



# Abkhazia, Georgia and the Circassians (NW Caucasus)

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## Demography

Although the data from the last (Soviet) census (1989) in these parts of the Caucasus are already a decade old, they at least provide a basis for discussing ethnic divisions.

**Table 1.** (a) Figures for the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic (capital = Tbilisi). Main population of Georgia (1979 and 1989)

	1979	1989	1979	1989
Whole population	4,993,182	5,400,841	100%	100%
'Georgians'	3,433,011	3,787,393	68.8%	70.1%
Armenians	448,000	437,211	9.0%	8.1%
Russians	371,608	341,172	7.4%	6.3%
Azerbaijdzhanis	255,678	307,556	5.1%	5.7%
Ossetians/Ossetes	160,497	164,055	3.2%	3.0%
Greeks	95,105	100,324	1.9%	1.8%
Abkhazians	85,285	95,853	1.7%	1.8%

(b) The Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (capital = Sukhum). Main population of Abkhazia (1979 and 1989)

Whole population	486,082	525,061	100%	100%
Abkhazians	83,097	93,267	17.1%	17.8%
'Georgians'	213,322	239,872	43.9%	45.7%
Armenians	73,350	76,541	15.1%	14.6%
Russians	79,730	74,913	16.4%	14.2%
Greeks	13,642	14,664	2.8%	2.8%
Ukrainians	10,257	11,470	2.1%	2.2%

(c) The Adzharian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (capital = Batumi). Main population of Adzharia (1979 and 1989)

Whole population	354,224	392,432	100%	100%
'Georgians'	283,872	324,806	80.2%	82.8%
Russians	34,544	30,042	9.75%	7.7%
Armenians	16,101	15,849	4.5%	4%
Greeks	7072	7379	2%	1.9%
Ukrainians	5402	5943	1.5%	1.5%
Belorussians	481	712	0.13%	0.2%

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**Table 2.** The Kabardino-Balkar Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (capital = Nal'chik). Main population of Kabardino-Balkaria (1979 and 1989)

	<b>1979</b>	<b>1989</b>	<b>Percentage growth</b>	<b>% in 1989</b>
Whole population	666,546	753,531	13.1%	100%
Kabardians	303,604	363,351	19.7%	48.2%
Russians	234,137	240,721	2.8%	31.9%
Balkars	59,710	70,571	18.2%	9.4%
Ukrainians	12,139	12,826	5.7%	1.7%
Ossetians/Ossetes	9710	9996	2.9%	1.3%
Germans	9905	8569	- 13.5%	1.1%

**Table 3.** The Karachay-Cherkess Autonomous Oblast (capital = Cherkessk). Main population of Karachay-Cherkessia (1979 and 1989)

	<b>1979</b>	<b>1989</b>	<b>Percentage growth</b>	<b>% in 1989</b>
Whole population	367,364	414,970	13%	100%
Russians	165,604	175,923	6.2%	42.4%
Karachays	109,196	128,746	17.9%	31%
Cherkess	34,430	40,230	16.8%	9.7%
Abazas	24,245	27,475	13.3%	6.6%
Nogays	11,872	12,933	9.4%	3.1%
Kabardians	756	1030	36.2%]	0.25%

**Table 4.** The Adyghe Autonomous Oblast (capital = Maykop). Main population of Adyghea (1979 and 1989)

	<b>1979</b>	<b>1989</b>	<b>Percentage growth</b>	<b>% in 1989</b>
Whole population	404,390	432,046	6.8%	100%
Russians	285,626	293,640	2.8%	68%
Adyghe	86,388	95,439	10.5%	22.1%
Ukrainians	12,078	13,755	13.9%	3.2%
Armenians	6359	10,460	64.5%	2.4%

### Elucidation of ethno-linguistic terms

The term 'Georgian' has been used since ca.1930 within Georgia/former USSR as a general designation (superordinate) for speakers of all four of the South Caucasian (Kartvelian) languages, namely Georgians proper, Mingrelians, Svans

and Laz (although this last ethno-linguistic group lives almost in its entirety in the Laz traditional homeland, which today is incorporated within Turkey, running from the Turko–Georgian border along the Black Sea coast towards Rize)—there are also large numbers of ethnic Georgians who have ended up on the Turkish side of the border. I myself do not use the term ‘Georgian’ in what I deem to be this deliberately misleading enlarged sense (NB: this obfuscation of ethnic categories does not apply in Turkey), preferring the term ‘Kartvelian’, the same term as is used widely by linguists to refer to the relevant language-family which, as far as one can determine, is an isolate, seemingly being unrelated to any language/language-family spoken either today or in the past. Mutual intelligibility among these four sister-tongues is only possible between Laz and Mingrelian. It will be important to bear in mind the ethno-linguistic distinctions within the Kartvelian family during the discussion below.

The other indigenous language-family with whose speakers we shall be concerned in this section is North West Caucasian. This small family consists of Abkhaz (the most divergent dialect of which is Abaza), Circassian and Ubykh (extinct since 1992). A common synonym for Circassian is Cherkess—in Turkey the term ‘Cherkess’ has the wider sense of ‘North Caucasian’. Linguistically speaking, the Circassian language, which is universally known to its native speakers as ‘Adyghebze’, can be divided into a western and an eastern group of dialects; somewhat confusingly, the western dialects alone are commonly referred to as ‘Adyghe’, and this is the source of the name of Adyghea (Adyghe Autonomous Oblast), where the majority of western Circassian speakers remaining in the Caucasian homeland are concentrated—a further 10,000 or so speakers of the western dialect Shapsugh are found around the Black Sea town of Tuapse (‘Two Rivers’ in its Circassian etymology) in Russia’s Krasnodar Region. Eastern Circassian comprises the two dialects of Kabardian and Bes(le)ney. When the Soviet administrative divisions were set up in the NW Caucasus, eastern Circassians living outside Kabardino-Balkaria were styled ‘Cherkess’—hence ‘Karachay-Cherkessia’. As a general rule, all dialects of Circassian are mutually intelligible, although it is easier for western dialect speakers to understand eastern Circassian than vice versa. Similarly, although speakers of the two Abkhazian dialects still to be found on their Abkhazian ancestral lands (namely Abzhywa, base for literary Abkhaz, and Bzyp) can, with some difficulty, communicate with speakers of Abaza, it is easier for speakers of the Abaza dialects (namely Ashkharywa and T’ap’anta, base of literary Abaza) to understand the speech of (Bzyp or Abzhywa) Abkhaz. There is no mutual intelligibility between Circassian and Abkhaz–Abaza. It has not been finally demonstrated to universal satisfaction that NW Caucasian is related to any other language or language-family, although some think that the long-extinct Anatolian Hattic (plus whatever the contemporary Kasks might have spoken) may have been related. There is, however, growing acceptance of the theory that NW Caucasian derives from the same proto-language as the other North Caucasian language-family of Nakh–Daghestanian.

All the other ethno-linguistic groups mentioned in the above tables are

deemed to be non-autochthonous to the Caucasus, speaking either Indo-European (Slavonic Russian, Ukrainian, Belorussian; Armenian; Greek; German; Iranian Ossetic) or Turkic languages (namely Azeri; Nogay; Karachay and Balkar, which two, linguistically, are regarded as essentially dialects of one language)—there is a small community of speakers of Semitic Assyrian in Georgia, where speakers of Iranian Kurdish are also found. Georgia also has small communities of Chechens, all the 5000 or so speakers of Chechen-Ingush's sister-language, Bats, as well as small numbers of speakers of Daghestanian languages.

### Defining historical moments

One cannot understand the current aspirations of the communities to be discussed below unless one takes account of the individual historical phenomena that have largely determined them.

For the Kartvelians that moment came perhaps with the annexation by Russia of the central and eastern Georgian kingdoms in 1800, following the Tsar's cynical failure to implement the 1783 Treaty of Georgievsk by refusing to come to confront the Persians when they sacked Tiflis (Tbilisi) in 1795—remaining Kartvelian speaking territories soon came under Russian sway (although Free Svanetia succumbed only in the late 19th century). Over the years, particularly in latter decades, Russia has been demonized as ever ready to thwart Georgian independence by any and all devious means imaginable, so that during the later Soviet era Georgia rivalled only the Baltic states for depth of anti-Russian sentiment.

The NW Caucasian peoples in their entirety view the end of the 19th century Caucasian War (21 May 1864) as the start of their greatest tragedy (namely the Exile = Russian *maxadzhiřtvo*), which saw all the Ubykhs plus most of the Circassians and Abkhazians forced into exile in Ottoman lands (stretching from modern-day Kosova, mainly through Turkey, into Palestine, Jordan, Syria and Iraq). Only rump Circassian and Abkhazian populations remained in the NW Caucasian homeland, giving rise to their demographic weakness there today, as attested by the above tables. The presence, predominantly in Turkey of a huge N(W) Caucasian diaspora is an important but largely neglected factor in the appreciation of regional affairs. However, in the case of the Abkhazians, determined efforts this century by (Menshevik, Bolshevik, or post-Soviet nationalist) Tbilisi and/or the Kremlin to implement a vicious assimilatory process of 'kartvelianization', culminating in the Georgian–Abkhazian war of 1992–93, have opened up a major fault-line between the NW and the S. Caucasian peoples.

The Karachay-Balkars share with the Meskh(et)ians (usually referred to somewhat tendentiously, albeit by the preference of many of them themselves, as the 'Meskhetian Turks') the appalling fate of having been deported to Central Asia during the war (1943–44). While the Karachay-Balkars were allowed to return home from the late 1950s, Georgia has never sanctioned the return of the

by now perhaps more than 400,000 Meskh(et)ians to the south-western region of Meskheti on the Georgian–Turkish border. The righting of this historical injustice seems to be uppermost in the minds of these peoples today.

### **Circassians**

The NW Caucasus has been the quietest and thus the least reported of the Caucasian regions since the disintegration of the USSR. This does not mean that it is free from problems.

However understandable from a narrow linguistic point of view the creation of two literary Circassian languages may have been (although the inconsistencies between the two in representing identical sounds introduced into the Cyrillic-based orthographies devised in the late 1930s provide ammunition to charges of ‘divide and rule’), the splitting of the Circassian population into three administrative units, combined with an attempt to force a union in two of them between Circassians, on one hand, and a similarly divided Karachay-Balkar population, on the other hand, looks suspiciously like a strategy to hinder rather than help consolidation of ethnic self-awareness among both communities. The collapse of the Soviet Union has allowed calls from both the native and the Turkic groups for corrective action to become more vocal.

Prior to 1991 it was not easy for westerners to gain access to the NW Caucasus. Those who managed it legally tended to be members of the Circassian diaspora visiting their relatives from homes in the Near/Middle East. Already under *perestroika* some repatriation to Maykop and Nal’chik from the diaspora was not only taking place but actually supported by the Soviet government, interested, no doubt, in both the knowledge of the non-Soviet world and especially the business acumen such immigrants might bring with them. Hopes invested in this process have been set back first by the drastic decline in living standards across the whole former Soviet space (especially severe in the non-Russian periphery) that followed the fragmentation of the USSR and secondly by worries about personal safety, given both the Kremlin’s readiness to resort to such brutal force during the Chechen war (1994–96) and the prevailing lawlessness that seems particularly acute in districts close to Chechenia. So far returnees have numbered around 500 to Kabardino-Balkaria, 300 to Adyghea, and a mere few dozen to Karachay-Cherkessia. However, the Circassian intelligentsia, both at home and abroad, has remained active in pushing for Circassian unity, founding in 1991 the International Circassian Association. Their first president was the late Kabardian Yuri Kalmykov, who was for a time Minister of Justice in Yeltsin’s cabinet. Although required to sign the decree sanctioning military activity in Chechenia (only afterwards was discussion of the move permitted!), he objected, resigned and died of a heart attack not long thereafter. The current president is Boris Akbashev, and the Association held its IVth Congress in Krasnodar 25–27 June 1998. The Association’s commitment to the Abkhazians is indicated by the stated intention to hold the Vth Congress in Sukhum in 2000. Present in Krasnodar were not only the Presidents of Adyghea

and Kabardino-Balkaria (Adyghe Aslan Dzharimov and Kabardian Valerij Kokov, respectively) but also the head of the Krasnodar administration, Nikolai Kondratenko, the Prime Minister of Karachay-Cherkessia, Anatolij Ozov, and the Vice-President of Abkhazia, Valerij Arshba. Also in attendance was the Mufti of Adyghea and Krasnodar Region, Askarbi Hachimzor, although it should be stressed that Islam is of little relevance among NW Caucasians (including the Abkhazians)—at least, among those resident in the Caucasus itself. The title ‘Allah’s Mountains’ (I.B. Tauris, 1998), chosen for his recent book on the Chechen war and the N. Caucasus in general by freelance journalist Sebastian Smith, is misleading in this regard.

