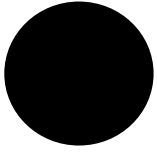


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Abkhazia on Three Wheels

Alexander Cooley and Lincoln Mitchell

SUKHUMI—The land between Georgia and this breakaway region represents a tense coda to a short war and a tenuous peace, a tribute to the fragile nature of such territories. Here, the frontier post is considered an international border by the Abkhaz and is patrolled by Abkhaz troops. Russian forces are camped nearby. After Russia and Georgia's brief war in 2008, Moscow recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia's declarations of independence. Since then, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have, with the Kremlin's support, lobbied for others' recognition but have, for the most part, failed. The territories are internationally isolated and increasingly dependent on Russia for security, hence the Russian troops. A steady stream of tired residents from Gali, an ethnic region on the Abkhaz side of the checkpoint, cross this frontier with shopping bags filled with goods for trade. By an unfortunate confluence of geography and politics, they are caught in between.

This new, postwar reality has been particularly damaging to Georgia. For years it claimed it was on the brink of solving internal conflicts that have fragmented its territories since the early 1990s, when South Ossetia and Abkhazia were first brought under Georgian leadership. In the years before the August 2008 war, the Georgian government

offered Abkhazia "limitless autonomy" within the framework of a national federation, but Abkhaz leaders refused to accept control from politicians in Tbilisi, Georgia's capital. Abkhazia and South Ossetia had been part of Georgia for most of the Soviet era, and many Georgians consider both territories their own. Still, Abkhazia and South Ossetia fought for their independence in the early 1990s, and again in August 2008. Since then, leadership in Sukhumi—Abkhazia's capital—find any arrangement that might cede sovereignty to Georgia unacceptable. Few governments acknowledge that the war has changed the political realities in Abkhazia and Georgia. The United States and Europe continue to support Georgia's territorial integrity, but after spending time in Abkhazia it is clear that this approach is a non-starter. By continuing to isolate Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia and the rest of the world is implicitly allowing Russia to get away with a *de facto* annexation of these territories, all but guaranteeing ongoing tension and potential military conflict along these political fault lines.

While Georgia and Abkhazia both cling to a vision of classical sovereignty and statehood, each lacks an essential element of the necessary combination of *de facto* control and *de jure* international recognition. For Geor-

gia, despite international support for its cause, any real influence over Abkhazia remains little more than a distant vision—it's been almost 18 years since it had effective control of the breakaway territory. For Abkhazia, broader international recognition of its independence appears unlikely. New ties with Russia threaten to curtail whatever autonomy the region enjoyed before the war, when it did not claim to be an independent state but was, ironically, less under Moscow's sway than it is today. Now the territory has been turned into a Russian province in every way but its name. Georgia needs to engage with Abkhazia without resorting to the language of exclusive sovereignty—that will only deepen Abkhazia's isolation and possible Russian annexation.

Georgian and Abkhaz leadership face domestic difficulties of their own, further complicating matters. In Tbilisi, discussing anything but total sovereignty over Abkhazia is unacceptable. And the same is true in Sukhumi, Abkhazia's capital. Throughout his time in office, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili has regularly promised his constituents that an Abkhaz return was imminent; but for many in Abkhazia, Georgian rule is a distant memory. These domestic constraints render any creative compromise over Abkhazia's legal status politically impossible. Meanwhile, both Tbilisi and Sukhumi continue to press for their peculiar and improbable sovereign aspirations. Tbilisi seeks international support for Georgia's non-existent territorial integrity, while Sukhumi builds a new state that has little chance of being recognized by the countries it needs to make Abkhazia's statehood feasible.

Checkpoints and Boundaries

Abkhazia lies in the northwest corner of Georgia, sandwiched between the Black Sea and the foothills of the Caucasus. The beautiful setting fails to conceal the ugliness of

the place—in the last two decades Abkhazia has seen a succession of wars, ethnic cleansing, international neglect and isolation. Most estimates put the population at about 180,000; during the 1989 census, when ethnic Abkhaz constituted a plurality (but not a majority) of the population, it was 525,000. The Abkhaz share their tiny territory with a potpourri of ethnic Armenians, Russians and Georgians living primarily in the Gali district. More than 200,000 other ethnic Georgians were forced from their homes and driven across the frontier at the end of 1993, during the wars between Georgia and Abkhazia.

