

# Abkhazia: The Long Road to Reconciliation

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## *Executive Summary*

Georgia's peaceful change of government in 2012 stoked optimism about reducing the open hostility with Russia and Abkhazia since the 2008 war. Though swift agreement on larger questions – like Abkhazia's status or the return of Georgian internally displaced persons (IDPs) – is highly unlikely, the three sets of authorities at least share a common interest to cooperate in incremental confidence-building measures. For the immediate future, therefore, it would be beneficial for all sides to concentrate on achievable goals, including an intensified dialogue on basic security-related and humanitarian issues.

Russia wields effective control over Abkhazia because of its huge financial support and large military presence, so any major progress on resolving the twenty-year conflict thus requires a similar breakthrough between Tbilisi and Moscow, who have no diplomatic relations. Since becoming the head of Georgia's government in October 2012, Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili has made improved ties with Moscow a priority. Progress toward the partial lifting – for wines and mineral waters – of Russia's seven-year embargo on Georgian produce is a first concrete outcome of his efforts. But the new government increasingly emphasises that without a change in Moscow's positions, Russia remains “a threat” and Georgia's military must be kept on alert.

Some clear areas of discord exist between the Abkhaz and Russians as well. Russia would like more opportunities for its citizens to buy property and invest in the development of tourist infrastructure but has faced legal obstacles and public discontent. Relations between the Orthodox Church in Moscow and Sukhumi, the capital of Abkhazia, are strained. Disputes over territory and a new road to the North Caucasus demonstrate the Abkhaz leadership's unwillingness to hand over all authority. With Russian funding for a massive socio-economic program apparently held up, Abkhazia's 2013 budget may be only half what it was in 2012.

Nevertheless, officially at least, the Abkhaz have so far reacted coolly to Georgian overtures, including for resumption of direct talks, even though the new government in Tbilisi includes several ministers with track records of constructive ties with them. In the last few months, Georgia's new government ended support for armed groups operating in Abkhazia's Gali district and started to modify legislation and practice related to its “law on occupied territories”, which placed largely symbolic limits on the free movement of goods and people in and out of Abkhazia. Unlike the previous government, it has focused more on offering ways to engage with the Abkhaz, rather than largely rhetorical declarations of its official sovereignty over the entity.

Despite the seeming intractability of political questions, taking up any chance to enhance security in the region would be positive for all sides. In recent months, there has been a marked decrease in violence in the Gali district, but the area, with Russian troops guarding the administrative boundary line (ABL) dividing Georgian and Abkhaz-held territory, still inspires much distrust and sense of insecurity. The local population has limits on its free movement and other basic rights. Moscow has also made claims about alleged radical Islamist activities in the entity and about plots to launch attacks against the Sochi “[Winter] Olympic Zone” just 4km from Abkhazia. Abkhaz leaders themselves speak of threats posed by the possible growth of Islamist radicalism.

A beneficial step would be the immediate resumption of the Gali Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM) meetings and joint fact-finding missions that the Abkhaz are boycotting. Efforts should focus on a joint statement on the non-use of force, as proposed by the co-chairs of the Geneva International Discussions: the UN, Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and EU. Concentrating on broader security threats, like stability in Gali and perceived terrorism risks, Georgia could also show good-will by suspending its annual efforts to secure resolutions at the UN General Assembly on the right of Georgian IDPs to return to their homes. Abkhaz officials, who have protested the resolutions, could reciprocate by committing to start a real dialogue with the Georgians on IDP issues, including the return of their properties in Abkhazia and/or compensation.

Georgian officials have shown a willingness to be more flexible on humanitarian issues, such as removing legal or bureaucratic hurdles for residents of Abkhazia to obtain visas, especially to study abroad. The Abkhaz could respond by lifting barriers to mother tongue education for ethnic Georgians still living in the entity and increasing their presence in local administrative structures. All sides would benefit by seeking creative ways to facilitate trade and travel across the ABL for family visits, and trade, health or education purposes.

The international community, particularly the EU, should remain engaged in Abkhazia, seeking ways to increase the entity's access and exposure to information and expertise. The Abkhaz have over the past several months become more critical of the work of the EU, Western states and international NGOs, suspending some activities. Sukhumi claims that this work is insignificant compared to Russian support and is disorganised, piecemeal and too focused on post-war emergency needs even though the situation has largely stabilised. Yet, it would not help Abkhazia's cause to restrict its access to the outside world to its road to Russia.

Russia's lack of implementation of the EU-brokered 2008 ceasefire agreement and the fate of Georgian IDPs prevented from returning to Abkhazia remain core issues of fundamental importance. However, this report concentrates on recent developments, and offers ways to establish some common ground that would benefit all sides. A subsequent separate report will deal with South Ossetia, which due to its much smaller size, idiosyncratic conflict history and extreme physical isolation deserves separate analysis.

## *Recommendations*

*To improve the security environment*

### **To all participants – Georgian, Russian and Abkhaz – in the Geneva International Discussions:**

1. Agree to a draft statement at the Geneva International Discussions on the non-use of force.
2. Resume participation in the Gali Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM), at an expert level initially if that is the most suitable, and in its joint fact-finding missions when violent incidents occur.

*To better provide for IDPs*

### **To the Georgian Government:**

3. Suspend efforts to secure annual UN General Assembly resolutions on IDPs.

### **To the Abkhaz authorities:**

4. Re-engage fully in Working Group II of the Geneva International Discussions and seriously engage in a good-faith discussion of mechanisms to begin addressing property return and compensation for IDPs and refugees

*To improve conditions for other persons affected by the conflict*

### **To the Georgian, Russian and Abkhaz authorities:**

5. Guarantee freedom of movement for goods and people across the ABL, open new crossing points and remove bureaucratic impediments to movement.
6. The Abkhaz authorities should lift legal and practical obstacles to Georgian language education in the ethnic Georgian Gali region, and take steps to include local Georgians in administrative, government and police structures.
7. Georgia should continue to modify legislation and practices related to its “law on occupied territories” that limit free movement of goods and people in and out of Abkhazia; and encourage its international partners to facilitate the issuing of visas especially, but not only, for residents of Abkhazia wishing to study abroad.
8. Russia should fully implement the ceasefire agreements and strictly control all transfers from its federal budget to limit corruption

*To improve Abkhazia’s external access and exposure*

### **To the international community, in particular the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the European Union (EU):**

9. Offer to strengthen the very limited international presence in Abkhazia; for example, the EU should offer to expand its police liaison activities; open an EU information point in Sukhumi; and begin implementing its new assistance program focusing on health, education and improving local livelihoods, while the Abkhaz

authorities should not rebuff these efforts and others that increase access and exposure to foreign expertise.

10. Conduct a comprehensive study on the feasibility of redeveloping regional economic and transportation corridors, including rail, road and sea transport, between Abkhazia, Georgia and other regional hubs.

**Tbilisi/Sukhumi/Moscow/Istanbul/Brussels, 10 April 2013**

# Abkhazia: The Long Road to Reconciliation

## I. Introduction

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2013 marks five years since the Georgia-Russia war and Moscow's recognition of Abkhazia as an independent state. Though the de facto Abkhaz authorities and Russia declared that recognition essentially settled the conflict, in fact it further entrenched the deadlock.<sup>1</sup> Abkhazia, as a local official put it, remains "in a grey zone", with Russia its only ally.<sup>2</sup> Russia says there is no chance it will rescind its recognition or reconsider its troop presence in the highly strategic South Caucasus. The Abkhaz officially say the only major issue left to be decided is how Tbilisi will acknowledge their sovereignty. Georgia rules that out and has won diplomatic victories in the form of declarations by governments and international bodies describing the Russian military presence as an illegal occupation.<sup>3</sup> However, Tbilisi has received little tangible support to reverse that presence.