The Circassians, like the Abkhazians, are members of the Unrepresented Nations and Peoples’ Organization (UNPO, The Hague). Thanks to UNPO’s help, Circassians have twice participated in conferences of the UN Working Committee for Human Rights and its sub-committee for National Minorities’ Rights in Geneva, where on 28 May 1998 T. Kazanokov was able to raise the question about the restoration of both the common name for the Circassian ethnos and Circassian surnames for all compatriots resident in Syria and Turkey; he also requested the right to return to their motherland for all Circassian expatriates. Prince Ali ben Al-Hussein of Jordan, where Circassians form the palace guard, has taken a keen interest of late in promotion of Circassian rights, having visited the Circassian regions of the N. Caucasus in October, journeying from Amman entirely on horseback and by boat to retrace the route to Jordan taken by the early migrants—his mother was Circassian. A Caucasian Cultural Society was founded in Turkey, where estimates place the number of Circassians anywhere between 2 and 4 million, in 1967. Turkey has witnessed in recent years a proliferation of publications dealing with cultural and linguistic problems of (especially NW) Caucasian peoples. A Circassian internet site has been organized by a member of the small community in Israel. It can be expected that pressure for measures to guarantee the survival of the Circassian language (under threat of demise both among the diaspora and even in the Caucasian homeland) will continue to come from committed individuals, and there is surely a worthy role to be played here by Western organizations such as UNESCO or the EU’s cultural fund—recall the much trickier project overseen by the Council of Europe (representative Alison Cardwell) to prepare a common (objective!) textbook to be used in the schools of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Indeed, an approach to such funders is likely to be made in the near future from The Cherkess Fund, the brainchild of a Kabardian businessman and writer from Jordan. The Fund is minded to investigate the possibilities of creating a common form of written Circassian not only to bridge the divide caused in the Caucasus by the existence of the two literary languages but to produce a unifying bond between *all* the Circassian peoples and, in order to make such a form of Circassian attractive to Circassians unfamiliar with the Cyrillic script, the Roman script is envisaged as serving as base for the orthography.

The leaders of Adyghea and Kabardino-Balkaria are former communists who have managed to retain power—Vladimir Khubiev, head of Karachay-

Cherkessia and an ethnic karachay, was actually appointed by Yeltsin and has been the head man in the district for almost 20 years.. It is unlikely, given their close ties to Moscow, that any will alter past practice by initiating undertakings openly unfavourable to the interests of Moscow, particularly at a time when ordinary people across their territories are faced with serious daily difficulties just to feed themselves and their families and while whatever financial resources exist emanate from Moscow. However, it is significant that Dzharimov (b.1939 and an economist by training), supported by leaders of other N. Caucasian regions, secured (3 July 1998) ratification by the Russian government for a resolution on the urgent repatriation of Circassians from Kosova. Also, on 1 August the first contingent (numbering 72) arrived in Adyghea, heralding the end of 135 years of exile for this small community. Barriers to cooperation between the three Circassian N. Caucasian areas have been removed, and the teaching of and in Circassian for the first four school-grades has been reintroduced (at least in Kabardino-Balkaria).

The negligible increases revealed by a comparison of the figures for the Russian populations in our three NW Caucasian territories between 1979 and 1989 suggests that some out-migration must have been taking place even before nationalism became such a significant force, both in Russia and parts of the Caucasus. One can imagine that, as a result of reaction to first the rough expulsion from post-Soviet Moscow of 'those of Caucasian nationality' who were thought to be exploiting 'Russian' (!) citizens in the capital's markets and secondly the slaughter of largely civilians in the Chechen war, Russian out-migration will have accelerated over recent years—indeed, the Kabardians are almost certainly now an absolute majority in Kabardino-Balkaria.

Karachays and Balkars who can afford it often send their children to Turkey for education. Both peoples enthusiastically participate in pan-Turkic cultural events.

### **Kabardino-Balkaria**

Home to Europe's highest mountain (Elbrus), the economy is predominantly farming-based, although mountain health resorts also contribute. Despite periodic calls for secession, the Balkars, like their close relatives to the west, the Karachays, are predominantly interested in gaining compensation from Moscow for the Central Asian exile (to which they were subjected during the war along with a variety of other peoples from the Caucasus and nearby regions, such as the Crimean Tatars, the Volga Germans and, before the war, the Koreans) and put all real efforts into securing this. Increased educational places for Balkars are one sign of their achievements in this regard. The republic's premier is a Balkar.

In spite of the greater opportunities to develop the local languages, even in the Kabardian-language papers *Circassian Word* and *Circassian Council* only cultural matters are addressed. Political discourse is dead. This is partly in reaction to the Chechen war and partly because of the prevailing wholesale corruption. The long-serving head of state, V. Kokov, was re-elected in 1997 largely on the

principle 'hang on to nurse for fear of something worse'; he is adviser to the chairman of Russia's Federation Council. Nal'chik's petrol-stations are under Kokov's control, and his 22-year-old son heads the main factory there. On 19 April 1998 *Pravda* published an article on the extent of corruption, naming the heads of various ministries and the fabulous amounts spent on their private homes. There is widespread and growing indignation at the way those able to do so have been unrestrainedly feathering their own nests since the restraints that kept such activity to generally acceptable levels during the Soviet period have withered. Kokov is said to run the republic like a police state. Russo-Kabardian relations continue to be good, and the government does not wish to upset its cosy relations with Moscow, on which the economy is wholly dependent. However, as was anticipated, less money for the provinces was forthcoming following the appointment of Sukhum-born S. Kirienko as Russia's short-term Prime Minister. At that time Russian Minister of Economics, Y. Urinson, arranged for the upgrading of a mountain plant in the republic to extract molybdenum and tungsten for processing in Nal'chik but since then, as the world plainly saw in August, the entire economy has sharply deteriorated, so that the situation is today no better under Premier Yevgenij Primakov. Market-trading (e.g. in Nal'chik, Baksan, Majskij) is one of the few ways ordinary people can make money.

The local parliament naturally approved the law for repatriation (sc. of the predominantly Turkey-based diaspora) proposed by the Circassian national movement. Most high-quality goods available in Nal'chik are in fact produced by diaspora members, including a jeweller belonging to Kabardians from the United States. One prominent Turkish Kabardian built no fewer than 86 mills in the region, and flour has even been used for bribery, but 2 million dollars owed to the mill-builder remain unpaid. Kokov has introduced a law to encourage foreign investment, such that joint enterprises with a minimum investment of 50,000 dollars will be free of tax for 4 years. However, the danger of losses through corruption hangs over any business venture. As an indication that Moscow does not oppose horizontal agreements within the Russian Federation, Kabardino-Balkaria signed a bilateral agreement with Astrakhan on 2 April 1998.

Local Imam Pshikhachev was re-elected but with little enthusiasm for him personally. Even monies collected for the building of a mosque disappeared from a Circassian-owned bank. Islam is no great force, and the possibility of moves to spread Wahabism is viewed with real apprehension, as is the intention of those such as Chechen warrior Shamil Basaev to turn the whole N. Caucasus into a bastion of Islam.

### **Karachay-Cherkessia**

In addition to the Turkic-speaking Karachays and the East Circassian Cherkess, the region is home to the Abazinians/Abazas, whose ancestors first migrated from Abkhazia across the Klukhor Pass around AD 1400, the final wave

following around AD 1700. Abazinians tend to be tri-lingual in Abaza, Kabardian and Russian.

The Dombai, Teberda and Arkhyz valleys boast famous skiing and health resorts. Radio- and optical telescopes are located in the Zelenchuk region, and in Soviet times a large cement-works along with machine-building, electrical, fuel, chemical and metal-working plants operated in lowland-parts. Very few reports emanate from the region. Vladimir Khubiev serves as parliamentary chairman. There are moves to create a presidency, and elections are due in April 1999. The 66-year-old unelected effective holder of the post, Vladimir Khubiev, is unpopular as a result of the deterioration in the region's economy during recent years. One favoured candidate is a leading Circassian, 51-year-old Stanislav Derev, a businessman, mayor of the capital, Cherkessk, and founder of Mercury, the most active production company in the area. However, another name currently touted as a serious contender is 57-year-old General Vladimir Semënov, whose father is Russian and whose mother is Karachay—Russians are reckoned to represent 40% of the regions's population, while the Karachay form 39%.

Cherkessk was the venue in November 1997 for the first session of the inter-republican legislative body that followed the earlier signing in Nal'chik of an agreement between the three Circassian areas to create an Interparliamentary Council.

## Adyghea

The majority of the West Circassian population that lives on here as a rump-reminder of the original native inhabitants speak either the Bzhedugh or the Temirgoi dialect (base of literary Adyghe)—there are also a few Abadzekhs/Abzakhs. In terms of demographic balance, the Adyghe's position *vis-à-vis* the Russians closely parallels that obtaining in Abkhazia prior to August 1992 for the Abkhazians *vis-à-vis* the Kartvelians. Again, very little news reaches the outside world.

The republic's major industry is food and food-processing, the output of which increased by 12.5% between 1994 and 1995. On the 250,000 hectares of arable land (incorporating 90 collective farms and 1400 private farms) grow grain, sunflowers, sugar-beet, vegetables and the world's northernmost tea; meat and milk are also produced. Horse-breeding, a national pride for generations, is being revived. Various joint ventures (involving *inter alia* UK and French companies) were functioning in 1996, at which time hope was expressed for investment in the Maykop Centre for Production of High Quality Insulin.

An exchange in the 1997 press suggests the presence of potentially explosive tensions between Circassians and Russians. *Megapolis-Kontinent* (No. 14, 1997) published an article entitled 'Russian House: triumph of national idiocy' (reprinted in the Adyghe Khabze *Tradition* (No. 6, 1997)) in which Russian nationalist, Sergej Pletnëv, used arguments reminiscent of those marshalled by Georgian nationalists in the late 1980s against the Abkhazians' (17.8% of

Abkhazia's population) enjoyment of national rights in their ancestral homeland—Adyghe, as only a 22% minority but with permanent rights to elect an ethnic Circassian to Adyghea's presidency, were creating, he argued, a racist (namely anti-Russian) enclave with separatist tendencies that threatened the integrity of the Krasnodar Region. A response, 'The idiocy of chauvinist accounting' by the director of the Adyghe State Museum, Almir (Alec) Abregov (Abredzh), was appended to the reprint. Among the arguments adduced was the observation that Russia, as heir to the Tsarist state that was responsible for the decimation of the Circassian population, should not only facilitate the repatriation of ethnic Circassians wishing to return to the homeland but also hand back lands appropriated from their ancestors and do everything necessary to compensate for this near-genocide.

A road through the mountains from Maykop to the Black Sea was started in Soviet times but halted at nearly its highest point when it was realized that this would link Circassians in Adyghea directly with the ca. 10,000 Shapsugh Circassians remaining around Tuapse—consequently, communication requires a trip that takes one north around the mountains and then south again.