From Tbilisi, the Abkhaz capital of Sukhumi is a seven-hour drive. After four hours it is interrupted by a checkpoint along a ceasefire line, established after the 2008 war. This is now Abkhazia's administrative boundary. Compared to the rest of the South Caucasus, the first part of the trip is smooth sailing. President Saakashvili has substantially improved Georgia's infrastructure during his six years in office, so traffic moves quickly along the newly renovated highways.

Things change at the checkpoint. Gocha, our dependable and easygoing driver, heads back to Zugdidi, the nearest city on the Georgian side. We walk 200 yards towards the guards, carrying our passports and a printout of a permit to visit Abkhazia, secured through a visa agency in Toronto. The Georgian soldiers take a cursory glance at our passports before waving us through. They're chatting in Mingrelian, a west-Georgian dialect. We set off up the road towards the Abkhaz checkpoint and after about half-a-mile we find two more Georgian soldiers glancing at us with some curiosity—we're in business suits, not the most common attire for these checkpoint crossings. The soldiers are more interested in talking to us than examining our documents. After exchanging a few sentences in



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The Inguri River: Displaced Georgians on a bridge to nowhere.

Russian, we continue.

A bedraggled donkey stands hitched to a jerry-rigged cart. The cart is built from discarded farm equipment and the wheels of an old Soviet Lada sedan. A few feet away sits the driver, anxiously waiting to make a few rubles ferrying travelers across this no man's land between the checkpoints. We turn down the donkey cart and walk over a concrete bridge designed for truck traffic. Spanning the scenic Inguri River, it marks the boundary of the breakaway territory. The bridge is pock-marked and full of deep puddles. It has had few repairs since the USSR collapsed.

On the Abkhaz side, the checkpoint consists of a series of rundown shacks surrounded by a few kiosks selling cigarettes, water and liquor. There's an empty restaurant that smells of barbecued meat. Though the checkpoint is manned by Abkhaz troops, there is no question who is in charge here. A substantial Russian military camp

lies a few hundred yards away, a Russian flag flying over the entrance, just a few feet from a large election campaign billboard promoting the presidential candidacy of Sergei Bagapsh, Abkhazia's recently reelected leader.

A minor clerical error by the visa agency in Toronto threatens to destroy our plans and force us to turn back, but the Abkhaz soldiers make a few calls to our contacts in Sukhumi and tell us to wait. We can't call because Georgian cell phones don't reach Abkhaz territory, presumably because they are being jammed by Russia, or Georgia, or both. We settle in, eating energy bars and sipping water. From our previous trip to Abkhazia we learned to bring our own food—there are few stores and restaurants, even in the capital.

At least 100 people pass in both directions. All are locals, ethnic Georgians who live in southern Abkhazia. In the decades

since conflicts began, Abkhaz leadership has allowed about 30,000 Georgian residents from border villages around Gali to return to their homes. The Georgians refer to them as “spontaneous returns.” Most have roots in Gali, but friends in Georgia. We watch them carry large bags of goods, presumably taking advantage of the trade opportunities on either side. Taxis and Abkhaz *martsbutkas*, the local mini-buses, wait at the checkpoint and gradually fill up before departing for points further into Abkhazia. One smiling taxi driver approaches every 10 minutes, reminding us that if our ride doesn’t come he would gladly take us to Sukhumi.

While we wait, we are approached by a chatty Russian soldier, educated, well-armed and clearly with the Federal Security Service, the successor to the Soviet-era KGB. We answer his questions cheerily, explaining that the error in our paperwork was not our own, and agree with him that all people in the world should live in peace and friendship. A few minutes later we are allowed across the checkpoint, as a large Russian helicopter flies above us at low altitude, patrolling the northern bank of the Inguri.

Into the Void

Though barely 50 miles, the drive to Sukhumi takes at least two hours. The roads are atrocious—potholes filled with mud and water slow our aging car to a crawl. These roads have suffered from years of neglect, not to mention all the tanks that rolled across them during the August 2008 war. Russia funded road repair from Sukhumi north to its border, but this largesse has not extended south towards Zugdidi, the nearest major city on the Georgian side of the checkpoint. The message is clear—Abkhazia’s future lies with Russia, not Georgia.

Even language is used differently here. In Tbilisi, crossing between Abkhazia and

Georgia, you travel through a checkpoint. In Sukhumi, this is a border. In Georgia, ethnic Georgians expelled from Abkhazia during the wars of the 1990s are Internally Displaced Persons; in Abkhazia they are refugees. In this case, the word choice is especially important—refugee implies an escape from persecution across international borders, while Internally Displaced Persons move within a country.