The Abkhaz were euphoric when Russia recognised the entity in 2008. They hoped, unrealistically, to replicate the success of Kosovo, which has been recognised by more than 90 countries. Kosovo's history and demographic situation has little in common with Abkhazia's however.<sup>4</sup> Its unilateral declaration of independence in February 2008 was the outcome of a long, internationally-supervised process and based on a framework devised by UN Special Envoy Martti Ahtisaari that set in place its internal structure and statehood. Even with such sustained international engagement, recognitions of Kosovo's independence have come relatively slowly, and the country faces a range of obstacles in affirming its sovereignty.<sup>5</sup>

In the Abkhaz case, Russia's non-fulfilment of the 2008 ceasefire, signed by then-President Medvedev and then-French President Sarkozy at a time when Paris held the EU Presidency, as well as the refusal of the Abkhaz to discuss the fate of ethnic Georgian IDPs from the region, pose strong obstacles to any consideration of recognition by most states.<sup>6</sup> Initially, Russian diplomats worked to secure more significant

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<sup>1</sup> The Abkhaz authorities, officials and government are "de facto" due to the entity's unrecognised international status. That to avoid redundancy and heavy phrasing this report does not preface those nouns with the qualifier in all instances has no substantive implication.

<sup>2</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Abkhaz official, Sukhumi, January 2013.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, "Resolution on the situation in Georgia", Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) Parliamentary Assembly, 9 July 2012; also, press conference by José Manuel Barroso, European Commission president, and Mikheil Saakashvili, Georgia president, Brussels, 17 November 2010. The U.S. Senate unanimously adopted a resolution labelling the Russian presence an "occupation" and referring to "... ongoing violations of the territorial integrity and sovereignty of Georgia and the importance of a peaceful and just resolution to the conflict within Georgia's internationally recognised borders", S.RES.175, 29 July 2011.

<sup>4</sup> See Crisis Group Europe Reports N°193, *Georgia and Russia: Clashing Over Abkhazia*, 5 June 2008, p. 15; and N°195, *Russia vs Georgia: The Fallout*, 22 August 2008, p. 8 on the effect of Kosovo's unilateral declaration of independence on Russia's attitude to Abkhazia.

<sup>5</sup> On Kosovo see Crisis Group Europe Reports N°218, *Setting Kosovo Free: Remaining Challenges*, 10 September 2012; and N°223, *Serbia and Kosovo: the Path to Normalisation*, 19 February 2013.

<sup>6</sup> The 2008 agreement obliges Russia to reduce troop levels to those mandated before 8 August 2008 and withdraw from previously unoccupied areas. Crisis Group Report, *Russia vs Georgia*, op. cit., p. 37.

recognitions, and the Abkhaz sent a few emissaries abroad for the same purpose. Five years on, Moscow's and Sukhumi's efforts have quieted, and it is highly unlikely that Abkhazia will be recognised by any large states in the near future.<sup>7</sup>

This status quo is deeply costly on several fronts. It perpetuates the cut-off of Georgia-Russia relations; Tbilisi rules out restoring ties until Moscow removes its "embassies" in Abkhazia (and South Ossetia). Russia's non-compliance with the terms of the 2008 EU-brokered ceasefire has also strained ties with some Western countries, which do not subscribe to the contention that it is not "a party to the conflict".

The election in October 2012 of a new government in Georgia led by Bidzina Ivanishvili and his Georgian Dream (GD) coalition immediately raised hopes that unfreezing of the Georgia-Abkhaz relationship was possible. During the summer of 2012, Vyacheslav Chirikba, Abkhazia's foreign representative, declared Sukhumi was "open for dialogue" if a more pragmatic leadership came to power in Tbilisi, explicitly naming Ivanishvili and new Defence Minister Irakli Alasania.<sup>8</sup> In addition to Alasania, members of Ivanishvili's government who have established good working relations with the Abkhaz over the past two decades include State Minister Paata Zakareishvili and Culture Minister Guram Odisharia (an IDP from Abkhazia).<sup>9</sup> Their appointments were seen as signalling a more conciliatory approach.

Nonetheless, a quick breakthrough on key issues of Abkhazia's status and the fate of Georgian IDPs is unlikely without a serious improvement in Russian-Georgian relations, including the reestablishment of diplomatic ties, given Abkhazia's dependence on Russia. This report consequently examines whether there is a realistic chance to improve trust and mutual security for all concerned by focusing for now on incremental confidence-building measures.

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<sup>7</sup> Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua and three Pacific-island nations (Nauru, Tuvalu and Vanuatu) recognise Abkhazia.

<sup>8</sup> "We need to have a more pragmatic interlocutor like, for example, [the leader of Our Georgia-Free Democrats Irakli] Alasania or oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili .... Ivanishvili is a businessman and, perhaps, pragmatic enough to understand what kind of solution would be beneficial for everyone. We are open for dialogue". "Abkhaz fm says wants to see pragmatic leadership in Tbilisi", *Civil.ge*, 25 June 2012. Alasania earned his credentials as a key mediator in Georgian-Abkhaz relations while chairman of the Tbilisi-based Abkhaz government-in-exile, as a presidential aide in the Georgian-Abkhaz peace talks and as Georgian ambassador to the UN. He was instrumental in resuming the Georgian-Abkhaz Coordination Council before the 2008 conflict.

<sup>9</sup> Zakareishvili is state minister for reintegration. A decree to change the ministry's name to the reconciliation and civil cooperation ministry awaits President Saakashvili's signature; if he does not sign, it will probably come into effect after his term ends in October. Crisis Group interview, Georgian minister, Tbilisi, November 2012. Zakareishvili, a veteran politician and civil society activist, negotiated prisoner exchanges with the Abkhaz as head of the Commission for the Protection of Civilians in the Conflict Zone, Missing Persons and Prisoners of War (1992-1997). Since the mid-1990s, he has also been involved in many Georgian-Abkhaz civil society dialogue initiatives.



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## II. Political Realities in Abkhazia

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In 2011 Alexandr Ankvab was elected president of Abkhazia. This was perceived partially as a reaction to local concerns about the overwhelming influence the late president Sergei Bagapsh had allowed Russia to amass in the entity. Ankvab nonetheless declares full loyalty to Russian President Vladimir Putin and is perceived as a no-nonsense, law-and-order leader. He rose through the ranks of the Georgian Communist Party and served as a senior interior ministry official in Tbilisi during the 1980s.<sup>10</sup> He has survived at least five assassination attempts since the early 2000s, most ascribed to his uncompromising attempts to crack down on corruption and scheming between political clans for economic control.

Ankvab strongly shares the ethnic Abkhaz fierce commitment to independence for the 8,700 sq km territory, slightly smaller than Cyprus.<sup>11</sup> The ethnic Abkhaz make up no more than half, and possibly less, of the “official” population of close to 241,000.<sup>12</sup> Whatever their actual numbers, they are still much more than the 18 per cent they were before the 1992-1993 war with Georgia, when most of the 240,000 ethnic Georgians were driven out.

### A. Russia’s Military Presence

The 2008 war with Georgia allowed Russia to greatly enhance its already considerable military presence.<sup>13</sup> Russian officials say there are roughly 5,000 Russian personnel in Abkhazia: 3,500 military and 1,500 Federal Security Service (FSB) officers and “border guards”.<sup>14</sup> Moscow allocated \$465 million over four years to the rehabilitation and construction of military infrastructure.<sup>15</sup> This included work on Bombora, the

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<sup>10</sup> Ankvab was born in 1953 in Sukhumi and worked his way up the Soviet Communist Party hierarchy. He worked in Tbilisi from 1981 to 1990, first in the Georgian Communist Party, later in Soviet Georgia’s interior ministry. He was Abkhaz interior minister during the 1992-1993 war with Georgia, then moved to Moscow and became a successful businessman. He returned to Abkhazia and was elected Bagapsh’s vice president in 2004 and 2008.

