These efforts are directly connected with the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, which are eating up huge budget funds. Its failure would undermine Russia's international prestige and destabilize the region even more.¹¹

Contrary to what was expected of them in Tbilisi, the Abkhazians preferred to keep away from the anti-Russian "Circassian" project. The split in the Abkhazian-Circassian ideological and political camp became obvious some time ago in the course of several scientific-public and political actions. The events of the winter and spring of 2012 clearly indicated that the former allies would finally part ways.¹²

The radical Circassian leaders, in particular Ibrahim Yaganov, leader of the Hase Movement in Kabardino-Balkaria, who during the Abkhazian-Georgian conflict commanded a Kabardin battalion, moved to the side of external (Georgian) actors, which caused confusion in the ranks of the ideologists of the Adighe-Abkhazian unity."

At first Yaganov carefully avoided direct contacts with the Georgians. As recently as 2010 he refused to attend the Tbilisi conferences on the Circassian genocide and argued that the Circassians should avoid contacts with Georgia until it recognized Abkhazia. He deemed it necessary to specify

¹¹ See: "Cherkesskiy vopros" i vneshniy faktor. Analiticheskiy doklad, RISS, Moscow, 2012.

¹² Circassians were actively involved in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict of 1992-1993.

that he did not want “to betray the memory of his fallen comrades.”¹³ Shortly after that, early in 2011, he retreated from his previous position; in October 2011, he appeared on Georgian TV (the PIK Channel) with a detailed interview in which he spoke about the need for a “direct dialog” between Georgia and Abkhazia and suggested the Circassians as intermediaries.¹⁴

The leaders of Abkhazia found it hard to see eye to eye with Yaganov. Two years before he had tried to draw Abkhazians into what President Ankvab called “the Tbilisi squabbles” and was deported from Abkhazia.¹⁵

After realizing that the Abkhazians were determined to stay away from the Circassian radicals, Tbilisi started talking about the Abkhazians as a “second-rate nation” compared with the Circassians and even denying their belonging to the Circassian community.¹⁶ Popular Georgian bloggers say the same.

In fact, the new Georgian policy of “separating” the Abkhazians and Circassians strengthens Russia’s position in the republic and the region.

In view of the firm position of the Abkhazian leaders and President Ankvab on the problems of the republic’s independence, “genocide of the Circassians,” and the resettlement of muhajir descendants, as well as the Winter Olympics in Sochi, it can be said that the Republic of Abkhazia will not support the Circassian radicals in the near future. President Ankvab has dotted the “i’s”: “Our position is absolutely clear: we will never allow anyone, whenever possible, to speculate on this issue. Our relations with the Russian Federation are not based on what happened a century and a half ago. This is history. We should analyze history but should not build our relations on it. We should know history but should not rely on the results of the Caucasian War in our relations with Russia. Abkhazia will never do this.”¹⁷

For independent Abkhazia the Circassian support is of purely moral importance. What the radicals do and say is killing the illusions of some of the Abkhazians about Abkhazian-Adighe unity; these illusions will soon be finally dead.

The “Neutral” Neighbors

While Georgia, as well as Armenia and Azerbaijan, will not recognize the new republics, Turkey and Iran have already displayed a lot of interest in both countries at an unofficial level.

Turkey is home to a fairly large Abkhazian diaspora (several hundred thousand); some of the Sukhum intellectuals believe that this human and economic potential can be used to build an independent Abkhazian state. This, however, is impossible for several reasons, the main being the Islamic factor, considerable social and cultural distinctions, and Russia’s opposition to the threat of widespread Turkish influence in the Republic of Abkhazia.

¹³ A. Babitskiy, D. Polandov, “V gruzinskiy parlament postupila prosba o priznanii genotsida cherkessov,” *Ekho Kavkaza*, 21 March, 2010, available at [<http://www.ekhokavkaza.com/content/article/1989419.html>].

¹⁴ “Vasha pravda s Davidom Sakvarelidze: Adygsky vopros,” PIK TV Channel, 20 October, 2011, available at [<http://pik.tv/ru/shows/vasha-pravda/video/64/2459>].

¹⁵ See: “Alexander Ankvab: ‘Otnosheniia Abkhazii s Rossiei ne baziruiutsia na tom, chto bylo 150 let nazad,’” Interview to Yana Amelina, Regnum Information Agency, 22 August, 2011, available at [www.regnum.ru/news/1437495.html].

¹⁶ See, for example: Kvakhadze, “Rukovodstvo cherkesskogo kulturnogo tsentra pod cherkessami podrazumevaet iskluchitelno adygov i ubykhov,” Prepared by Solomon Lebanidze, AntiSochi, 28 February, 2012, available at [<http://antisochi.org/2012/02/квахадзе—«руководство-черкесского/”>].

¹⁷ “Alexander Ankvab: ‘Otnosheniia Abkhazii s Rossiei ne baziruiutsia na tom, chto bylo 150 let nazad.’”

Turkish diplomats visited Abkhazia after its independence had been recognized by the Russian Federation. This does not mean that Turkey will do the same any time soon: Ankara has to retain friendly relations with Russia, the U.S., and NATO (of which it is a member).

Iran, the diplomatic steps of which are invariably cautious and balanced, will not recognize Abkhazia despite the unofficial talks between the two countries.

Turkey and Iran are unlikely to recognize the independence of the Republic of South Ossetia either. It should be said that Iran has been demonstrating more interest in South Ossetia, probably because of its remote linguistic kinship; Iranian diplomats held several unofficial meetings, some of them in the republic.

Tehran decided that it would be politically risky and, therefore, hardly wise to recognize the independence of South Ossetia in the near future. This does not mean, however, that the sides will not revive the issue in a different geopolitical situation. Russia, which has been recently openly supporting Iran on the international scene, may play an important role in this respect.

By Way of a Conclusion

In the future, several more countries might recognize the republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. So far their statehoods and physical safety are guaranteed by the fact that Russia has recognized their independence.

Any possible attempts by the United States, the EU, or NATO to change the status quo should be prevented: further destabilization of the region could lead to disaster.