The most striking aspect of traveling through Abkhazia is its emptiness. Abandoned houses, summer homes, villas, administrative offices and shacks all litter the landscape. The region lost about 250,000 people, mostly ethnic Georgians, during the tail end of wars in the early 1990s. The emptiness here is a stark reminder of why Abkhaz statehood is rejected by most of the world—the absence of Georgians is evidence of ethnic cleansing.

In Sukhumi, a few hundred meters from the decrepit boardwalk, an enormous concrete structure looms over the landscape. It was once home to cafes and restaurants, but today resembles nothing so much as a giant, decaying cruise ship. A handful of pensioners drink coffee on plastic sun chairs, reminders of a time when Abkhazia was known as the best spot for a beach vacation in the USSR, where the Soviet elite spent a few weeks a year on the Black Sea enjoying the sun and the sea.

With so few people, Abkhazia lacks the human capital to build a viable government, create schools and universities, or defend itself. Of course, Russia is here to help with the staffing and training of a nascent, pro-Kremlin Abkhaz state. But this solution won’t end with a functioning Abkhaz nation.

Measuring Up

Politics in Abkhazia lack the frenetic tone common in Georgia. The case for statehood is made in detailed and considered terms, not the angry rhetoric so common in Tbil-

isi. Perhaps because of the far smaller population or the Russian presence, Abkhazia feels calm; while Georgia feels like the calm before the storm. In 2010, Georgia is emphatically absent from the minds of the Abkhaz, a stark contrast to the period before the August 2008 war. When we visited Sukhumi two years ago—just months before the war—everyone we spoke to spent a great deal of time portraying Georgia as armed and dangerous. Today the political, civic and business leaders we meet seem uninterested in Georgia, because of what happened after the war.

After Georgia attacked Tskhinvali, the capital of South Ossetia, on August 6, 2008, Russia opened up a military front through Abkhazia, mounting an offensive into Georgia. In the process, Russian troops reclaimed the Upper Khodori Valley region, a heavily militarized mountain gorge that had been triumphantly seized by Georgian President Saakashvili in 2006 following its demilitarization in 2002. Soon after the 2008 war, Russia recognized Abkhazia's independence and sought to legalize its military presence on Abkhaz territory, reaching bilateral defense and border protection agreements with Sukhumi. Russian troops in Abkhazia now formally guarantee Abkhaz security.

Though they may not be taken seriously in Tbilisi or the West, the Abkhaz are focused on state building. In Moscow, it is common to hear leaders say that they will work with Georgia once the leadership changes, but in Abkhazia there are no such claims. Indeed, the country seems totally disinterested in Georgia's tumultuous domestic politics. The one glib aside, trumpeted by the Abkhaz leadership, political analysts and virtually everybody else, is that they are thankful to President Saakashvili for initiating the 2008 war that ultimately spawned their nation.

A Meeting With The President

Abkhazia is dominated by Russia. Its citizens wrestle with this fact. Is absorption into the Russian Federation too high a price to pay for self-declared independence, and an end to the fear of Georgian aggression? Government officials are less than forthcoming, and claim that relations with Russia are fine, that they actually have a reasonable degree of autonomy from Moscow. But this

“Abkhazia is dominated by Russia. Its citizens wrestle with this fact.”

does not jibe with Russia's economic and political activity throughout Abkhazia. Since the war, local phone exchanges have been replaced by Russian ones, so that a call to Abkhazia requires the Russian country code. The ruble remains the common currency. Russian media, security, and political presence is ubiquitous. And Abkhaz citizens currently travel on Russian passports—although this is slated to change within the next year, when Abkhaz documents will be distributed. In less than two years, Abkhazia and Russia have signed more than 30 agreements on cooperation in various spheres, and the vast majority give Russia the license to impose its standards, transfer its human capital or, in some form, absorb some sliver of the Abkhaz state or an entire agency or enterprise under the cover of an international accord. Abkhaz officials have agreed to transfer the bulk of their railroads, maritime transport, electricity transmission and air traffic control directly to their Russian counterparts.

Much of Abkhazia's economy comes from the 2 million Russian tourists who flock to the Black Sea each year. Due to its

proximity to the Russian city of Sochi, site of the 2014 Winter Olympics, Abkhazia has become even more closely tied to Russia's economy. Resources for Olympic-related construction in Sochi—such as a massive new cement mixing factory in Tkuarchal—increasingly come from Abkhazia. It's been suggested that Abkhazian law will soon allow Russians to buy property here, and it is almost certain that the land along the Black Sea will be rapidly bought up.