<sup>11</sup> A recent study found that 79 per cent of ethnic Abkhaz support independence and 19 per cent union with Russia, while 44 per cent of ethnic Armenians support an independent Abkhazia, 48 per cent union with Russia. Local Russians, a smaller minority, support independence over joining Russia by 58 per cent to 38 per cent. John O’Loughlin, Vladimir Kolossov, and Gerard Toal, “Inside Abkhazia: Survey of Attitudes in a De Facto State”, *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2011), pp. 1-36.

<sup>12</sup> A 2011 census put Abkhazia’s population at 240,705, including 122,069 ethnic Abkhaz (50.71 per cent); ethnic Georgians/Megrelians 46,367 (19.26 per cent; ethnic Armenians 41,864 (17.39 per cent); and ethnic Russians 9.17 per cent, Apsnypress, 29 December 2011. Of the 46,367 Georgians and Megrelians, 3,201 (1.33 per cent) described themselves as Megrelian, a Georgian ethnos. The vast majority of Georgians (30,437) live in the Gali region, along the ABL separating Abkhaz-from Georgian-controlled territory. The number of ethnic Abkhaz may be inflated, as it is a disproportionately high increase since the 2003 census, which reported 94,606 Abkhaz. For more details, see “A First Look at Abkhazia’s Census Results”, Taklama.com, 29 December 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Russia’s assets in Abkhazia were part of Russia’s North Caucasus Military District, which was folded into the Southern Military District (SMD) in 2010; see <http://structure.mil.ru/structure/okruga/south/news.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> Crisis Group interviews, senior Russian diplomat, February 2013. The diplomat noted that troop numbers may fluctuate due to rotational variations. Foreign military experts estimate that the Russian military infrastructure in Abkhazia could support up to 10,000 troops. Crisis Group interview, EU member-state military attaché, Tbilisi, December 2012.

<sup>15</sup> “Россия завершила развертывание военных баз в Абхазии и Южной Осетии” [“Russia completes deployment of military bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia”], [www.kavkaz-uzel.ru](http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru), 18 July 2009.

largest military airfield in the South Caucasus, in Gudauta.<sup>16</sup> Though Russian media sources describe significant weapons at the base, Western military officials in late 2012 said intelligence indicated only four fighter craft there on a regular basis – two Sukhoi 27s and two MiG-29s.<sup>17</sup>

The Russians also refurbished a smaller, though strategically and symbolically important naval port in Ochamchire, just 30km from Georgian-controlled territory. Eight Russian “border patrol” boats are reportedly there – including two new craft that arrived in 2012. According to FSB officials, they likewise set up several radar stations along the coast to cover Abkhazia’s “territorial waters” and monitor areas under Georgian naval control.<sup>18</sup>

There are clear signs Moscow plans to stay in Abkhazia indefinitely. Not far from the centre of Sukhumi are several recently completed, well-built twelve-storey apartment buildings for Russian officers serving in the entity. They are a stark contrast to aging Soviet-era apartment blocks nearby, several still burned out or with bullet-pocked exteriors left over from the Georgian-Abkhaz war two decades ago.<sup>19</sup>

Russia has also erected several sparkling new compounds – military-function bases as well as new apartments for troops – in the ethnic Georgian Gali district, in some cases just a kilometre from the administrative boundary. About 2km from the centre of Gali town, a new, upscale-looking ten-storey residential compound for Russian military personnel and their families has gone up. It towers over a neighbourhood of mostly rundown Georgian-style houses, with their typical large gardens, wandering cows and mandarin orange groves. Many were long ago abandoned by fleeing Georgian IDPs and subsequently looted or torched.<sup>20</sup> A five-metre-high cement security wall topped with thick rolls of razor wire and several dozen security cameras surrounds

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“Российские военные завершили строительство военного городка” [“Russian military completes building of military settlement”], [www.yuga.ru](http://www.yuga.ru), 27 August 2012.

<sup>16</sup> For more on the Russian military presence, see Crisis Group Europe Report N°202, *Abkhazia: Deepening Dependence*, 26 February 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Moscow agreed to close Bombora in 1999 under an OSCE-brokered agreement with Georgia, but never did so. Bombora has a 4km runway ending less than 100 metres from the sea, allowing aircraft to take off at altitudes too low to be detected by radar. As of early 2011, a Russian military analysis database said it included S-300 surface-to-air missile systems, “Tunguska” surface-to-air gun/missile systems, GRAD multiple rocket launchers, 41 T-90 advanced tanks, anti-tank guns and missiles, field artillery and armoured personnel carriers. “7th Military Base, Gudauta, South”, [Warfare.ru](http://Warfare.ru). “Безопасность на Большом Кавказа, Досье военного эксперта Анатолия Цыганка” [“Security in the Greater Caucasus: a dossier by the war expert Anatoliya Tsyganka”], [polit.ru](http://polit.ru), 11 January 2011. Crisis Group interviews, NATO member-state military attaché, Tbilisi, January, 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Western military officials, January 2013. The Abkhaz state information agency said two additional craft brought the total number there to eight. “В Очамчирский порт прибыли два пограничных сторожевых корабля” [“Two border patrol boats docked in Ochamchira”], [Apsnypress](http://Apsnypress), 12 July 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Crisis Group observations, Sukhumi, February 2013.

<sup>20</sup> Official Georgian and UN High Commissioner for Refugee (UNHCR) statistics list over 200,000 IDPs from Abkhazia, including approximately 160,000 from areas outside Gali. Abkhaz estimate that there are 140,000 Georgian refugees. See Crisis Group Report, *Abkhazia: Deepening Dependence*, op. cit. 45,000 may have spontaneously returned or be in the process of returning to Gali, the sole region to which Georgians have been allowed to return freely. “Status of internally displaced persons and refugees from Abkhazia, Georgia, and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, Georgia, Report of the Secretary-General”, UN General Assembly A/66/813, 22 May 2012.

the Russian complex, inside which there is a brand new Russian Orthodox chapel with a gleaming gold cupola.<sup>21</sup>

“We were surprised by the thickness and depth of the concrete foundations they laid for these buildings, as if they were meant to withstand an atom bomb blast”, said a Gali local, adding that “it’s obvious the Russians plan to stay here for eternity”.<sup>22</sup> Further reinforcing the sense of permanence, Russian officers and their families are eligible for Abkhaz citizenship upon completion of service there, as well as the right to retain their state-provided apartments.<sup>23</sup> They are the only group allowed dual citizenship under Abkhaz laws.<sup>24</sup>

The thousands of Russian troops tend to keep a low profile in major towns. In the course of a week’s visit to Abkhazia and hundreds of kilometres of travel, Crisis Group encountered only a few Russian “border guards” at the administrative border line (ABL) and a lone military cargo truck. Some locals said this may be a deliberate strategy, probably designed to minimise incidents or creation of an “occupation atmosphere”.<sup>25</sup> At the same time, given its control over Abkhazia’s “borders”, roads and sea, Russia need not maintain a heavy permanent presence, as it can move military equipment and troops into and out of the entity at will.

The exception is the heavy Russian military and FSB border guard presence along the ABL, on the edge of the Gali district. After several years of work along rugged, swampy or otherwise difficult terrain, they have “demarcated” what in Soviet times was merely an unmanned administrative line and sealed off the boundary with concertina wire and trenches. Abkhaz officials justify this by alleging that armed Georgians in recent years had regularly infiltrated into the Gali district to kill or attack local officials. The area is also known for petty shakedowns of local citrus or nut farmers or small-time traders, as well as robberies and turf wars between rival armed gangs of mixed ethnicity.<sup>26</sup>

In a further show that Moscow is in control, Russian border guards in September 2012 began manning the lone open checkpoint over the Inguri River, which until then was controlled by Abkhaz guards.<sup>27</sup> This was a symbolic blow to the Abkhaz, whose former leader, Bagapsh, had insisted that Sukhumi would be in formal command of “frontier forces”, with the Russians assisting.<sup>28</sup> Now in booths with darkened win-

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<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group observations, Gali, February 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group interviews, local Gali resident, Gali, February 2013.