### **The Confederation of Caucasian (Mountain) Peoples**

An Assembly of Mountain Peoples of the Caucasus, uniting peoples' representatives rather than regional governments, was instituted in Abkhazia's capital in August 1989 under the leadership of Kabardian academic Yuri Shanibov chiefly at the time to provide support for the Abkhazians, who were coming under ever greater threat from rampant Georgian nationalism. It associated some 16 ethnic groups from Abkhazia through the N. Caucasus to Daghestan (including both N. and S. Ossetians but not any of the Turkic peoples). Transformed into the Confederation in November 1991, it was to provide crucial psychological and material support (thanks largely to Chechen and Circassian volunteers and weaponry provided from the N. Caucasus) to the Abkhazians, thereby helping them to win the war with Georgia (1992–93)—to avoid being stopped at the Russo-Abkhazian border, fighters crossed the mountains into Abkhazia around Wathara, from where they were bussed down to the coast along the track built by German prisoners of war in World War II. The Confederation was also very active (prior to the war in Abkhazia) in arbitrating between N. Ossetians and Ingush and between Akin Chechens and Daghestanis. Shanibov eventually declared openly that the ultimate goal was to reestablish N. Caucasian independence. However, the Russian onslaught in Chechenia, buttressed by the sort of dangerous (and factually ridiculous) self-deception exemplified by Russian academic D. Danilov's assertion that 'the Northern Caucasus is actually an inalienable part of Russian territory' (p. 137 of *Coppieters*, 1996), not surprisingly saw its activities diminish. By no means as prominent as before 1994, it still exists (minus the designation 'Mountain'), until recently under the chairmanship of the Chechen Yusup Soslambekov. At the beginning of April 1998 Acting Interior Minister of Russia, S. Stepashin, accused it of seeking to found

a N. Caucasian Islamic state, although Acting Deputy Premier, R. Abdulatipov (a Daghestani), preferred to downplay the Islamic threat. According to its founding constitution, Islam has no relevance to it. Georgians view it with suspicion, undoubtedly because of its role in the Abkhazian war. During the intense fighting in Abkhazia's Gal District at the end of May 1998, Confederation representatives in Sukhum were reported to have offered military assistance, although this was turned down by the Abkhazian government, who wished to demonstrate to their opponents as well as to the Russians that they were quite capable of defending themselves.

However appealing the idea of an independently constituted confederation of all the (?North) Caucasian peoples might be to some in the longer term, in the shorter/medium term some form of growing consolidation between the NW Caucasians (Abkhaz-Abazinians and Circassians) is much more realistic. This would be motivated by their close genetic and historical ties as well as by a shared determination that their languages and cultures must not suffer the same fate that overtook their *confrères*, the Ubykhs. While there is respect for the determination and fighting skills of the Chechens, there is great apprehension about the socio-religious tendencies manifesting themselves in both post-war Chechnia and neighbouring Daghestan. In Chechnia, for its part, a certain resentment is reported over the lack of support they were given during their war with Russia by fellow N. Caucasians, especially over the lack of any significant presence of fighters from Abkhazia in return for the support Abkhazia received from Chechens in their earlier war with Georgia—the fact that Abkhazia continued/continues to face a serious threat from Georgia is ignored; indeed, its border with Russia was actually closed when the Chechen war began. What happens in the 2001 discussions between Chechnia and Russia over Chechnia's future political status will be watched with keen interest throughout the region.

However, the N. Caucasus was not as exposed to foreign influence during the Soviet period as Georgia (including Abkhazia), and N. Caucasians often tend to project the reservation frequently associated with mountain people, so that many in Abkhazia often assert that thinking in the N. Caucasus seems some 20 years behind that to the south of the mountains. This gap, plus that existing between home-populations and the diaspora communities (particularly those in Turkey) arising out of different educational systems and inculcated ideologies, will take time and effort to overcome.

## **Abkhazia**

At the same time during the late Gorbachev period as various autonomies within the Russian Federation were declaring 'sovereignty' over their territories and being awarded republican (but not independent) status, Abkhazia (and S. Ossetia) decided to follow suit—Adyghea, for instance, gained republican status in 1991. This move by Abkhazia as well as its post-Gorbachev restitution of its 1925 Constitution, which defined Abkhazia's status as a union-republic with

special treaty-ties to Georgia from 16 December 1921 to February 1931 (when it was further downgraded to a mere autonomous republic within Georgia—from 4 March 1921 to 16 December 1921 Abkhazia had existed briefly as a fully independent union-republic, recognized by Georgia on 21 May<sup>1</sup>) have both regularly been misinterpreted in the West as declarations of independence—just one example of the gross misunderstandings of the Abkhazian question that have distorted western perceptions. The fact that, on the Abkhazian side, no formal declaration of independence has ever been made and that, on the Georgian side, there has been no formal annulment (as happened in the case of S. Ossetia) of Abkhazia's autonomous status has been suggested as a basis on which to build a future *modus vivendi*, along the lines of the proposal for a federative relationship drawn up by lawyer T'aras Shamba (older brother of Abkhazia's current Foreign Minister, Sergei). This was published in the paper *Abkhazija* (29 June–4 July 1992; for the translation see Hewitt 1993)—T'aras Shamba is also president of the International Association of the Abkhazian-Abaza Nation, founded in October 1993. The fact that the Abkhazian authorities were apparently still willing to consider negotiating such a relationship even after the wholly unnecessary suffering inflicted upon them during the Georgian occupation and subsequent events should have been seen as a meaningful concession on their part, but they have been given not the slightest credit for this stance by the international community. It has been mooted that they might have been mistaken not to have declared full independence immediately after expelling the invader at the end of September 1993 for this, it is argued, would have strengthened their position once negotiations had started. Equally, if one recalls that a contingent of Abkhazian fighters followed the rout of their opponents as far as the Mingrelian capital of Zugdidi, some feel that they should have held on to this territory within Georgia proper and used it as a bargaining chip to guarantee the security of their border with Georgia along the R. Ingur. However, there are indications that the government of Abkhazia currently sees Abkhazia as nothing other than a fully independent country. Sergei Shamba was quite adamant on this point in the summer of 1998 asseverating that, although Article 1 of the Constitution (ratified on 26 November 1994) refrains from using the term 'independent' (cf. 'The Republic of Abkhazia (Apsny) shall be a sovereign democratic state based on law'), Article 3 (namely 'The Republic of Abkhazia, as a subject of international law, shall enter treaty-relations with other states') effectively makes Abkhazia independent of Georgia—interestingly, when Tatarstan signed its special agreement with the Russian Federation on 15 February 1994, it agreed to drop the words 'sovereign state' and 'subject of international law' from its constitution (*Segodnja*, 16 February 1994, quoted by Sirén, 1998, p 151). This interpretation of Abkhazia's present status has been confirmed by both President Vladislav Ardzinba (b.1945) and Speaker of Parliament, Sok'rat' Adzhindzhal (Dzhindzholia), a former teacher. Exasperation is universal throughout Abkhazia at Georgia's unwillingness to abandon the disingenuousness and double-dealing with which, the Abkhazians assert, they

(unlike their neighbours' new western friends) have sadly become only too familiar.

The two main problems to be resolved before any final solution can be achieved in the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict remain (i) the political status of Abkhazia *vis-à-vis* Georgia (which has been the very root of the problem since the latest flare-up in the late 1980s of this post-1931 festering wound), and (ii) the question of the refugees.

Some fundamental clarifications must first be made with reference to the refugees. During the war many Abkhazians were forced to go into exile either in safe(r) areas of Abkhazia or in Russia. Since non-Kartvelians in general (and not just Abkhazians) were targets for the nationalist rabble that constituted the Georgian 'troops', the same could be said of Abkhazia's large Armenian and Russian communities. The Greek government sent a ship to evacuate ethnic Greeks (see Clogg, 1994), and some Jews were taken out to Israel. When references are made to the refugees from Abkhazia by Georgians or in international documents, all the above categories are conveniently forgotten. Although references to the (remaining) refugees almost without exception name them 'ethnic Georgians', there are actually (sc. according to our definition) relatively few actual Georgians among them—the vast majority are Mingrelians, while both Svans (who first appeared in significant numbers in Abkhazia when they took over mountain areas abandoned by the native population post-1864) and Georgians proper figure to a relatively small degree. Since by no means every last Kartvelian left Abkhazia in the hasty flight that occurred *before* the arrival of the Abkhazian fighters and their allies (see Overeem, 1995), it follows that (a) no act of ethnic cleansing (a charge commonly levelled at the Abkhazians) can have taken place, for this implies a deliberate act implemented by force or the threat thereof, and (b) nowhere near the figure regularly quoted by Georgian sources and their sympathizers for these refugees (namely 250,000, 300,000 or even 350,000) can possibly reflect reality—more recently Reuters has begun to use the much saner figure of 160,000, and the current population of Abkhazia is estimated at around 300,000. Despite significant Kartvelian presences (sc. following the importations by Mingrelian Lavrent'i Beria, born near Sukhum, in the 1930–40s) in Ochamchira District, Gulripsh District, Sukhum and around Gagra, the bulk of the compact Kartvelian population of Abkhazia resided in the southernmost Gal District. There is an argument over the original ethnicity of those settled in this region (see D. Müller's paper in Hewitt, 1998), but there is no doubt that it was occupied almost exclusively by Mingrelian speakers at the start of the war. However, since most of these sympathized not with Shevardnadze but with his ousted predecessor, the late Mingrelian Zviad Gamsakhurdia, Gal Mingrelians remained largely aloof from the war and the incidents of human rights abuses committed by the occupying forces (as chronicled in the 221-page *Belaja Kniga Abxazii 1992–1993*); for both these reasons the Abkhazian authorities were/are happy for Gal Mingrelians to return. This means that the further imputation of ethnic cleansing supposedly carried out against this population in the fighting of May 1998 is questionable (although it

cannot be denied that some reprobate elements seem to have accompanied those hastening to defend their homeland in the hope of booty. That so many homes were torched in the villages where the battle was at its most intense was explained by an international military observer, who did not wish to be identified, when he noted that the best way to root out a dug-in enemy (as indeed the infiltrators were) is to deprive him of the cover provided by buildings—had there been no infiltration, there would have been no second wave of refugees.

The agreement signed between Abkhazia and Georgia in Moscow on 4 April 1994 in the presence of the UN Secretary General and leading western ambassadors was followed by the signing of a quadripartite understanding on the return of the refugees. The latter gave the Abkhazians the right to vet applications from prospective returnees and to reject those known to have acted militarily or criminally against Abkhazia. Accused of deliberate slowness in the vetting process the Abkhazians pointed out that, even those whose applications were approved regularly failed to turn up at the Ingur bridge at the appointed time, which demonstrated a lack of real eagerness to return. At the same time nothing was done then or has been done since to prevent unofficial returnees to the Gal District. Georgia has from the start been clamouring for an instant mass return of the exiles, which is and will remain both unacceptable to the Abkhazians and basically unrealistic—a UNHCR spokesman at a conference in June 1998 has been quoted as saying that any large-scale return of refugees is out of the question until something is done about the catastrophic state of the Abkhazian economy, an elementary lesson apparently quite lost on those forever clamouring about the need to arrange an immediate mass return. Given the hatreds sown by the war (buttressing the mutual animosities that antedated hostilities), if such a mass return were to occur, the scale of bloodshed would simply be unimaginable—there is a huge amount of weaponry in the hands of the ordinary population of Abkhazia, although (rather uniquely in such situations) one sees no overt evidence of this on the streets of towns or villages, and everyone knows perfectly well how to use the hardware—lawlessness became quite widespread in the early post-war period but has since been contained. Given the enforced isolation of Abkhazia most talk, even 5–6 years on, centres around the events of the war, reinforcing the feelings of enmity towards former neighbours, whose presence will simply not be tolerated on Abkhazian soil for the foreseeable future. This is an undeniable fact of life that has to be recognized by international players and impressed by them upon the Georgian authorities, for the kindest thing to do for the Kartvelian exiles is to implement a resettlement programme for them in Georgia, predominantly in Mingrelia (assuming there is space available there)—indeed, this measure should have been undertaken years ago. The acknowledged outflow of population from Georgia, especially strong among non-Kartvelians (such as the Russians), since 1991 surely means that there is plenty of room to accommodate those displaced from either Abkhazia or S. Ossetia, if only the Georgian government were to apply itself to the problem. Of course, traditionally Georgians have not been noted for magnanimity towards their Mingrelian cousins and, as long as they can use the (inflated numbers of)

refugees to attract more aid from the international community, they will not be inclined to effect appropriate humane measures.