Politically, Russia is the only major country that maintains diplomatic relations with Abkhazia. Earlier this year, Moscow provided a generous foreign assistance package of \$50 million to Nauru, a tiny island in the South Pacific and the smallest recognized independent country in the world. It soon became the fourth country to officially recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia, joining Nicaragua, Venezuela and, of course, Russia. But these recognitions from distant nations are far more important as external validation; they aren't really genuine sources of partnership. No other state in the region has indicated that it's likely to recognize Abkhaz sovereignty any time soon, nor will the European Union or the United States.

Beyond the Russian question, the Abkhaz leadership has no idea how to deal with local Georgians who were forced out of Abkhazia more than 15 years ago. If all returned, Abkhazia would again have a Georgian majority, and that would be the end of any Abkhaz statehood. But refusing the Georgians' return would mean building a state based on ethnic cleansing. The former solution is untenable within Abkhazia; the second doesn't sit well with the rest of the world. Any popular referendum on statehood Abkhazia submits to the UN Security Council that does not include a significant portion of these former residents cannot be accepted as legitimate—regardless of whether or not these former residents even want to return. Until its leadership comes up with a way to

deal with the exiled Georgians, it is likely that their aspirations for independence will continue to be marginalized.

At midnight, the day before our planned meetings with Abkhaz leaders, our schedule threatens to be derailed. We receive a call from an adviser to the Abkhaz president. A Nicaraguan delegation is in town and will be visiting Abkhaz official institutions the following day, he informs us. It will be very difficult for us to get time with the president, prime minister or any other senior Abkhaz official, he continues, as they will be embroiled in the extravagant ceremonies. We push back against this unexpected threat to our schedule, and tell him that most independent countries, at the very least, should be able to host a minor delegation from Central America and squeeze in time for two American academics. Luckily, the message is received and we are able to meet with Abkhaz President Sergei Bagapsh.

He graciously receives us in his presidential office, a large room in one of Sukhumi's main government office buildings a hundred yards from the Black Sea. There are ceremonial swords, prepared for the Nicaraguan delegation, there to remind us how seriously Bagapsh takes recognition. He reiterates his government's commitment to economic development and statehood, but seems reluctant to confront just how difficult such tasks would be. He seems at peace with the enormous role Russia would play in keeping the Abkhaz project afloat.

No Laughing Matter

In this post-Kosovo world, the Abkhaz aspiration for statehood should not be dismissed. Officials in Sukhumi argue that, contrary to the American position, Kosovo did in fact establish a significant precedent for breakaway territories. The independence of Kosovo, according to the Abkhaz argument, is similar to

the situation here. In both cases, the established country lost its right to govern a break-away region through aggressive and unprovoked attacks. While the analogy is not perfect, it is powerful enough for the Abkhaz and the Russians, if no one else. Still, most countries in the world want nothing to do with the self-styled independence of either Kosovo (which is still only recognized by about 60 nations) or Abkhazia, for fear that such recognition will lead to further disintegration and fragmentation within existing states. For its part, Russia opposed Kosovo's independence while making it clear that, for them, Kosovo sets a precedent for an independent Abkhazia.

So far, Abkhazia's plans for economic development, diversified economic activity and trading partners—all of which are essential for creating a viable state—have met with little success. The opening of a Benetton clothing store in Sukhumi was hailed a major achievement, but the Finnish cellular giant Nokia stopped selling new hardware here after Finland's foreign ministry objected. In this international legal limbo, it is difficult to believe that strong commercial links between Abkhazia and anywhere beyond Russia's influence will begin soon.

The View from Georgia

Immediately following the 2008 war, the Georgian government passed the "Law on Occupied Territories." It was a highly criticized piece of legislation, and it placed heavy penalties on any individual, organization or corporation with contacts in occupied Abkhazia. The law was cited in August 2009, when the Georgian Coast Guard intercepted a Turkish ship transporting fuel to Abkhazia, sentencing its captain to 24 years in prison. The Turkish Foreign Minister rushed to Tbilisi on a crisis visit, Georgia

released the captain, and Georgian leaders began to think of more constructive ways to press their sovereign and legal claims.