<sup>23</sup> This was part of the Russian-Abkhaz military agreement finalised in 2011. It specifies Russia will keep a base in the entity for 49 years, [http://en.rian.ru/military\\_news/20111006/167440872.html](http://en.rian.ru/military_news/20111006/167440872.html).

<sup>24</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Abkhaz officials, Sukhumi, February 2013. Abkhaz law forbids the privatisation of public land. Even Abkhaz residents who own detached homes and use adjacent farming or grazing plots technically own only the dwellings and immediately adjacent land.

<sup>25</sup> Crisis Group interviews, journalists and local residents, Abkhazia, January-February 2013.

<sup>26</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Russian foreign ministry, Moscow, November 2012; officials, civil society experts, NGO workers, Sukhumi and Gali, February 2013. While many of the gangs may have been dominated by ethnic Georgians, some local observers said they did not always discriminate on ethnic grounds and included local Abkhaz or Armenians from nearby districts taking advantage of the security vacuum in Gali and the legal defencelessness of local Georgians in the district.

<sup>27</sup> The 2009 “Agreement between the Republic of Abkhazia and the Russian Federation on joint efforts in the field of protection of the state border of the Republic of Abkhazia” gave Moscow full control over Abkhazia’s “borders” until it is able to establish its own force. Abkhaz officials refer to a “joint border force”. Crisis Group interviews, Abkhaz officials, Sukhumi, February 2013.

<sup>28</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Abkhaz officials, Sukhumi, February 2013. For more, see Section IV.B below.

dows, Russian guards seated behind computer screens check passports and question visitors. During a recent entry by Crisis Group, one Russian and one Abkhaz official manned the booth, with the Russian clearly in charge – though the Russians at the border wear uniforms identical to the Abkhaz, without visible Russian insignia.<sup>29</sup>

Russia has clearly solidified its security presence in Abkhazia over the past five years, flouting the commitments it made in 2008 to pull back its troops to their pre-war locations, claiming that the agreements are no longer valid because of the “new realities” created by diplomatic recognition.<sup>30</sup> But Moscow is apparently not utilising its renovated infrastructure to full capacity. This may be due to a desire to not be seen as an occupying force, but may also be linked to Russian armed forces’ heavy commitment to combating a Salafi-inspired insurgency in the North Caucasus that limits resources available for use in the entity.<sup>31</sup> It is less likely that Russia is doing this to keep the door open to a compromise with Georgia.

### B. *Russian Financial Dependence*

Abkhazia’s government is overwhelmingly dependent on Russia for budget and development funds. Since 2009 Moscow has provided about 1.9 billion roubles per year in direct budgetary support (\$61-\$67 million, depending on exchange fluctuations). In 2012, this amounted to 22 per cent of the official 8.6 billion rouble (\$287 million) budget.<sup>32</sup> But taking into account that Moscow allocated another 4.9 billion roubles (\$163 million) that year as part of a “comprehensive aid plan” for infrastructure development, the actual subsidy for Abkhazia’s budget is at least 70 per cent.<sup>33</sup> In addition, Moscow also hands out an estimated two billion roubles (\$70 million) in pension payments for Abkhaz residents, most with Russian passports.<sup>34</sup>

The “[c]omprehensive aid plan for the socio-economic development of Abkhazia” is by far the biggest source of Russian funds – but also opaque and controversial. Under it, Moscow originally earmarked eleven billion roubles (\$350 million) for in-

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<sup>29</sup> Until 2010, Abkhaz border guards patrolled the porous ABL. They were often accused of accepting bribes to allow passage to people (mostly Georgians in the Gali region) crossing into Georgian-controlled territory. Crisis Group observations, Gali and Zugdidi, June and December 2012, February 2013. Crisis Group interviews, Tbilisi, January 2013.

<sup>30</sup> “Чуркин: Запад предпочел яд лекарству” [“Churkin: West preferred poison over medicine”], Russian NTV television network, 16 June 2009.

<sup>31</sup> For more on military in the North Caucasus, see Crisis Group, Europe Report N°221, *The North Caucasus: The Challenges of Integration (II), Islam, the Insurgency and Counter Insurgency*, 19 October 2012, p. 21.

<sup>32</sup> Abkhazia’s official state budget for 2011 was 8.8 billion Russian roubles (\$294 million). Of this, 22 per cent (1.9 billion roubles, about \$63 million) was direct budget support from Russia; 49 per cent (\$144 million) came from the Russian-funded infrastructure development program. Abkhazia’s own budget revenues were about 28 per cent. “Кабинет Министров РА утвердил отчет об исполнении Государственного бюджета Республики Абхазия за 2011 год” [“Abkhazia’s cabinet ministers confirm reports of the use of the State Budget of the Republic of Abkhazia for 2011”], Apsnypress, 8 March 2012. For a full breakdown, see “Parliament adopts law on state budget of Abkhazia for 2012”, Apsnypress, 26 December 2012.

<sup>33</sup> “Parliament adopts law on state budget of Abkhazia for 2012”, Apsnypress, 26 December 2012.

<sup>34</sup> Abkhaz officials estimate at least 80 per cent of the population have Russian passports, with the exceptions largely limited to the very young or ethnic Georgians. Crisis Group interviews, Sukhumi, February 2013. The Abkhaz authorities distribute their own pensions, but these amount to just 500 roubles a month (\$17). Minimal Russian pensions are at least four times higher. Crisis Group interviews, Sukhumi-Gali, February 2013.

infrastructure projects in 2010-2012, including the rebuilding of roads, schools, government buildings and agriculture. Though many residents of Abkhazia say living standards have risen as Russian money has come in,<sup>35</sup> some critics complain of a dependency syndrome, and both Abkhaz and Russian officials have alleged the funds have fuelled corruption.<sup>36</sup> An opposition figure known for harsh opposition to the present Abkhaz leadership lamented: “Abkhazia’s economy is like a drug addict on Russian help. We want real help to support our economic development, not ‘façade’ assistance”.<sup>37</sup>

An independent Abkhaz parliamentarian said the Russian money would be better spent on promoting business development and skills. He argued: “We cannot feed people by building houses of culture and stadiums”, adding that Abkhazia needed to formulate its own comprehensive economic development plan, and that:

It’s an embarrassment that we’re paying guest workers 30,000 roubles a month [\$1,000] to pick up garbage. We don’t have Abkhaz who know how to or want to, for instance, work with plaster, do masonry. They don’t have the skills. We need to develop our workforce, our capabilities, and our business skills”.<sup>38</sup>

Longstanding plans had called for tripling Russian infrastructure financing to Abkhazia during 2013-2015, to 30 billion roubles (\$1 billion).<sup>39</sup> But so far, Abkhaz officials would only say, the matter is “in the discussion stage”, and the final amount is uncertain.<sup>40</sup> In December 2012, upon returning from Moscow, the de facto prime minister said to expect no agreement before the second half of 2013.<sup>41</sup>

There has been no official explanation as to what is causing the delay, though disputes between the Abkhaz and Russians – especially over Sukhumi’s refusal to allow Russian companies to buy real estate in the entity – and corruption could be key reasons.<sup>42</sup> A Russian audit chamber official said that only 53 per cent (5.8 billion roubles, \$190 million), earmarked in 2010-2012 for the “comprehensive aid program” were actually spent. The audit chamber cited “shortages in planning, breaching of work schedules of contractors, [and] the lack of appropriate control on the part of the customer”. It also blamed “... the absence of a competitive system of choosing

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<sup>35</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Abkhazia, January-February 2013.