As a mark of the Abkhazians' genuine wish to do something positive for the Gal Mingrelians, one can mention the institution in the summer of 1995 of an intermittently published newspaper *Gal*<sup>2</sup> which, in addition to articles in Russian and Abkhaz, also included material in Mingrelian, the first time that Mingrelian has been used for the benefit of ordinary speakers since 1938 when the language was effectively banned as a literary language in Georgia—apart from the occasional scholarly publication for linguists or folklorists, it is only post-Soviet private publishing houses that have started to print the occasional work in Mingrelian for the Mingrelian man in the street. The existence of an albeit part-Mingrelian publication on the Abkhazian side of the border reportedly aroused great interest among certain sectors of the Mingrelian population in Mingrelia itself. Sadly, *Gal* has not appeared since 1997, although Ardzinba agreed in September 1998 that such a publication is of crucial importance for keeping Gal residents informed of what Sukhum is trying to do to secure their well-being. Personal disagreements between the Gal District's head of administration, Ruslan Kishmaria, and the editor of *Gal*, Nugzar Salaq'aia, a Gal Abkhazian thoroughly and impressively committed to improving the self-awareness and thus self-respect of Abkhazia's Mingrelians, made it difficult for Ardzinba to resolve matters—perhaps the solution will be to appoint a new editor. Salaq'aia and Ardzinba have both recognized that more should have been done through the media in general to make the Gal residents better aware of the facts behind the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict.

The 4 April 1994 Agreement itself, which allows Abkhazia to have its own constitution, flag and state emblem, is seen by the Abkhazians as the only document of real importance that has been signed by both sides since the end of the war—CIS (essentially Russian) peacekeepers were subsequently introduced to patrol a Security Zone along the R. Ingur; UNOMIG's contingent was also increased. Since the Abkhazians regard it as granting to them fully equal status to the Georgians, they absolutely refuse to accept what they see as attempts by Georgia, supported as usual by the international community (especially the much reviled grouping known as the Friends of [the UN Secretary General's Initiative for] Georgia), to backtrack on the commitments it there undertook. Consequently, the Abkhazians have stated ever since then that the best the Georgians can hope to achieve is a union-state consisting of Abkhazia and Georgia as absolutely equal partners—what any settlement along these lines would mean for future constitutional arrangements between S. Ossetia and Tbilisi, on the one hand, and Adzharia and Tbilisi, on the other, is unclear. A S. Ossetian delegation in London in November 1997 stated that leaders in Abkhazia, S. Ossetia and Nagorno Karabagh were in touch with one another and that none would sign any final agreement independently of the others for fear that, should any one of them sign, greater concessions might be made to the others shortly thereafter—those who constantly not only allude to the better relations existing between S. Ossetia

and Tbilisi but also suggest that the S. Ossetian problem might thus be closer to a final settlement seem unaware of this factor.

The Abkhazians resent and utterly reject the accusation frequently made against them that they are the ones responsible for lack of progress in negotiations with Georgia. With regard to this, Sergei Shamba began an interview in the summer of 1998 by speaking of what had taken place one year earlier. Subsequently I translated the details from an information sheet issued by the Abkhazian Foreign Ministry, and I now quote the relevant passage:

On 13 June 1997 the Sides began discussion of a new draft-Protocol, proposed by the mediator, the Russian Federation. Article 2 of this Protocol, pertaining to the mutual relations of Georgia and Abkhazia, was based on agreements achieved earlier, in particular on provisions in the 4 April 1994 Declaration and reflects the limit of the compromise to which the Abkhazian side is ready to proceed. This document was agreed by the Sides in the presence of the Foreign Ministers of Abkhazia and Georgia through the mediation of the First Deputy Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation. At the concluding stage of the discussion-process the Russian Federation's Foreign Minister and the President of the Republic of Abkhazia were both involved.

After reaching agreement on all clauses of the Protocol late at night, those present noted the successful completion of their work and fixed the 18 June 1997 as the date for signing the Protocol. However, the Georgian side once again declined to sign it, seeking to alter the whole document. Then, on 19 June 1997, the Republic of Abkhazia's Minister of Foreign Affairs wrote to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia setting out the alterations to the Protocol's clauses which the Abkhazian side was again ready to accept. In fact, the Abkhazian side accepted the introduction of amendments to 7 out of the 9 clauses.

Consequent upon this, on 14 August 1997 at the initiative of the Russian Federation's Minister of Foreign Affairs there took place in Tbilisi a meeting between the presidents of Georgia and Abkhazia. A joint Declaration was announced in accordance with which the Sides committed themselves anew to refrain from the use of force or the threat to use it against each other and declared their readiness to settle all disputed questions exclusively by peaceful means. This declaration lowered the acuteness in the tension in mutual relations between the Sides. Following the presidential meeting there took place visits of Georgian and Abkhazian governmental delegations, alternating between Sukhum and Tbilisi, the outcome of which was the creation of a joint commission for deciding practical questions.

Activation of the bilateral dialogue gave grounds to hope for achieving progress in the talks' process. However, the September round, which took place in Sukhum, again failed to reconcile the positions of the Sides. It should be noted that this round was conducted in the presence of the UN Secretary General's special representative and the First Deputy Foreign Minister of the Russian Federation; the changes introduced into the Protocol as well as the Attachment to it pertaining to the question of the return of the refugees and composed with regard to the amendments of the Georgian side were discussed. Signing of the discussed document would have enabled the sides to proceed to the final stage of a wide-ranging settlement. However, the uncompromising nature of the Georgian side's position yet again caused the signing to be postponed.

Those convinced by the Georgian line about Russian involvement in Abkhazia speak of the unreliability of Russian support. They suggest that, after Shevardnadze was forced to seek protection from the threat of Gamsakhurdia's advance

on Georgia's second city (Kutaisi) in the wake of the Abkhazian victory in 1993 by taking Georgia into the CIS, Russia dropped Abkhazia and invested greater effort into building its relation with Tbilisi. Such people further argue that Russia remains in control of events in Abkhazia, ever ready to 'play the Abkhazian card' in order to keep Georgia under control. The question for those advocating this argument to answer is: 'How differently should the Abkhazians have acted/be acting, given the very real dangers posed to them by the chauvinism whipped up by the unofficial leaders like Gamsakhurdia and his fellow Mingrelians, the late Merab K'ost'ava and the late Gia Ch'ant'uria or by a host of academics, primarily historians and linguists, whose venomous outpourings against the Abkhazians and other non-Kartvelian minorities have largely determined Georgia's ethnic policy ever since?' There is evidence to suggest that Yeltsin knew in advance of Shevardnadze's plan to invade Abkhazia on 14 August 1992 and gave approval by silence following the start of the military (mis)adventure. Russia's Foreign Minister at the time of the war was Andrej Kozyrev, a protégé of Shevardnadze and no friend of Abkhazia. Towards the end of the war Russian Defence Minister, Pavel Grachev, proposed to introduce troops into Sukhum to keep the rival forces apart. This would have effectively partitioned Abkhazia, which was not in the interests of the Abkhazians. However, it was not they but Shevardnadze who rejected the offer, clearing the way for the imminent Georgian defeat. The attitude of the Kremlin authorities throughout has hardly been characterizable as pro-Abkhazian. Whatever support from Russia(ns) that Abkhazia has enjoyed has come from sources outside the executive, voluntary helpers or weaponry (widely available from a dispirited and poorly paid Russian military) purchased (unlike that accruing to the Georgians thanks to the division of spoils on the breakup of the USSR) for cash—on Russian military involvement during the war see Billingsley's level-headed articles in either *The Harriman Review*, Vol. 10, No. 4, 1998<sup>3</sup> or Hewitt (1998). Many in the Duma are sympathetic to Abkhazia's plight, crystallizing general sentiment throughout Russia, which is well aware of what it means to be the butt of Georgian antipathy.

The Abkhazian border with Russia over the R. Psou was closed for males of fighting age from the commencement of the Chechen war in 1994. At the time Abkhazians were able to use Abkhazian passports to travel by boat to Trebizond, from where freighters also delivered goods into Abkhazia—estimates put the number of ethnic Abkhazians living in Turkey at around half a million. However, the passenger boat was stopped, thanks to Georgian pressure, in late 1995. Also, a total blockade of Abkhazia was imposed in January 1996 after the CIS summit assented to Shevardnadze's demands. When pressed to lift the blockade as a goodwill gesture towards Abkhazia, the official Georgian response is that there are so many leaks that Abkhazia is effectively free from restrictions already. It is true that goods (including petrol—often watered-down with damaging consequences for carburettors!) still enter the port of Sukhum from Turkey and that some trade is carried on (thanks to bribery) over the Psou. However, this is just about managing to keep Abkhazia afloat. The blockade is

biting, and many people are faced with tremendous hardship. What goods do penetrate from abroad are priced beyond the means of most potential purchasers. Abkhazia is (?unofficially) part of the rouble-zone, refusing to have anything to do with the Georgian *lari*, so that the dire straits in which the Russian economy now finds itself are necessarily amplified here. Little work is available, and wages are naturally insufficient to cater for the needs of the wage-earner. Red Cross parcels, distributed quarterly, are keenly awaited by recipients, such as pensioners.

The situation is particularly bleak in the Ochamchira District, which is where the bulk of the actual fighting occurred, and thus the physical damage here is by far the worst in the republic. There is no point listing here the nature and extent of investment required to put Abkhazia back on its feet, for the 107-page *United Nations Needs Assessment Mission to Abkhazia* produced as part of the UN Development Programme in March 1998 has already carried this out most efficiently and impressively; regrettably (and scandalously) it has had restricted distribution, and so many are unaware of the desperate state in which the country finds itself—one particularly alarming observation concerned the very real danger of contamination to Sukhum's water supply with all the implications that would have for the health of the capital's citizenry. What I can do is highlight some examples of the plight of the country on the basis of some personal observations from the summer of 1998.

Schooling is notionally free, but nobody pays the teachers, and so parents of schoolchildren have to provide cash payments themselves. Some parents are unable to do this or, sometimes, even to buy shoes and clothing for their children. In such cases, the children simply receive no schooling. Since there is often no prospect of paid employment for those completing their education, there is a danger that lack of incentives will result in an apathy towards study. Specialist treatment and medicines are in short supply for those, including children, who were affected psychologically by the war—there have been instances of mentally unbalanced children, untreated for years, killing their parents. Importation of even medical and humanitarian supplies is only possible with the express permission of those imposing the blockade. Assuming that young males manage to cross the border into Russia, the danger is that they might never return. Since Abkhazian passports are unrecognized outside Russia, no one attempting to leave Russia with such documents is permitted to do so. Acquisition of Russian documents is, if at all possible, very costly (and often not entirely legal) and, while Georgian passports would be readily provided at the consulate in Sochi, the psychology of most Abkhazians is such that they flatly refuse even to consider this option for travel outside Russia. Almost 3 years of blockade have tended to instil something of a siege mentality—after telephone links were rerouted via Tbilisi, they were cut for about 12 months; resentment is strong against all those who are deemed responsible for inflicting continuing punishment on a country that was the victim of aggression from a neighbour and not the instigator of military action, as it is painted and, since Georgia is seen to enjoy such uncritical backing from the West, such feelings could easily be

transformed into anti-westernism. There is not one scintilla of evidence that the blockade could be leading to a greater willingness to accede to Georgian demands—on the contrary, positions are noticeably hardening.

Abkhazia's President, Vladislav Ardzinba, is by training a specialist in Hittite who worked at Moscow's Oriental Institute, where Yevgenij Primakov was the director—the two men apparently enjoy a good relationship, whereas the present Russian premier, who was brought up in Tbilisi, had a Georgian as his first wife, and speaks Georgian (in addition to Arabic and English), is reported not to be so close to Shevardnadze. Ardzinba first came to prominence when he was chosen to head the Abkhazian Research Institute (deliberately burned to the ground along with its priceless archive in the autumn of 1992) on the death of Academician Prof. G. Dzidzaria during the late-1980s. It was then natural that he should have been selected as a delegate to Gorbachev's Congress of People's Deputies. His defence of the rights of minorities (not just within Georgia) delivered in eloquent Russian attracted wide praise and attention—he is often charged in ritualistic Georgian abuse with ignorance of Abkhaz, but this is just one of the deliberate untruths spread about Abkhazia and leading Abkhazians—and it was directly as a consequence of this that he became ever more involved in politics; he still nominally heads the Research Institute, should he wish to give up his political role or be voted out of office. His popularity among ordinary citizens is undeniable. There are, however, those prepared to voice some discontent about the direction in which the country seems to be being taken—there is regrettably and for whatever reason not much open discussion of these matters in the press or on TV, with which many people express open dissatisfaction for its lack of interesting content, and in such a climate rumours rather than facts shape (?distort) people's judgements. Questions are asked about how members of the Ardzinba 'clan' seem to succeed in making money and why such leaders as K'onst'ant'in Ozgan from Gudauta or Sergei Bagapsh from Ochamchira (both former district Party bosses) are still in prominent governmental positions; Sergei Shamba, like Ardzinba himself, is an academic, specifically an archæologist, and a former leader of the Abkhazian National Forum (Aydgylara 'Unity')—he successfully defended his doctoral thesis in Yerevan, capital of Armenia, in November 1998, much to the annoyance of Tbilisi, from where the president of the Georgian Academy of Sciences, Albert' Tavkhelidze, wrote in vain to his Armenian colleagues to urge cancellation of the procedure. However, even such critics as there are do not advocate closer rapprochement with Tbilisi—on the contrary, they are more radical than Ardzinba has shown himself *vis-à-vis* relations not only with Georgia but even with Russia.