The Georgian government recently published a new paper called "State Strategy on Occupied Territories: Engagement through Cooperation." The report centers on the efforts to win back Abkhazia. This strategy, "engagement through cooperation," ad-

“The opening of a Benetton store in Sukhumi was hailed as a major achievement.”

mirably puts status questions on the back burner and tones down some of the aggressive rhetoric that Georgia has used in the past. It proposes a set of joint Georgian-Abkhaz initiatives in trade, transport, health and education. The Georgian strategy also offers Abkhazia the prospect of establishing links to the outside world via non-governmental organizations, on the important condition that the Abkhaz agree to participate in joint delegations and international programs with Georgians displaced from Abkhazia. Georgian officials make a point of highlighting just how difficult it was to achieve an interagency agreement on many of the strategy's provisions, and what a break this is from previously inflexible positions. They may be right, but this strategy seems like too little, too late. For years, the Georgian public has been led to believe that the unification of Georgia under the Saakashvili administration was right around the corner. So accepting any sort of concessions on status issues, or even a more conciliatory stance, is difficult.

In Abkhazia, the new Georgian strategy seems like a non-starter too. Some Abkhaz officials oppose it simply because its ultimate goal remains restoring Abkhazia to

Georgian rule. Others view it as a strategy meant not for Abkhaz consumption, but for Georgia's European and American donors, who want to see Georgia adopt a more conciliatory tone towards its breakaway territories. Regardless, the Abkhaz are adamant that any links they establish with the international community will not ultimately be decided or mediated by Tbilisi.

Ironically, Abkhazia believes that a warming of relations between Georgia and Russia is a more significant threat than invading Georgian troops. Although this seems unlikely in the immediate future, there are forces in both Russia and Georgia who believe the two countries must find a way to deescalate tensions and militant rhetoric. If this happens, it is not at all unimaginable that Russia could cede all or part of Abkhazia back to Georgia. This would also, of course, be a valuable bargaining chip for Russia in the West.

Still, in the current political climate, all Georgian strategies will prove difficult. There is little interest within Abkhazia to engage with Georgia. Moreover, only Russia has any ability to move Abkhazia toward engagement, and Russia is strongly disinclined to push Abkhazia toward talks. Having isolated Abkhazia for nearly two decades in support of Georgia's territorial integrity, the EU and the United States have no leverage over the leadership in Sukhumi. So while it is too early to give up on the Georgian strategy, it faces potentially insurmountable challenges.

Sovereign Dreams

Russia will not let Georgia reassert sovereignty over Abkhazia. The rest of the world is not likely to recognize Abkhaz independence. The short- and medium-range future for Abkhazia will likely end up somewhere between these poles, but it is not at all clear where. It is certainly possible, and perhaps

likely, that Abkhazia will stumble along in its current situation, asserting its independence and perhaps even winning recognition from a few more countries in Latin America and the Pacific—12 to 16 nations in the next five years, perhaps. All the while, it will remain heavily dependent on Russia.

This, clearly, is the path of least resistance for Abkhazia. But it's one that, if followed, will make any hope of separating from Russia more difficult with each passing month. By seeking new and different arrangements of sovereignty, Abkhazia is drifting into the waiting arms of Russia. The absence of international leverage or even creative thinking about an Abkhaz state (reinforced by near universal support for Tbilisi's position) makes the consideration of more novel sovereign arrangements—such as the transfer to an international administration—quite unlikely.

Now is the time for the West to break with Tbilisi and establish some modest communications and contacts with Sukhumi, while insisting that it will not recognize Abkhaz independence. The West must engage with the breakaway territory, if only to try to halt Abkhazia's absorption into Russia and buy some time for an internationally backed status to be formulated. If this is not a result which the United States and the EU can accept, then it's essential that Western diplomats adopt a new strategy of engagement, while continuing to refuse to recognize Abkhazia's independence.

Reflections on the Road

The drive from Sukhumi back to the checkpoint follows a slightly different route. There are unexpected road closings, and we travel on empty pavement through the deserted town of Gali. The roads here are littered with garbage and filled with enormous holes and cracks. In some cases they simply end with no warning. Our driver taking us

through this desolate and war-torn moonscape happens to be a member of Abkhazia's substantial Armenian population. At one point he sarcastically asks us if the roads we have in the United States are this bad.

A few miles north of the checkpoint, one of the cracks in the road gets the better of our aging Russian-made Zhiguli and we get a flat. Our driver chooses to forge ahead and we drive the final few miles, jostling back and forth on the rim. When we reach

the checkpoint our driver bids us goodbye and enlists the help of a Russian soldier to help him replace the wheel. It's a good metaphor for Abkhazia, bumping along on just three good wheels, asking Russia for help with its fourth. On some level, just as we figured three wheels were better than walking, the Abkhaz seem aware—even if the West is not yet persuaded—that they have to do the best with what they've got. That it could be worse. ●