<sup>36</sup> As a local journalist remarked, “in the 1990s and 2000s we were happy to receive a couple of million roubles from Russia; now we think it would have been better if they would have given much less to let us develop ourselves”. Crisis Group interviews, Sukhumi, May, June 2012. “Коррупция имела место в восстановлении Южной Осетии и Абхазии – Кремль” [“Kremlin: Corruption reported in the use of aid funds for South Ossetia and Abkhazia”], Ria Novosti, 9 December 2012.

<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group interview, opposition politician, Sukhumi, June 2013.

<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group interview, independent Abkhaz parliamentarian, February 2013.

<sup>39</sup> Crisis Group interview, Russian diplomat, Sukhumi, February 2013. The diplomat said the details of the assistance were still being worked out. A formal “Russian-Abkhaz Commission for Socio-economic Relations” is technically responsible for the investment program.

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Abkhaz officials, Sukhumi, February 2013.

<sup>41</sup> “The final adjustments to the parameters of Russian aid will be included in the budget after the commission’s approval”, Apsnypress, 18 December 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group interviews, political observers, analysts, Sukhumi, Moscow, Tbilisi, February-March 2013.

contractors and suppliers ...”, noting an instance of 107 million roubles (about \$3.5 million) spent to procure “useless” water main pipes in the town of Gagra.<sup>43</sup>

A big reduction in Russian support would have profound political and social consequences. Abkhaz leaders have never made any secret that their level of real independence is circumscribed by their reliance on Moscow, sometimes using terms like “limited sovereignty”, or “asymmetrical independence”.<sup>44</sup>

Abkhaz leader Ankvab faced relatively large street protests of up to 2,000 people in February, after the entity’s government called for doubling electricity tariffs, from 30 kopecks (\$.01) per kilowatt hour to 60 kopecks (\$.02) and raising state-subsidised bread prices. Ankvab backed down, limiting increases to 40 kopecks per kilowatt hour in 2013, or no more than 15-20 per cent annually.<sup>45</sup> Tellingly, just days after the uproar and Russian complaints about the misuse of aid, Ankvab again visited Moscow to meet with President Putin, though few specifics were disclosed.<sup>46</sup>

### C. *Property and Other Disputes*

Even though Abkhazia is highly dependent on Russia, clear areas of discord exist. One concerns property and investment. Abkhazia’s laws prohibit the private ownership of land, at least partially because the mountainous entity has little that is habitable and fears privatisation would quickly result in it being overrun by wealthy Russians. As an Abkhaz politician said, “two oligarchs can buy the whole of Abkhazia”.<sup>47</sup> In part also due to a prohibition against “dual citizenship” and ownership by non-Abkhaz “citizens” of apartments or homes, the lack of commercial Russian investment, aside from three petrol stations belonging to a Russian supplier and a few smaller projects, is striking five years after recognition.<sup>48</sup>

There are no Russian banks, almost all but large transactions are in cash, with receipts only occasionally provided (credit and debit cards are not accepted), and there were no functioning ATMs when Crisis Group visited in February 2013. The government has no exact data on overall foreign investment; a minister was able to give only a “rough estimate” that it grew from 1.5 billion roubles (\$50 million) in 2010 to 2.5 billion roubles (\$80 million) in 2012.<sup>49</sup>

Russian state and commercial entities wanting to build luxury resorts along the Black Sea coast have also faced obstacles. In 2009, the Russian defence ministry signed a 49-year lease for four resorts it owned during Soviet times as part of its “united military base” agreement with the Abkhaz.<sup>50</sup> But the Abkhaz resisted Russian plans

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<sup>43</sup> An auditor of the Russian Audit Chamber, Sergey Ryabukhin, quoted by Interfax, Moscow (in Russian), 11 March 2013. Numerous Abkhaz officials told Crisis Group the plan offered eleven billion roubles; this was the first mention of sixteen billion Crisis Group heard.

<sup>44</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *Abkhazia: Deepening Dependence*, op. cit.

<sup>45</sup> “Ankvab visits Moscow”, *The Messenger*, 13 March 2013.

<sup>46</sup> “Meeting with President of Abkhazia Mr Aleksandr Ankvab”, Russian presidency website, <http://eng.kremlin.ru/news/510512>, March 2013.

<sup>47</sup> Crisis Group interview, local Abkhaz politician, Sukhumi, June 2012.

<sup>48</sup> A Russian diplomat noted: “Obviously most serious businesses are not going to invest in Abkhazia without laws protecting private land or allowing foreigners to buy real estate, at the very least”. Crisis Group interview, February 2013.

<sup>49</sup> Crisis Group interview, Abkhaz minister, Sukhumi, February 2013.

<sup>50</sup> “Соглашение между Российской Федерацией и республикой Абхазия об объединенной Российской военной базе на территории Республики Абхазия”, 17 February 2010. [“Agreement on the united military base on the territory of Abkhazia”] “Путин поручил подписать договор с

to build luxury accommodations on the sites, and after a few years of haggling, the defence ministry in effect returned three of the four sites,<sup>51</sup> including the sprawling, twenty-acre Moscow Military District Sanatorium (MVO) along the Sukhumi beachfront, a favourite of the USSR's military elite for decades. Local Abkhaz opposition and small protests led military officials to conclude it was not worth the effort.<sup>52</sup> The complex is technically again Abkhaz property, but without a major investor to undertake sweeping and costly repairs, it is mainly shuttered. A public outcry also derailed a deal to transform three palatial summer residences once used by former top Soviet Communist leaders into "world-class" tourist resorts.<sup>53</sup>

For utterly intrepid individual Russian investors, loopholes apparently exist for "buying" summer homes or apartments.<sup>54</sup> But despite rumours about backdoor deals, most involve deeds registered in the names of Abkhaz locals, requiring a significant level of trust. The few Russian "owners", locals say, generally use them only for short summer visits.<sup>55</sup> Some of the property may have belonged to ethnic Georgians forced to flee in 1992-1993. Some mostly derelict properties are adorned with "for sale" signs with Abkhazia telephone numbers. Occasional ads hawk "Abkhazia vacation homes" in Russian newspapers or on websites, but property rights would be hard if not impossible to defend given Abkhazia's murky legal status.<sup>56</sup>

Russia also objects to its citizens' inability to recover houses or apartments they left behind during or after the 1992-1993 war. In 2010, a Russian newspaper reported that Russian citizens, residing inside and outside Abkhazia, had filed 4,000 claims attempting to restore their property rights.<sup>57</sup> The Russian foreign ministry proposed setting up a joint commission to study the issue; the Abkhaz said many of the claims were actually by former ethnic Georgian residents who later obtained Russian citizenship (Russian officials disagreed with the characterisation) and that they would not consider them.<sup>58</sup> Ultimately, the Abkhaz set up a consultative body to address

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Абхазией о передаче РФ ряда объектов" ["Putin ordered to sign an agreement with Abkhazia on the delivery of number of objects"], RIA Novosti, 5 October 2010. The full text of the agreement is available here: <http://open.lexpro.ru/document/20909343#222>.

<sup>51</sup> Anton Kriveniuk, "Сухум: Молчание ягнят" ["Sukhum: Silence of the lamb"], *Caucasus Times*, 15 July 2011, and interview with President Alexandr Ankvab, Apsnypress, 19 July 2012. Two of the potentially more prestigious sanatoriums previously reserved for the Soviet cultural elite – one in Gagra, one in Pitsunda – remained in Russian-state control. Crisis Group interviews, Abkhaz officials, Sukhumi, February 2013.