In response, Ardzinba argues that Abkhazia's position is still so dangerous and the community so small that even a hint at division of opinion might lead to disaster if cunningly exploited by Georgia. He himself is confident that he can steer a middle course between Russia and Tbilisi, playing one off against the other while cultivating ever better relationships with western visitors. The early stance of western states (notably America) that demanded no contact of any sort with the Abkhazian authorities or those seen as their representatives has

mercifully passed, and good relations seem to have been established with such ambassadors as those from the United Kingdom, Germany and France—former French ambassador Bernard Fassier's appointment to Minsk was judged to be a suitable reward for his entirely unhelpful and unsympathetic attitude to Abkhazia's problems! Unfortunately Ardzinba, well-read and self-confident, is not well versed in western ways (might a possible explanation be sought here for governmental reluctance to break with Soviet norms and promote greater freedom in the media?), and on a purely personal level some visitors find his style somewhat didactic and peremptory. However, Abkhazia cannot be equated with its leader—that said, no one should doubt that for the time being Ardzinba certainly articulates the aspirations of most of his countrymen. It remains to be seen if he will contest the 1999 presidential elections or who will be the other candidate(s). Even if Ardzinba can, given time, achieve the aims stated above, the question is whether he and Abkhazia have that time. There are so many imponderables: will the blockade continue, or will pressure within Russia (whether we are talking of the N. Caucasus or sympathizers within Russia proper) cause a shift of opinion, inclining the government to be more favourable to Abkhazia? Will Georgia continue along the same pointless path, or will foolhardy radicals such as Tamaz Nadareishvili or Boris K'ak'ubava persuade another futile but bloody resort to arms? Might the West achieve a much-to-be-desired greater neutrality in this matter and finally exercise some influence for the benefit of *everyone* in the region? The Abkhazians, like the Chechens, have demonstrated that they do not respond to pressure, especially when it is quite without justification.

In the meantime, the speed and effectiveness of the Abkhazian response to the danger posed in late May 1998 when, as widely anticipated, the Georgian side tried to seize control of the Gal District in celebration of their Independence Day (26 May), inflicted (in Ardzinba's words) an even more crushing defeat on the aggressor than that of the 1992–93 war. As for the question of Georgian governmental complicity in the long campaign of incursions into the Gal District and terrorist activity conducted there by such partisan groups as the White Legion and Forest Brothers, one reads the following in the latest Amnesty International report on Georgia (August 1998):

The Abkhazian side has claimed frequently and bitterly that guerrilla forces operating in Abkhazia have the support of the Georgian government, which does not act with sufficient rigour to clamp down on the activity of those who launch their attacks from Georgian controlled territory. Russian officials from the CIS peacekeeping forces, also target of guerrilla activity, have made similar claims. For example, after five soldiers from the CIS peacekeeping force were killed by a mine on 12 July this year, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued a statement two days later condemning the killings as an act of terrorism by Georgian guerrillas and said that 'any attempts to present the White Legion or the Forest Brothers as organisations that have nothing to do with the Georgian special services are an attempt to ignore reality'.

The Georgian Interior and Security Ministries issued a statement on 16 July rejecting the accusations, and the Georgian government has persistently denied having any links with or

support, financial or otherwise, to the armed groups. To Amnesty International's knowledge, however, no criminal proceedings have been initiated against any suspects although some have a high profile locally, or in the press. In the western town of Zugdidi, for example, close to the Inguri river border, men said to be local commanders of the White Legion reportedly move openly around the town and surrounding areas, with the tacit approval of the local authorities. Members of armed groups are said to have given press interviews during the May fighting in Gal, and the leader of the White Legion, Zurab Samushia, is regularly quoted by domestic and international media. He was, for example, interviewed and photographed by the British daily the *Guardian* in June while he was recuperating in Tbilisi from a leg wound sustained in the fighting. In that interview Zurab Samushia claimed that the White Legion had 'executed' 47 members of the the CIS peacekeeping forces.

There have also been claims that the Georgian security ministry has been involved in training members of armed groups, including in sophisticated sabotage techniques. In November 1996, for example, UNOMIG observers discovered a paramilitary group of some 50 men, 'many of whom were internally displaced persons with connections to known insurgent groups', in a camp in the restricted weapons zone on the Georgian side of the Inguri river. UNOMIG was initially refused access to investigate but was eventually allowed to visit the unit after making protests. The Georgian security service informed UNOMIG that the unit 'had been formed to control amnestied criminal elements who had committed crimes in Abkhazia' and who were at that time living in the Zugdidi area. They had been given the choice of either joining the unit or being expelled.

Some individual Georgians in authority have also been linked with the guerrilla forces. The White Legion, for example, is said to have links with Tamaz Nadareishvili, the chairman of the Abkhazian parliament in exile.

Official Georgian association with these terrorist groups is so well known in the region that Georgian journalist, Ak'ak'i Mikadze, writing in *Vremja* (7, of 3 June 1998), boldly stated:

The Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of State Security actively support the partisan groupings operating in the Gal Region. For example, fighters from the division called 'Forest Brothers' officially receive wages of 200 lari (about 150 dollars), whilst their commander, criminal authority David Shengelia receives 300 lari (about 220 dollars). The division supposedly numbers about 700, for whom wages and allowances are set aside from the budget, whereas, as confirmed by our interviewer, you can't in actual fact locate even 100 individual members.

Shevardnadze employed his well-known wiles not only to outmanoeuvre the warlords (Dzhaba Ioseliani and sometime Defence Minister T'engiz K'it'ovani) who ousted his predecessor and invited him himself back to Georgia but actually to imprison them—Ioseliani's trial for alleged involvement in the August 1995 supposed assassination-attempt on Shevardnadze (in which, as luck(?) would have it, no one was seriously injured) finished in November 1998 with an 11-year sentence. This forces one to conclude that, if he really wanted terrorism in Abkhazia launched from Georgian territory to cease, he could bring this about. At the end of October 1998 Germany was expected to supply Georgia with a coastal patrol-boat, receiving a further one from Turkey—similar aid has

also been proffered by America. Additionally, America is reported to be granting \$5.2 million for the purchase of helicopters, the first three of which are to be delivered in 1999. The US State Department is also said to have signed a joint agreement for the serial production at the Kutaisi aircraft works of a Mercury airplane to be purchased by the Frontier Defence Forces. In the light of relations with Abkhazia, these developments must be seen as worrying, especially when coupled with the military training promised by various western governments. The paper *Droni* reported in its issue of November 14–17 1998 that since 1995 Georgia has incurred a debt to Russia too of \$22 million for the training of Georgian officers.

Instead of being gaoled for incitement to racial hatred, Tamaz Nadareishvili served for some years after his exile from Abkhazia as a deputy-premier of Georgia and continues to enjoy VIP treatment as he travels the world to press his argument for a military solution to the conflict. There can be no doubt, however, that Abkhazians are still more than able to counter open challenges. The attitude found throughout the Abkhazian population is one of implacable defiance—Abkhazia is their land and, regardless of the pressures to which they are subjected, they seem quite prepared to die in its defence.

Lifting of the blockade, viable settlement with Georgia, and suitable investment could relatively quickly restore Abkhazia, with its favourable climate and natural resources, to its former position as a Black Sea riviera. Tourism is always likely to be the main source of income, for Abkhazia boasts most of the main resorts on the Caucasian Black Sea coast—undoubtedly one compelling reason for Georgia to try to keep control over potentially lucrative profits. Sukhum's airport at Dranda is acknowledged to be the best in the Caucasus, having been upgraded to international standards before the Soviet collapse, although it has lain idle since 1993. A 1995 feasibility study into the possible development of Skurcha, to the north of Ochamchira, reportedly suggested it had the potential to outrank the more southern ports of Poti (Mingrelia) and Batumi (Adzharia). All this would facilitate the creation in Abkhazia of a free economic zone, as envisaged by the government. Maize, tea, citrus fruits, grapes, nuts, bay-leaves, timber (chestnut, oak, pine, box, beech, walnut, yew, bamboo) and tobacco are the chief agricultural crops, although many mines still make access to the fields in some areas (e.g. around K'yndygh) impossible. Water resources (mineral and plain) are virtually limitless. There are deposits of coal, marble, granite, barite, limestone and oil, with potential for extracting copper, arsenic, zinc, gold and silver. Discussions have taken place on the construction of a subsidiary pipeline (Novorossiysk–Abkhazia–Poti–Ceyhan) that would associate Abkhazia (jointly with Russia and Georgia) with the benefits (assuming that any actually accrue) flowing from the export of Caspian oil. However, this economic 'carrot', as it is seen in Tbilisi, is alone unlikely to entice Abkhazia back into Georgia's fold.

## Georgia

Logic would seem to demand that, by any standards, Georgia should be at the very heart of Caucasian affairs and represent the fulcrum for the Caucasian policy of foreign states—it has road- and rail-links to Russia, Armenia and Azerbaijan, two (non-rail) frontier-crossings with Turkey, outlets to the Black Sea, and its capital lies at the very centre of Transcaucasia. The country, in its internationally recognized borders, consists of 70,000 km<sup>2</sup> (Abkhazia encompasses 8700 km<sup>2</sup> = 12.5% of the territory of 'Georgia') with natural resources comprising: tourist attractions, agricultural land (800,000 hectares of arable land, 322,000 with permanent crops, growing grapes, tea, citrus fruits, bay leaves, vegetables), forests, mines (manganese, copper, iron, zinc, oil, mercury, and barium), wines and mineral waters, plus such industries as: metal processing, electrical equipment, chemicals, food, textiles, iron-casting, steel(-piping), production of vehicles and synthetic yarn; additionally, the Georgians are the largest of the indigenous Caucasian peoples and, unlike any of the others, can boast 15 centuries of literary tradition. Of 9308 small enterprises 91.7% had been privatized by October 1996, although there is no private ownership of land. The latest figures for GDP growth-rate of 11% (1996–97) make Georgia the fastest-growing economy in the region. The amount of investment, largely connected with the TRACECA (Transport Corridor Europe–Caucasus–Asia) project, as for instance detailed in *Georgia: 1998 Country Profile*, suggests that the West has already started to treat Georgia in this favourable way, complementing the political–diplomatic gains achieved by Georgia in the wake of Shevardnadze's return (March 1992).

Russia remains Georgia's main trading partner in terms of both imports and exports—Georgia's total exports in 1996 were US\$199.2 million vs. total imports of US\$647.2 million. Specifically, in 1996 Georgia exported US\$56.9 million-worth of primarily food, coloured metal products and printed materials, representing a 28.5% share of exports, to Russia; this was followed by US\$25.9 million-worth of primarily electrical energy, ammonium nitrate and coloured metals to Turkey (= 13% share of exports). This compared with US\$127.3 million-worth of imports of primarily natural gas, food and electrical energy from Russia (= 19.4% share of imports); this was followed by US\$80.4 million-worth of imports of primarily food and electrical appliances from Turkey (= 14.2% share of imports). Britain represented the highest-ranking western country to receive Georgian exports (mainly benzine and related products and nitrates), whilst the United States was the highest-ranking western country from which imports were received (donations and food, each representing about one-third of the US\$48.3 million-worth of imports). The trade-turnover with Russia for the first 10 months of 1998 was \$145 million, representing 14.7% of Georgia's total foreign trade, which is 2.3% higher than the volume of trade with Georgia's second partner, Turkey.