<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group interview, Russian official, February 2013.

<sup>53</sup> Crisis Group interviews and observations, Sukhumi, June 2012, February 2013. The homes once hosted Nikita Khrushchev, Stalin's secret police chief, Lavrenty Beria, and Mikhail Gorbachev.

<sup>54</sup> Aleksey Ovchinnikov, "Russians buy beachside homes in Abkhazia", *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 17 October 2010.

<sup>55</sup> Crisis Group interviews and observations, Sukhumi, Gudauta and other towns, January-February, 2013.

<sup>56</sup> Being a veteran of the Abkhaz-Georgian war or belonging to the right "clan" tends to bestow more rights than any legal arrangement. "Абхазия обрела независимость, русские ей больше не нужны" ["Abkhazia has its independence, it no longer needs Russians"], *Moskovskij Komso-molets*, 4 February 2010. Crisis Group interviews, Sukhumi, June 2012.

<sup>57</sup> The article estimated that about half the properties on Abkhazia's real estate market were "trophy" homes of former ethnic Georgians forced to flee. Aleksey Ovchinnikov, "Russians buy beachside homes in Abkhazia", *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 17 October 2010. But Abkhaz officials told Crisis Group they knew of no source for the 4,000 figure and doubted its accuracy. Crisis Group interviews, Sukhumi, June 2012.

<sup>58</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Sukhumi and Moscow, June and November 2012.

Russian claims that by April 2012 numbered 188, but it ruled that just twenty were valid.<sup>59</sup> Of those, only eleven property restitutions are known to have been ordered.

The Russian government is currently constructing a multi-storey apartment building in Sukhumi, ostensibly for the benefit of those whose claims are judged legitimate by the Abkhaz commission.<sup>60</sup> Crisis Group made several personal and telephone requests with Abkhaz officials for more information about the current number of restitution cases and their results but received no answers.<sup>61</sup>

Another disagreement concerns delimitation of the “Abkhaz-Russian border”. The Russians initially claimed a 160 sq km chunk of territory, but that was dropped, and the dispute now involves the tiny mountain village of Aibga – population 30 – close to the resort of Krasnaya Polyana, a key venue for the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics.<sup>62</sup>

A further sticking point involves ambitious Russian plans to build a road through the high elevations of the Caucasus range, linking Abkhazia directly to Russia’s North Caucasus region. Russia’s President Putin publicly supported the project, but Ankvab opposed it, citing environmental concerns. Political observers in Abkhazia say the key reason was fear the link could leave the entity even more exposed to the unstable North Caucasus and hasten a spread of the region’s radical Salafi-inspired insurgency. There are also claims Moscow insisted that only Russian construction firms would be involved in the lucrative project that has been dropped for now.<sup>63</sup>

Perhaps the most emotional issue involves the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC). Despite Moscow’s political recognition of Abkhazia, the ROC maintains warm ties with the Georgian Orthodox Church (GOC) and adheres to the GOC’s canonical jurisdiction over the entity. In 2000, a group of ethnic Abkhaz Christian priests and faithful declared the establishment of an autocephalous “Abkhaz Orthodox Church” (AOC), but, it has not been recognised by the Russian Church. An Abkhaz clearly expressed the frustration of many when he told Crisis Group: “We cannot understand how the ROC won’t recognise our church, while at the same time the Russian state has recognised Abkhazia”.<sup>64</sup> Abkhaz Christians also split into rival factions – one perceived by detractors as secretly loyal to the ROC and GOC, and another seeking full recognition by the Patriarchate in Istanbul (impossible given the ROC’s objections).

The dispute in 2011 reached the walls of the impressive Novy Afon monastery, perched along cliffs over the Black Sea just north of Sukhumi, when the ROC installed a new cleric to oversee the sprawling complex despite Abkhaz objections.<sup>65</sup> The ROC in principle considers it to be under Georgian Orthodox Church jurisdiction, but as Georgian clerics cannot operate in Abkhazia, the ROC has assumed de facto control

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<sup>59</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Sukhumi, June 2012. See also, Apsnypress, 18 July 2012.

<sup>60</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Abkhaz officials, Sukhumi, February 2013.

<sup>61</sup> Crisis Group interviews, telephone requests, Abkhaz officials, January-March 2013.

<sup>62</sup> The Abkhaz suggest an attempted land-grab by a prominent Russian businessman who alleged the 160 sq km were “true Russian lands” was at the root of the issue. Crisis Group interviews, Russian and Abkhaz officials, Sukhumi, June 2012 and February 2013.

<sup>63</sup> Russian conservation activists argued the road would be illegal, as it would cut through a nature preserve. Ankvab cited this objection, but commentators and political observers in Sukhumi believe he is more worried about spillover from the North Caucasus. Crisis Group interviews, journalists and civil society figures, Sukhumi, February 2013. Another local journalist said the Abkhaz also rejected the idea because Russian officials insisted only Russian firms would do the construction.

<sup>64</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Abkhaz government official, Sukhumi, February 2013.

<sup>65</sup> Olga Allenova, “Зачем церковный народ надо превращать в недумаящее стадо?” [“Why turn church folks into a thoughtless herd?”], *Kommersant*, 20 June 2011. Crisis Group interviews, Abkhaz journalist and officials, February 2013.



of Novy Afon and its surrounding eparchy. As an Abkhaz official put it, “the ROC is renting out Novy Afon from the Georgians”. As a result of their conflict, the ROC barred AOC priests from presiding over religious services at Novy Afon.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Sukhumi, June 2012.

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### III. **Overcoming Obstacles in the Georgia-Russia Standoff and Abkhazia**

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The October 2012 parliamentary elections in Georgia brought a new government, led by Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili, to office, and hope in Tbilisi that relations with Russia and the Abkhaz authorities would quickly improve. Ivanishvili early on declared this a priority and vowed a gradual approach, but during the first six months, efforts have focused more on navigating a challenging cohabitation with his arch rival, Mikheil Saakashvili, who remains president until October 2013.<sup>67</sup>

#### A. *Georgia-Russia Relations*

Ivanishvili appointed Georgia's former ambassador to Moscow, Zurab Abashidze, special representative to Russia. Abashidze met with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Gregory Karasin, Moscow's point man on Georgia, in December 2012 and again in March. While the Georgian authorities downplay hopes of a speedy rapprochement, Abashidze said the first meeting showed that "dialogue is possible".<sup>68</sup> Trade issues, namely the lifting of Russia's ban on Georgian wines, mineral water and agricultural produce – in effect since 2006 and widely accepted as politically motivated – was the first focus of discussion. In March 2013, Russia's food safety agency said that more than 30 Georgian wine and mineral water companies had been cleared to apply for import licences, suggesting that the ban will soon be eased.<sup>69</sup> Allowing all agricultural goods back into the Russian market could boost Georgia's battered agriculture sector, at virtually no political cost to Moscow. As a member since 2012, Russia might soon be required by World Trade Organisation rules to open up anyway.

Easing visa requirements for Georgian citizens has been a topic of discussion, but as yet with no results.<sup>70</sup> Between 500,000 and a million Georgians are estimated to reside permanently or part time in Russia, and Georgia is one of the only ex-Soviet countries whose citizens cannot travel to Russia visa-free.

In parallel to the political talks, in January 2013 the Russian Patriarch, Kirill, and the Georgian Patriarch, Ilya II, met in Moscow, together and with President Putin. Given the church's powerful political influence in both countries, they could become a force for reconciliation, a stated ambition of the Georgian Patriarch.<sup>71</sup>

The attempt to inject some normalcy into Tbilisi-Moscow relations – in the absence of diplomatic ties – entails significant political risks for the Ivanishvili government. Opponents would pounce on a failure to produce tangible economic or political benefits as a sign of weakness in the face of Russian pressure. President Saakashvili and his UNM party have often criticised Ivanishvili's approach as "pro-Russian" and an abandonment of Georgia's NATO and EU aspirations.<sup>72</sup> The political influence of

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<sup>67</sup> For more on the challenges of cohabitation and domestic politics in Georgia, see Crisis Group Europe Briefing N°69, *Georgia: Making Cohabitation Work*, 18 December 2012.

<sup>68</sup> "PM's envoy spells out reasons behind launching direct talks with Russia", *Civil.ge*, 17 December 2012.

<sup>69</sup> "36 winemakers close to resuming exports to Russia", *Civil.ge*, 7 March 2013.

<sup>70</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Georgian, Abkhaz officials, Tbilisi, Sukhumi, January-March 2013.

<sup>71</sup> Crisis Group participated in a meeting organised by the Eurasia Partnership Foundation at which the Georgian Patriarch made these comments, Tbilisi, November 2012.

<sup>72</sup> "Saakashvili, parliamentary minority hound new Georgian government", *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty (RFE/RL)*, 6 March 2013.

Georgian IDPs prevented from returning to Abkhazia has diminished in recent years, but they can still be mobilised to demonstrate discontent.<sup>73</sup>

Ivanishvili's government is also cautious. In March 2013, the Georgian defence minister, Irakli Alasania, on several occasions noted that Russia had not altered its positions regarding Abkhazia and South Ossetia and its military presence there. In an exchange with journalists, he emphasised that despite efforts to improve trade relations and tone down aggressive rhetoric, Russia remained "the enemy" and that Georgia must consequently maintain a high state of military readiness.<sup>74</sup>

### B. *The Geneva International Discussions and Humanitarian Issues*

The new Georgian government has repeatedly stressed that any dialogue with Russia should not undermine the Geneva International Discussions, held regularly since the 2008 war. The talks, chaired by UN, EU and OSCE representatives, with U.S. and Russian presence – Moscow claims it is not a "party to the conflict" – have not produced any major agreements; most of the first 23 sessions (including the most recent, on 26-27 March) have bogged down in terminological sparring.<sup>75</sup> To get around debates about status, the negotiators attend as "experts" rather than "delegations". Nonetheless, the talks remain important for all involved, because they are the only formal channel for the exchange of views.<sup>76</sup>

The Abkhaz have in effect blocked discussion of humanitarian issues – including refugee and IDP issues – in Geneva's "Working Group II", which is supposed to be a forum for such questions.<sup>77</sup> The Abkhaz object to Georgia's successful lobbying for annual UN General Assembly resolutions calling for the return of the IDPs to Abkhazia.<sup>78</sup> An Abkhaz official said, "instead of concentrating on getting meaningless UN resolutions passed, the Georgians should discuss together with us the IDP issue". However, the Abkhaz have never showed real willingness to entertain the prospect of IDP returns, except to the nearly entirely ethnic Georgian Gali region. And the same Abkhaz official admitted that "the refugee [IDP] issue is radioactive, impossible".<sup>79</sup>

To kick-start discussions on IDP issues, Georgia could suspend its yearly efforts for a UN resolution and the Abkhaz could re-engage in Working Group II and enter a serious discussion on property return and compensation (especially in districts near

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<sup>73</sup> IDPs showed discontent with housing arrangements by occupying buildings immediately after the October elections. Crisis Group Briefing, *Georgia: Making Cohabitation Work*, op. cit., p. 8.

<sup>74</sup> "Alasania: Georgia should be on Alert", *Georgia Today*, 21 March 2013. [www.georgiatimes.info/en/news/88172.html](http://www.georgiatimes.info/en/news/88172.html).

<sup>75</sup> For more on the latest discussions, see "Press Communiqué of the Co-Chairs of Geneva Discussions", 27 March 2013, [www.osce.org/cio/100397](http://www.osce.org/cio/100397); and "Twenty Third Round of Geneva International Discussions Concludes", 27 March 2013, [www.unog.ch/unog/website/news\\_media.nsf/\(httpNewsByYear\\_en\)/B4B21A546CAD007EC1257B3B006059B1?OpenDocument](http://www.unog.ch/unog/website/news_media.nsf/(httpNewsByYear_en)/B4B21A546CAD007EC1257B3B006059B1?OpenDocument).

<sup>76</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Georgian foreign ministry and reintegration ministry officials, January-February 2013.

<sup>77</sup> They reportedly send a different representative, with little knowledge of the topic, to each meeting. Working Group I deals with security issues.

<sup>78</sup> Georgia has obtained such resolutions for several years in a row, most recently 2012. "UN General Assembly passes IDP resolution", *Civil.ge*, 4 July 2012.

<sup>79</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Abkhaz minister, Sukhumi, February 2013; Georgian minister, Tbilisi, February 2013.

Gali).<sup>80</sup> While the Abkhaz find any talk of return of ethnic Georgians to areas beyond Gali extremely threatening, they may be willing to consider beginning a dialogue on property issues by setting up, with Russia and international experts, compensation mechanisms like the Turkish Cypriot Property Commission.<sup>81</sup> The possibility of organising visits across the ABL for persons affected by the conflicts has previously been discussed in Working Group II, and concrete steps should be taken.

Another area where progress is possible relates to missing persons. A serious assessment of the fate of people missing since the 1992-1993 war would be constructive. A taskforce sponsored by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has for several years been studying the cases of 200 Abkhaz and 1,700 Georgians missing since the war, but progress has been slow because of logistical hurdles, missing records and the cost of DNA analysis of remains.<sup>82</sup>

### C. *The Non-Use of Force*

Within the context of the Geneva International Discussions, Abkhazia is also demanding that Tbilisi sign a bilateral non-use of force treaty.<sup>83</sup> The Georgians respond that President Saakashvili made a similar legally-binding pledge in his formal, unilateral declaration in 2010 that was sent to the international mediators.<sup>84</sup>

The Abkhaz demand seems to be a tactical manoeuvre, rather than one of substance, intended to secure a bit of additional “recognition”. In December 2012, they also threatened to boycott the Geneva talks unless their delegation was recognised as a formal representative of the Abkhaz side, but quickly and without explanation backed down. A top entity official, asked to name the greatest security threats, made it clear that attack from Georgia was not among them. “The Georgian threat has been taken off the table by the fact the Russians are here”, he said, emphasising that development and the eventual securing of more international legitimacy were priorities.<sup>85</sup>

Reluctant to confer recognition and legitimise Russia’s position that it is not a party to the conflict, Tbilisi has consistently refused to sign such an agreement unless Moscow – at a minimum – makes the same pledge. Moscow meanwhile is unhappy with Georgia’s successful diplomatic campaign over the years to gain acceptance of

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<sup>80</sup> They could begin by discussing properties in the Ochamchire and Gulripsh districts, heavily depopulated by the 1992-1993 war. Many homes of former Georgians are in ruins or the same arson-damaged state twenty years later.

<sup>81</sup> In the absence of a political settlement on the island, Cypriots began to turn to costly, time-consuming judicial solutions to regain rights to lost property. With the encouragement of the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR), Turkish Cypriots set up this domestic remedy. See Crisis Group Europe Report N°210, *Cyprus: Bridging the Property Divide*, 9 December 2010.

<sup>82</sup> The ICRC has been chairing tripartite meetings on the issue since 2010. Crisis Group telephone interview, ICRC official, Tbilisi, March 2013.

<sup>83</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Abkhaz officials, Sukhumi, January-February 2013.

<sup>84</sup> “Georgia makes ‘unilateral pledge’ of non-use of force”, *Civil.ge*, 23 November 2010.