Of course, the underlying situation is distinctly less healthy. After the disintegration of the USSR and because of internal conflicts the Georgian

economy simply collapsed—used to ‘playing the system’ in Soviet times, which partly explained the relative wealth that was always so conspicuous in Georgia in comparison with the other republics, Georgians no longer had a system other than their own to exploit, and Georgia actually became almost the poorest of the former union-republics. Only in 1995 did matters start to improve; this was the year when the new currency, the *lari*, was introduced under the control of the World Bank and IMF at a rate of 1.12 to the US dollar (September 1995); in October 1998 it fell to 1.43, sliding still further to 2.105 to the dollar at the start of December. This means that recent annual improvements have been set against a remarkably low base-point. As of 1 October 1996 705 production-plants (one-third of the total) stood idle. Annual income in 1996 was just \$665. Only 116,000 tourists visited Georgia in 1996 and, although 1997 saw a threefold increase, the totals are well below figures for the 1970s, when Georgia (principally the Black Sea coastal resorts) attracted Russians and denizens of other socialist countries in droves. There is a huge trade deficit, which means that Georgia cannot meet its debts, particularly those owed to Turkmenistan/Russia for fuel supplies. In consequence, there are critical problems still with electricity supply and heating in winter. Russia’s own economic crisis cannot but have a serious (and deleterious) effect on Georgia’s economic condition, which again is starting to be described as catastrophic. On 14 November 1998 the Finance Minister, Mikhail Ch’k’uaseli, resigned over government disunity and failure to implement his ‘pre-crisis’ plan. This resignation highlights the voluminous and growing budget deficit. Before he resigned, the Minister claimed that budget revenues do not exceed 100,000 lari (\$75,000) daily, whereas expenditure stands at 2 million lari. Minister of State (former ambassador to Moscow) Vazha Lortkipanidze added at the same meeting that the budget shortfall for the first 10 months of 1998 was 160 million lari (\$120 million). Thus, the government currently owes \$9 million in wages to public sector employees and no less than \$35 million in pensions—the current living-wage in Georgia amounts to 85.5 lari (ca. \$57) per month, whereas 70% of Tbilisi residents are estimated to fall short of this income. As the *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty Caucasus Report*, Vol. 1/38 (18 November 1998) goes on to say:

This shortfall is first and foremost the result of chronic tax-evasion, which has proven resistant both to changes in the tax-code proposed by Ch’k’uaseli several months ago and warnings from the IMF. In its annual review of Georgia’s economy in July, the IMF had advised the country’s leadership to mobilise additional tax-revenues and expressed satisfaction with the government’s professed commitment to eliminate all outstanding payments’ arrears by the end of this year—an objective which now looks utopian. An IMF mission is currently in Tbilisi and will make recommendations to the Fund’s directors on disbursement of the final tranche (worth \$38–40 million) of an ESAF loan.

Col. Avtandil Davitadze, head of the financial department at the Ministry of Defence, has stated that the Finance Ministry will shortly owe the Defence Ministry more than 22 million lari (ca. \$14.5 million). The 1997 defence budget totalled 79 million lari (ca. \$52.7 million), reducing in 1998 to 74 million lari

(ca. \$50 million), while the draft budget suggests that it may shrink in 1999 to 65 million lari (ca. \$43 million). At the same time the size of the army is expected to fall from 30,000 to 25,000.

This state of affairs would be bad enough in a stable country with a government commanding the confidence of its citizenry. This is far from the case in Georgia.

Ethno-territorial wars have left both Abkhazia and S. Ossetia *de facto* independent and effectively beyond the control of Tbilisi, although S. Ossetia has recently been reported as being interested in joining the lari-zone. Although no fighting has occurred in the southwestern province of Adzharia (Ach'ara), this too is tightly administered by local strongman, Aslan Abashidze, who came to power there during the Gamsakhurdia period. He enjoys excellent relations with Turkey (and indeed with the Russian troops stationed there still); the Adzharian border with Turkey at the village of Sarpi is said to be quite open, small-traders benefiting greatly from flows of goods in both directions, whereas Adzharia's border with Georgia proper is reported to be rather more strictly controlled. Relations between Abashidze and Shevardnadze are decidedly frosty, the former not having set foot in Tbilisi since Shevardnadze's return, even though he is a member of the central parliament. The daily English-language digest of Georgian newspapers provided by the Caucasian Institute for Peace, Democracy and Development (CIPDD) included the following for 27 October 1998 from an article that day by Mikhail Esartia in *Resonance* (294):

Aslan Abashidze, the leader of Adzharia, told journalists yesterday that before the mutiny [by Ak'ak'i Eliava and his army group from Senak'i, Mingrelia] in Western Georgia Temur Shashiashvili, the governor of the Imereti region, had offered the President to order the army to decimate the population of the Mingrelia province [NB: this incidental hint at the nature of the tension between Mingrelia and Georgia proper, for which *vide infra*—author]. Abashidze promised to make public the record of this conversation, tapped, in his words, by a high-ranking official in Tbilisi. For his part, Mr. Shashiashvili claimed Abashidze's accusations to be a delirium. The 'Adzharian lion', he said, seemed upset by the defeat of the mutineers in Western Georgia and by the affiliation of Imereti to the Assembly of European Regions—Adzharia has been the only Georgian member of this organisation so far and Abashidze used this fact to increase his popularity. If Abashidze indeed provides the record, the newspaper argues, he is going to fall into a trap, as the Adzharian leader and his team may be sued for unsanctioned tapping of the president's talks.

In the 15 November 1998 elections a huge 94% of the electorate in Adzharia reportedly cast their vote, awarding all 30 seats on the Batumi council to Abashidze's party (The Union of Georgian Traditionalists). The 33-year-old son of literary critic Guram Sharadze, a prominent member of Abashidze's party in Tbilisi, was found shot dead in his Tbilisi flat some months ago; the authorities claim it was suicide, though the victim's father is convinced it was a political murder. The nature of future relations between Adzharia and Tbilisi when Abashidze (or, for that matter, Shevardnadze) is no longer in power is an

imponderable question. Though Abashidze cannot really be styled a separatist, nevertheless the autonomous status Adzharia has enjoyed has fostered a range of vested interests, and the population is predominantly Muslim, something which Gamsakhurdia once threatened to 'rectify', thereby creating here a strong reaction of resentment towards the central authorities.

The remote Dzhavakheti region (capital = Akhalkalaki), somewhat to the east of Adzharia, is populated almost exclusively by ethnic Armenians—in between Adzharia and Dzhavakheti lies Meskheti (capital = Akhaltsikhe); this whole border-zone was contested between Georgians and Armenians during the period of their independence after the Russian Revolution (specifically in 1920), and Georgia seems to have gained control thanks to a secret agreement with the withdrawing Turks, who, given the then catastrophic relations between Turks and the surviving Armenians, naturally did not want to see Armenians strengthening their hold over any neighbouring territory. Relations with Tbilisi have been strained (to say the least) since Gamsakhurdia attempted to impose Georgian prefects in this district. Reports also indicate that Shevardnadze's collusion with the Georgian Orthodox Church over its moves to seize control of local Armenian churches and graveyards has hardly endeared the Dzhavakhetian Armenians to the present Georgian regime—the Georgian Church took over the Catholic cathedral in the Adzharian capital some time ago. It is Armenian TV broadcasts that are watched in Dzhavakheti, while the flying of Armenian flags has also been reported, and many local Armenians are part of the soldiery at the Russian base in Akhalkalaki. In early autumn 1998 Georgian troops were forced by (?armed) local Armenians to withdraw from the area because no prior notification had been given of the planned manoeuvres, as is required by an understanding with Tbilisi. In recent months there have been reports that Abashidze has been trying to effect a union of some sort between Adzharia and Meskhet-Dzhavakheti to widen his base of appeal, possibly with a view to his contesting the 1999 presidential elections. Given a free choice (that is to say in conditions where such a decision would not lead to war between Armenia and Georgia, as it surely would at the moment), would the population of Dzhavakheti choose to remain part of Georgia? In issue 1 of volume 3 of *Caucasian Regional Studies* (1998) Voitsekhi Guretski devoted an article to 'The question of Javakheti'. He points out that the current administrative region known as Samtskhe-Dzhavakheti incorporates historical Dzhavakheti, where Armenians represent over 90% (some estimates go as high as 97%) of the population and, between Dzhavakheti and Adzharia, Meskheti, where Armenians form about one-third of the total population. Georgian is not widely known, while local Georgians tend also to speak Armenian. In 1988 a national-popular movement, Dzhavakhk, was formed; its goal from the beginning 'was at least to obtain autonomy, if not to unite the region with Armenia'. The movement feels that the creation of the current administrative unit was aimed at weakening Armenian predominance within Dzhavakheti alone. The most radical members of Dzhavakhk are influenced by the Dashnak(tsutyun) Party (officially non-existent in Georgia), which demands union with Armenia. However, David Rstakyan,

one of Dzhavakhhk's leaders, denies that such is the present aim of the movement, which he declares to be solely concerned with securing Armenian cultural rights in this part of Georgia (what of their rights elsewhere, such as in the capital, Tbilisi?)—there has been an outflow of population from this rather inclement locality in search of economic betterment. On the other hand, Guretski stresses that 'ignoring the demands of the Armenians by the Georgian authorities can lead to civil disobedience'. If Georgia is reconstructed on federal lines, it remains to be seen what special arrangements would be offered to Armenians in these south-western areas. Interestingly, Armenia itself opposes any form of separatism for Dzhavakheti, including the splitting-off of Dzhavakheti from the Samtskhe-Dzhavakheti administrative unit, because the current arrangement gives Armenia direct access to Adzharia, with which it enjoys good relations, and thus to the Black Sea via Batumi. Erevan cannot afford to have open conflict with another neighbour, given its relations with both Azerbaijan and Turkey.

In the Dmanisi–Bolnisi–Marneuli area further to the east live the majority of Georgia's Azerbaijani population, which is not noted for its knowledge of Georgian or its affection for Georgian culture in general. Pipelines to Armenia pass through this area and have often been blown up. Much of the anti-minority rhetoric in early 1989 was directed against the local Azerbaijanis and their high birthrate (perceived to be at levels dangerous for Kartvelian majority-status), and there were in fact deaths in ethnic clashes here in early July 1989, although these were not widely reported abroad as events in Abkhazia quickly overshadowed them.

There is far from universal harmony in some other Kartvelian provinces too. Svaneti(a), the northwestern mountain fastness has, like Chechenia, been reported to be a conduit for the drug trade. Mingrelia, the flatland in the westernmost part of Georgia proper is, however, perhaps Shevardnadze's main trouble-spot. Although most ethnic Svans and Mingrelians (plus any Laz that live in Georgia) *might* be reasonably content to be classified as 'Georgians' (e.g. for census purposes), the ethnic component in the Gamsakhurdia–Shevardnadze split should not be overlooked, although Georgians themselves argue that this is nothing more than a political problem. Just as even those Georgians who know of and accept the crimes committed by Stalin cannot entirely escape a sneaking regard for the local lad, christened Iosep Dzhughashvili, who achieved such world-prominence, so it cannot be accidental that the main stronghold of Zviadism remains his native region of Mingrelia (although Zviad Gamsakhurdia, like his famous novelist father, K'onst'ant'ine, and other Mingrelian intellectuals of the inter-war years was never a Mingrelian nationalist)—Gamsakhurdia's widow, Manana Archvadze, underlined this emphatic local support for her late husband during the first week of January 1999, when she repeated the (widely believed) accusation that Shevardnadze was directly responsible for Zviad's death. After Gamsakhurdia was overthrown, the Mkhedrioni (Cavalry) fighters under Dzhaba Ioseliani went on a murderous rampage in various parts of Mingrelia to root out his supporters—Ioseliani's boasting on Georgian TV of what he and his followers had done in Ts'alendzhikha was nauseating in the

extreme. This aspect of Georgia's civil war of early 1992 was largely ignored or poorly reported in the West, perhaps because the ethnic dimension was not properly appreciated, but there remains throughout Mingrelia an understandably strong legacy of bitterness towards Shevardnadze and his Tbilisi clique. Despite the predictable knee-jerk reaction of blaming 'some hostile foreign power' (sc. Russia) for the assassination attempt on Shevardnadze in Tbilisi in February 1998, it eventually transpired that the plotters were Zviadists, led by Mingrelian Gocha Esebua (to be shot while attending a funeral in April 1998). In like fashion the October mutiny in western Georgia (first reported to be threatening the capture of Georgia's second city, Kutaisi, but then apparently and somewhat suspiciously fizzling out in a couple of days!) was master-minded not by that same 'hostile foreign power' but by a Mingrelian army commander based in Senak'i, Ak'ak'i Eliava (a one-time supporter of Gamsakhurdia, and still at large). One of the reasons that the Mingrelian language has, since the mid-1930s, been suppressed (in the sense of not being awarded literary status and thus never taught in schools or used for publishing of materials for the benefit of ordinary Mingrelians) is the fear that encouraging language rights would inevitably lead to political separatism—this was openly admitted in the introduction to a privately published collection of Mingrelian colloquial expressions by Ana Chikvanaia in 1998. Any Mingrelian who dared in the closing days of communism to speak out in defence of their Mingrelian (as opposed to the imposed Georgian) identity came in for violent contumely (not to say, in some cases, actual physical assault). Consequently, one does not really know the extent of any such desires among the Mingrelian community, whose numbers anecdotally are put at anywhere between 500,000 and 1,500,000—even the likely figure of 750,000 represents a sizeable proportion of Georgia's 1989 70.1% Kartvelian population. It would not, however, be an unreasonable supposition that the ongoing dissatisfaction with Tbilisi's attitude to this region might easily lead to increasing manifestations of ethnic self-assertion. In fact, I was told in Abkhazia in the summer of 1998 by an Abkhazian Mingrelian that there are indeed Mingrelians over the border in Mingrelia proper who are interested not only in reviving the fortunes of the Mingrelian language (after the lead taken in Abkhazia with the *Gal* newspaper) but possibly even in acting on the political front to raise Mingrelia's profile (although not necessarily in the sense of aiming at total independence)<sup>4</sup>. Personally I feel that, however paradoxical it might appear at first glance, such a move would actually be in the interests of Georgia as a whole (and certainly in the interests of Georgian–Abkhazian relations in particular), for the country seems to me to be a paradigm case for the creation of a federal structure—Mingrelia, Svaneti(a), Adzharia, Dzhavakheti, the Azerbaijani area, Imereti, Kartli and K'akheti(a) *as an absolute minimum* should be constituent but separate parts of such a reconstituted state. The establishment of a Mingrelian buffer-zone between Abkhazia (whether totally independent, a fellow-member of the CIS or part of such a newly configured Georgian (con)federation) and Georgia proper would be the best means of relieving Georgian–Abkhazian tensions, for the Abkhazians have never regarded Mingre-

lians as Georgians and state openly that they can more easily build relations with them than the more distant (and nationalistically inclined) Georgians. If, as some suggest, (real) federalism is now acceptable to many politicians in Tbilisi, perhaps herein lies the seed of hope for Georgia's future and any attendant prosperity.

Corruption, widespread throughout the USSR, was endemic in Georgia and one receives the impression that little has changed, just as the introduction of a veneer of democracy to appeal to western observers has been said by some native commentators to have done little to alter underlying realities. The yearly US State Department reports on Georgia consistently refer to transgressions of judicial process—I quote from the latest (January 1998) issue:

Prior to the adoption of the Constitution, the courts were often influenced by pressure from the executive branch. This pattern continues, with judicial authorities frequently deferring to the executive branch, particularly at lower levels of the court system. Investigators routinely plant or fabricate evidence and extort confessions in direct violation of the Constitution. Judges are generally reluctant to exclude evidence obtained illegally over the objection of the Procuracy. Local human rights observers also report widespread judicial incompetence and corruption, including the payment of bribes to prosecutors and judges, which also leads to denial of justice.

In addition, the mistreatment of prisoners is regularly chronicled in Amnesty International's reports on Georgia; and in response to Georgia's request to be granted full membership of the Council of Europe, short-sightedly approved by the delegation despatched to assess the country in the middle of 1998, the British Helsinki Human Rights Group stressed the following in their letter to the Council on 24 April 1998:

Other reports issued in recent months by both non-governmental organizations and official bodies have, we note, been strikingly severe in their criticism of the Georgian authorities concerning that area that has long been of concern to us: namely, civil liberties and human rights. See, for example: US State Department report on Human Rights Practices in 1997; International Helsinki Federation for Human Rights 1997 annual report; Conclusions and Recommendations of the UN Committee Against Torture (November 1996); Concluding Observations of the UN Human Rights Committee (March 1997).

Mentioning the specific cases of K'arlo Dzhich'onania, Tamaz Gorelishvili and Zaza Ts'ik'lauri, the Group conclude:

We can only share Georgia's aspirations, based on its history and culture, to join the family of European nations. But due to its extremely grave recent human rights record, we hold serious reservations about its present eligibility for membership of the Council of Europe.

As the trial of Mkhedrioni leader, Dzhaba Ioseliani, was coming to a close at the start of November 1998, the paper *Sakartvelos Gazeti* (149, 11 November), quoted by CIPDD, reported this incident:

On November 10—Police Day—Temur Mgebrishvili, the commander of the special police

force, and his policemen beat Alek'o Tskit'ishvili, a reporter of the 'Resonance' newspaper, who tried to enter the Supreme Court building, where the Mkhedrioni trial was coming to an end. The reporter was conveyed to the Mtats'minda district police station and detained for three hours, while Mr. Mgebrishvili beat him in the presence of duty officers. That evening the NGO 'Liberty Institute' and journalists launched a protest action, demanding the dismissal of Mgebrishvili.

On the same day *Resonance* itself (309) reported (cited from CIPDD's daily digest): 'While the police suppression of the mass-media is strengthening daily, Shevardnadze congratulates the police, calling them a pillar of the state ...'

There is widespread disillusion with the Tbilisi leadership and political class in general, as the poor turnout in the 15 November 1998 local elections indicated; with the (?suspicious) exception of Adzharia, barely more than the one-third of the electorate required by law to legitimize the ballot bothered to vote, with just 20% (the largest share) of Tbilisi voters casting their ballot in favour of Shevardnadze's Citizens' Union of Georgia party. The newspaper *Alia* (19–20 November 1998), as quoted by CIPDD, gave the preliminary results of the local elections for the provinces (i.e. outside Tbilisi), according to the Central Election Commission, as: Citizens' Union of Georgia 585 mandates; Union for Democratic Revival 238; National Democratic Party 183; Labour Party 167; Socialist Party 141; Popular Party 95; Union of Georgian Traditionalists 61; Lemi 39; Bloc 'National Accord' 38; Sportive Georgia 30; Bloc 'Georgia—Merab K'ost'ava Society' 17; Greens 6; Freedom Party 1. The final results are expected on 5 December. The newspaper *7 Days* (27–29 November 1998) stated that the Central Election Commission by a vote of 15 to 9 (with two members absent) had approved the following division of the 55 places on the Tbilisi City Council: Citizens' Union of Georgia 20; Labour Party 12; Socialist Party 9; Union for Democratic Revival 4; Popular Party 4; National Democratic Party 3; Union of Georgian Traditionalists 3.

As the paper *Droni* (132, 17–18 November), as cited by CIPDD, put it: 'The local elections in Georgia marked the end of the national movement', arguing that the people demonstrated their indifference towards the pro-western policy of the ruling party, which made them abandon the national (?nationalist) ideals for which they had fought. Of course, the citizenry was misguided in the first place to have allowed itself to be taken down the road of nationalism by its mixture of incompetent and/or devious leaders over recent years. While similar charges may be levelled against the Kremlin, at least Russia can take some pride in the presence of intellectuals, such as Sergei Kovalëv and the late Galina Starovoitova, prepared to speak out against the policies of the government (e.g. over the Chechen war)—Georgia's shame is that, far from anyone of influence raising a voice in protest at the dangers of treading the nationalist path, the intelligentsia either said nothing or eagerly jumped aboard the nationalist bandwagon themselves. The country is palpably in desperate need of a better educational system, less insular and more objective (namely non-nationalist) in its outlook. Perhaps there will be little fundamental improvement in Georgian

society until this is introduced and a ruling élite reared on Soviet ideology fades into history.

Many (?most) western leaders and/or their advisers evidently think highly of the current Georgian leader and deem *him* at least to be worthy of support. Those who think this way should not examine merely Shevardnadze's term as Soviet Foreign Minister in isolation but consider the entirety of his career, including both the preceding 13 years he spent in charge of Georgia and the 6 years since his return; they would also do well to resist being bowled over by Georgian *bonhomie* and hospitality (no greater, incidentally, than that found among Caucasian people in general) and recall that, even those who had the acumen to see through that other (notorious) Georgian politician, Josef Stalin, found him, on a personal level, to be a man of supreme charm. An Abkhazian politician visiting London in 1993 remarked that Shevardnadze was an ideal executor of others' decisions but no man himself to lead an independent state. This latter judgement is surely borne out by the facts. The only world leader to back Yeltsin's murderous tactics in Chechnia was, quite predictably (given his pro-Kremlin orientation displayed throughout his career), Eduard Shevardnadze. As soon as it became clear, however, that Russia had effectively been defeated in that campaign, the first to welcome Chechen leader, Aslan Maskhadov, outside Chechnia was ... Eduard Shevardnadze—little wonder the sobriquet awarded to this man by his fellow-countrymen for his lack of principle during his tenure of office as Georgian Party Boss was *tetri melia* (White Fox). Realpolitik for Chechnia required that it achieve a means of egress that avoided Russia and, since Georgia is the only non-Russian region it borders, the Chechen leadership chose to ignore the previous pro-Russian (?anti-separatist) stance of the Georgian leadership and engineered agreement on the construction of a new road linking Chechnia with Georgia. The Chechen section of this was completed quite promptly but the Georgians have havered, alleging fear of a new route for the passage of narcotics. However, there can be no doubt that Georgia has totally lost any respect it might once have commanded across the whole N. Caucasus because of its treatment of the Abkhazians, specifically the inflicting on them of the wholly unnecessary war of 1992–93. For this Shevardnadze must shoulder the blame.

How did it happen? Shevardnadze had no excuses for not understanding the nature and depth of Abkhazian suspicions towards Georgians as a result of their constant attempts over the years to dominate Abkhazia and introduce there the Georgian language. At the time of the promulgation of the Brezhnevite constitutions in the late 1970s the language issue came to the fore in a number of Soviet regions, including Georgia proper (Georgian vs. Russian) and Abkhazia (Abkhaz vs. Georgian). The situation within Abkhazia became extremely tense, requiring Shevardnadze, as Party General Secretary, to visit Sukhum and pacify local emotions by referring to the mistakes committed by Tbilisi during the Stalin–Beria period. However, not having learnt his lesson, Shevardnadze, faced with ongoing rebellion among Mingrelia's Zviadists, seems to have gambled that perhaps the only way to win universal Kartvelian approval would be to divert

attention from intra-Kartvelian disputes towards a common foe, and the most convenient foe available happened to be the Abkhazians. The gamble conspicuously failed at appalling cost to the victims of the aggression, to the aggressors themselves, as well as to the republic whose frontiers these aggressors were supposedly protecting. After the Georgian forces were expelled from Abkhazia, Shevardnadze's bacon was pulled from the further flames ignited by Gamskhurdia's sudden return to Mingrelia from Chechenia only thanks to the receipt of 'humanitarian' Russian aid, proffered after another volte-face that took Georgia into the CIS—Gamsakhurdia's revolt crumbled, and he perished under mysterious circumstances over the 1993–94 New Year.

The one thing Georgia desperately needs as an absolute precondition for securing the desiderata common to all the states emerging from the Soviet shadow (namely, peace and prosperity) is stability, and the key to this is Abkhazia. Georgia's rail-link to Russia has been cut ever since the Abkhazian war, as the sole line runs the length of Abkhazian territory—the motorway (M27) stretching alongside it is also the only highway connecting Georgia to Russia that is open all year round—the cutting of these direct, permanent links to Russia was perhaps even more damaging to Armenia (in its conditions of blockade by Turkey and Azerbaijan) than to Georgia itself. Closure of the northern railway has necessitated the wasteful building in the renovated port of Poti of a special rail-dock, so that wagons can be rolled onto ships for onward transmission across the Black Sea to such ports as Odessa. In fact, apart from the oil terminal at Supsa in Shevardnadze's home region of Guria, Poti (current capacity 5–6 million tons per year) is the only port under the direct control of Tbilisi, and Poti is in Mingrelia! This is because the remaining port is Adzharia's capital Batumi (current capacity 4–5 million tons per year). Given the demonstration by the Abkhazians of their superior military prowess in both the war of 1992–93 and the large-scale skirmishes of May 1998 in Gal, Poti might prove an attractive and attainable target should another rash military adventure be essayed by Tbilisi or, indeed, should the Abkhazians finally lose forbearance in the face of the continual terrorist attacks on their territory mounted from neighbouring Georgia. The security of Supsa, a little further to the south, or of any extended pipeline from Baku via Georgia down to the southern Turkish port of Ceyhan, in which Georgia is investing such great hopes, must always be open to doubt if the Abkhazian question cannot be resolved—recall that there are an estimated half a million ethnic Abkhazians in Turkey.

References to Abkhazia in the current Constitution of Georgia (e.g. 'Article 55. 1. The Parliament of Georgia, in accordance with the Parliamentary Regulations, for the term of its authority and by secret ballot shall elect a chairman of Parliament and deputy chairmen, including one deputy chairman from the Abkhazian deputation and another from the Adzharian deputation. Candidates for the post of deputy chairmen shall be nominated by the deputations of their respective autonomous regions') are utterly meaningless, given the total absence of any authority over Abkhazia wielded by Georgia. Since it is the relationship with the Abkhazians that represents the nadir in all the relationships contracted

between Georgians and the non-Kartvelian minorities that constituted 29.9% of Soviet Georgia's 1989 population, if that one could be repaired, a crucial precedent would be established for improvement all around, an indispensable first step in turning Georgia into a mature modern democracy. Sadly, there are strong indications that without some external guidance (?pressure) in the right direction, this is unlikely to happen. Many Georgians are pursuing today the same anti-Abkhazian rhetoric that has become the norm since the late 1980s—with all the attendant dangers. Even those Georgians who are prepared in private to acknowledge frankly mistakes in recent/present policy towards Abkhazia, often cloak any public pronouncements in verbiage which still manages to be offensive to the Abkhazians. When challenged to explain why they do this, they regularly respond that this is essential to make their criticisms acceptable to a Georgian audience. To my mind, this is a most revealing statement about the nature of Georgian society, and it is something which external (?and superficial) observers with no knowledge of Georgian (and thus no capability to read all this for themselves) cannot possibly appreciate. It is regrettable that policy-makers (in the United Kingdom and United States especially, for example) fail to overcome this shortcoming by tending to listen to those whose advice confirms their a priori pro-Georgian prejudices. Successful regional policies have to take cognizance (in this of all regions) of more than the aspirations of just the titular peoples of the internationally recognized republics.

### **The West's role**

It is time that policy towards the Caucasus and its peoples was predicated on fairness and a genuine wish to help establish there a foundation for a peaceful and prosperous future rather than on the cronyism and rigid adherence to the trite principle of territorial integrity that seem to have determined policy in recent years. A state remains a viable entity for only as long as it retains the global respect and confidence of its citizens. The N. Caucasus fell to Russia's imperial expansion as recently as 1864, and the central authorities, whether Tsarist or Soviet, have hardly gone out of their way since to earn the devotion and fidelity of the multiplicity of ethnic groups resident there. The late Andrej Sakharov described Georgia in the summer of 1989 (in 'Ogonëk') as one of the USSR's 'little empires', and it was a huge tragedy for the Soviet Union's minorities in general that Sakharov did not live longer, for he was perhaps the one figure to whom the West might have listened when the collapse of the Union brought in its train so many dangers for those not lucky enough to have been granted administrative frontiers that fortuitously happened to demarcate union-republics (as opposed to autonomous republics or regions), for only union-borders were allowed by the international community to delimit the new states that were to join the world's family of nations. Boris Yeltsin and Eduard Shevardnadze were rapidly appraised by 'experts' in foreign ministries the world over as the type of leader we should cultivate and support. In the case of Shevardnadze, this meant that his return to his former communist fiefdom in March 1992 brought

immediate diplomatic recognition and access to the ‘clubs’ of the IMF, World Bank and UN—and all this took place despite the fact that the legitimately elected, although increasingly unbalanced, president Zviad Gamsakhurdia had been ousted in a coup a few weeks earlier. Instead of waiting for the new leadership to establish what credentials it could muster in the October elections all the carrots were given away, and along with them went any possibility the West might have had of controlling the excesses of Georgia’s continuing nationalism. Shevardnadze celebrated his country’s admittance to the United Nations by invading Abkhazia within a matter of days. Also, of course, to a West already preoccupied with Yugoslavia what Tbilisi did in Abkhazia was purely its internal affair. In the case of Yeltsin, blasting his opposition out of the parliament building by tanks on the streets of Moscow proved a minor incident in comparison with the firepower he employed to massacre thousands in Grozny and various Chechen villages. Interviewed on British radio Douglas Hurd, then British Foreign Secretary, could only think to say in defence of his ‘friend’ that Yeltsin had defended freedom in Russia when he took to the top of a tank in August 1991. President Clinton was moved to offer the outrageous comparison of the Chechen campaign with America’s own civil war (evidently ignorant of the true comparison with America’s genocidal Indian wars). This is no way for supposedly civilized states to conduct their foreign policies for, as things stand, western policy-makers share a good deal of the guilt for the shedding of blood in the Caucasus since 1991. Indeed, by continuing to offer blanket support to the Tbilisi authorities when they are proven to be engaged in promoting terrorism in Abkhazia, western governments cannot easily divest themselves of some responsibility for the deaths and injuries resulting from these terrorist acts. One example of double standards that exhibits a distinct pro-Georgian bent in western policy is seen in the insistence that the Abkhazians take back the bulk of the Kartvelian refugees *before* any financial assistance is given to repair Abkhazia’s shattered infrastructure (including the housing-stock), while Tbilisi’s assertion that the Georgian economy is in such dire straits that it cannot contemplate accommodating the Meskh(et)ians seeking to resettle their dispossessed homes is readily approved—when the junior British Foreign Office minister, Joyce Quin, was recently asked in a private letter why the countries constituting the Friends of the Secretary-General’s initiative for Georgia make no representation on behalf of the Meskh(et)ians, her reply was that the Friends operate exclusively with reference to the Abkhazian problem. The international community says nothing of reparations due to Abkhazia to cover the damage inflicted on the republic by Georgia’s invasion, and Abkhazian insistence that any talk of refugees should also take account of the Abkhazian diaspora, descendants of those coerced into exile in the 1860–70s, is airily dismissed.

Of course, it would be preferable not to have to start from here, but the Caucasus lies on the edge of the European continent, and it behoves the EU to offer assistance to fellow Europeans. This should not take the form of proffering any further state-sanctioned benefits (such as membership of the Council of Europe to Georgia<sup>5</sup>) but a more balanced approach to regional problems. The

necessity of (i) withdrawal from colonized regions, (ii) correct treatment of minorities and (iii) observance of human rights must be instilled in both Moscow and Tbilisi. Training programmes and exchanges should be instituted to teach *inter alia*: the meaning of democracy, civil society and the rule of law; techniques in finance, business management and commerce; conflict resolution; race relations; understanding the role of NGOs and the need for them to be independent of, without being hostile to, local government(s); the absolute necessity for education to be objective and free from national bias (cf. Hewitt, 1998a). A whole range of practical skills not familiar to post-Soviet societies must be introduced, and help must be made available for the creation of new school textbooks (possibly in newly devised scripts for some of the minor languages) and the training of teachers. All this should be available to representatives from all the regions and ethnic groups discussed in this report.

Proper policies towards a region can only be devised if that region is understood. The West, in my opinion, has made many serious mistakes for which it needs to atone in the Caucasus. If this project helps to lay the foundation for the introduction of corrective measures, the exercise will have been worthwhile.

#### *Note on Georgian government-personnel*

The current Minister for State Security is Gen.-Lieut. Vakht'ang Kutatelidze (b.1955) (having replaced Gen.-Lieut. Dzhemal Gakhok'idze, who in turn replaced Shota K'viriaia in 1997); on 12 May 1998 Gen.-Lieut Davit Tevzadze took over from Gen.-Lieut. Vardik'o Nadibaidze as Minister of Defence; the Minister of the Interior is K'akha Targamadze; Valeri Chkheidze is head of Georgia's State Department of Frontier Defence; Dzhamlet' Babilashvili is Chief Prosecutor; Sul Khan Papashvili (b.1966) has been appointed to head the State Safeguard Service; Zaza Mazmishvili has moved from being chief of the president's bodyguard to head the anti-terrorism centre at the State Security Ministry, while Gia Tsatsanashvili is acting head of the presidential bodyguard.

#### **Notes and references**

1. For the justification of the treaty-relationship with Georgia offered by the contemporary leader of Abkhazia, Nest'or Lak'oba, see p. 24 of the 1987 collected edition of his articles and speeches (*N.A. Lakoba: Stat'i i Rechi*, Alashara, Sukhum).
2. Since this move was in conformity with what I had been privately advocating for some time before this, I am reluctant to see it as a purely cynical political gesture. In 1991 Abkhazia undertook to publish Gedevan Shanava's Mingrelian verse-translation of the Georgian national epic, Shota Rust(a)veli's 'The Man in the Pantherskin'—when K'ak'a Zhvania had tried to have his own translation published in 1966 to coincide with the 800th anniversary of the poet, his request was denied in Tbilisi!
3. Consider, for example, the following: 'It is difficult to prove Georgian accusations of universal Russian support for Abkhazia. On many occasions Russian actions benefited Georgia more than Abkhazia' (p. 8), or later on the same page: 'Support for the Abkhaz seems almost random. If this is the case, then one can posit that other factors were critical to the failure of Georgian forces in Abkhazia. Georgian accusations of Russian intervention must be weighed against the need for assistance and a scapegoat in the face of an ill-planned military adventure with a terribly unprepared military'. Suggestions that the Abkhazians must have had Russian assistance simply because of their small numbers in comparison to the size of the force

- capable of being mustered by their Kartvelian opponents are simplistic in themselves and fail to take into account such factors as: (a) the support received by the Abkhazians from other non-Kartvelian minorities within Abkhazia, from North Caucasian volunteers, from members of the diaspora communities across the Near East, and (yes) from sympathetic individuals in the Russian military wishing to offer assistance to fellow-targets of Georgian sentiments of ethnic superiority; (b) the military skills acquired by Abkhazians doing their military service, while avoidance of conscription was always something of a sport among certain sectors of Georgian society during the Soviet era; (c) the FACT that the Abkhazians were fighting in defence of their homeland against a clear invader (despite whatever the ass of international law may have to say about the applicability of this designation to the Kartvelian forces operating in Abkhazia in 1992–93).
4. Given the reaction to those Mingrelians who spoke out in the late 1980s against being globally classified as ‘Georgians’, it is not surprising that this highly sensitive issue is not widely discussed—certainly, casual western visitors to the region who have no knowledge of Georgian and/or Mingrelian would probably have no inkling of any such tensions. Equally, given the way that Mingrelian language and culture have been downplayed over the decades, it is understandable that many Mingrelians openly cleave to Georgian language, culture and identity, as this is the way to personal advancement. Closer to home one could, for example, point to those Welshmen who see no advantage in preserving Welsh language and culture, preferring to have their offspring taught only English. The difference (sc. with respect to the issue here under discussion) between the situation in Wales and Mingrelia is that, whereas those who hold a contrary opinion in Wales can speak out in favour of preserving their language and culture without fear of violence from the English or fellow Welshmen, achieving such successes as a Welsh-language TV channel, Mingrelian preservationists by no means enjoy parallel freedom. While there is no suggestion that separatist tendencies might be about to burst forth in Mingrelia, it would equally be misguided to assume that there is no potential for such unrest in this part of the republic.
  5. Bearing in mind that Russia was admitted to the Council of Europe actually during its pursuit of the murderous war in Chechnia, we can say that a further nail has now been hammered into the Council’s coffin by the recommendation that Georgia be allowed full status from January 1999—one of the feeble conditions of entry to this ‘club’ is that the problem of the Meskh(et)ians be resolved within a time-frame of 3 years.

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