<sup>85</sup> Crisis Group interview, Abkhaz security official, Sukhumi, January 2013. The Abkhaz said they would give the Geneva talks “another six months” (until autumn 2013) to produce agreements on the status of the delegations as well as non-use-of-force, but threatened to pull out then if there was no progress. Russia most likely encouraged them to stay with the talks at least to maintain the appearance of cooperation and project some sense of stability in the run-up to the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics. Crisis Group interviews, Abkhaz officials, Sukhumi, January-February 2013.

the term “foreign occupation” to characterise its presence in the entity in various regional and other international organisations’ texts and resolutions.<sup>86</sup>

Georgia’s new government is also bound by its “Law on Occupied Territories”, which it says it has no intention of annulling entirely, because Russia’s military presence in violation of the EU-brokered 2008 ceasefire cannot be ignored. The Abkhaz insist they are not “occupied”, because the troops are there on the basis of a bilateral agreement.<sup>87</sup>

Given the counterproductive, dead-end nature of the terminology debate, the co-chairs of the Geneva discussions should continue refining a draft statement on non-use of force to which all participants should agree. The co-chairs could then announce agreement on the text to bypass the status issues. Clearly the non-use of force issue should be resolved soon to avoid permanently crippling discussion on a range of security and humanitarian subjects and undermining the little trust that still exists in Geneva.

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<sup>86</sup> Crisis Group interviews, journalists, officials, Tbilisi, Sukhumi, January-March 2013; Russian foreign ministry official, Moscow, November 2012.

<sup>87</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Georgian officials, Tbilisi, November 2012; Abkhaz officials, Sukhumi, January-February 2013.

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## IV. Finding Fields for Cooperation

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Security is a problem throughout the Caucasus region. While regular violence in Abkhazia and Georgia is currently nothing like that in Russia's North Caucasus, where some 700 were killed in 2012, the threat of spillover is of concern in Tbilisi and Sukhumi.<sup>88</sup> The 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics, just a few kilometres from Abkhazia, could benefit from close coordination and cooperation on security between Russia and its neighbours.

Georgia grappled with insurgents from Chechnya and the North Caucasus in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Hundreds of them virtually took over the remote Pankisi Gorge near the mountainous frontier with Russia. Their presence caused high tensions, and the Russian air force bombed the area.<sup>89</sup> Much more recently, in August 2012, eleven Salafi-inspired insurgents, most originally from the North Caucasus, and three Georgian special forces were killed along the Russian-Georgian frontier. The official explanation is that the group was discovered as it tried to cross the mountains along the Dagestani section of the border. While the circumstances remain murky, the incident shows that all sides would benefit from cooperation on security issues.<sup>90</sup>

### A. Spillover from the North Caucasus Insurgency?

The extent of radical Islamist activity in Abkhazia is unclear, but it obviously increasingly worries the Abkhaz leadership.<sup>91</sup> During the course of 2012, Russian security services claimed to have found up to ten arms caches. Russia's Anti-Terrorist Committee claimed that Doku Umarov, leader of the regional (North) Caucasus Emirate, brought the weapons via Turkey with Georgian complicity to prepare an attack on the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics.<sup>92</sup> Georgian and Turkish officials scoffed at the claim as mere propaganda.<sup>93</sup>

The Abkhaz initially connected discovery of the arms caches with an investigation into the latest of at least five assassination attempts against Abkhaz leader Ankvab, but on 25 December 2012, Ankvab directly linked the arms with radical Islamists,

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<sup>88</sup> For more on the North Caucasus, see Crisis Group Europe Report N°220, *The North Caucasus: The Challenges of Integration (I), Ethnicity and Conflict*, 19 October 2012, and *The Challenges of Integration (II)*, op. cit.

<sup>89</sup> "Bombing of Georgian village is confirmed", *The New York Times*, 15 August 1999.

<sup>90</sup> At the time of the incident, the Russian foreign ministry asked Georgia for more information, but an official said months later it was still awaiting a reply. Crisis Group interview, Moscow, November 2012.

<sup>91</sup> By the time of the break-up of the Soviet Union, most Abkhaz were not generally considered observant adherents of organised religions; perhaps half were nominally Orthodox Christian and a much smaller number formally Muslim. Crisis Group interviews, local residents, Sukhumi, Achandara, February 2013. Local animist traditions, including feasts or extended family gatherings presided over by elders, are common throughout the Caucasus Mountains.

<sup>92</sup> "Из Олимпийских игр исключили стрельбу из гранатометов" ["Grenade throwing excluded from the list of Olympic sports"], *Kommersant*, 11 May 2012. The Caucasus Emirate (Imarat Kavkaz) was proclaimed in 2007, as the final step in transforming the Chechen separatist movement into a region-wide, radical Islamist project, part of the "global jihad". It unified disparate insurgent groups under a command structure led by Doku Umarov, a Chechen field commander who has fought against Russia since 1995 and claims the title emir. See Crisis Group Report, *The North Caucasus: The Challenges of Integration (II)*, op. cit., pp. 13-14.

<sup>93</sup> "Statement of the Georgian Foreign Ministry in reaction to recent baseless accusations spread by the Russian National Anti-Terrorism Committee", 10 May 2012. Crisis Group interview, Turkish diplomat, Tbilisi, 15 May 2012, who called "the allegation ... not even worth commenting on".

asserting that “the quantities and characteristics of these weapons [are] good reason to argue that they were intended not only for terrorist acts, but if necessary, for a major military operation”. Elaborating on the dangers posed by “religious extremism”, he said the authorities would act to “eradicate it before it can take root, as it has in other countries”.<sup>94</sup>

High-profile unsolved murders and assassination attempts have shaken the entity’s small Muslim community since 2007. In August of that year, a local imam, Khamzat Gitsba, was assassinated in Gudauta, home to one of Abkhazia’s only two “prayer houses” (a euphemistic term whose use reflects unease over allowing full-fledged “mosques” to open and sensitivities about the potential spread of radical Islam).<sup>95</sup>

In July 2010 a bomb was found under the car of Salih Kvaratskhelia, the imam of Sukhumi’s mosque, who now heads the Spiritual Board of the Abkhaz Muslims (SBAM). A week later, unidentified gunmen killed Emmik Chachmach-ogly, a Turkish repatriate and member of the local SBAM division. In October 2010, gunmen attacked the Gudauta mosque, killing one and wounding two. In September 2011, Arsen Bzhikshiev, a prominent Muslim from Kabardino-Balkaria (North Caucasus) who fought in the Abkhaz-Georgian war and stayed in Abkhazia, was killed by a car bomb in Sukhumi.<sup>96</sup> That followed the suspicious death of the SBAM head, Adil Gablia, an 80-year-old ethnic Abkhaz who had repatriated from Turkey. His associates said he, like his wife months earlier, had been poisoned.<sup>97</sup>

Influential Muslims and Sukhumi officials seem to agree that more ethnic Abkhaz have become “observant”, with one estimating that 20-30 percent now consider themselves believers.<sup>98</sup> But some argue that a radical threat is being exaggerated. “We ourselves met with [Ankvab] and explained that just because a man wears a beard or has prayer beads, it does not mean he is a terrorist”, said a member of Sukhumi’s Muslim community. “How can a tiny handful of individuals be called a ‘Jamat?’” (an armed Islamist group), asked another.<sup>99</sup> Not all Abkhaz officials are so worried. “We are talking about a few individuals here and there. Some play up the threat for political purposes – it’s quite profitable to be in the business of ‘the fight against terrorism’ these days”, said a high-ranking government member.<sup>100</sup>

Whatever the actual level of threat, many Abkhaz officials and ordinary residents express concern with what they perceive as the dangers of the spread of violent radicalism. Given the Russian and Georgian experiences with the phenomenon, all

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<sup>94</sup> “Президент Александр Анкваб считает недопустимым распространение религиозного экстремизма в Абхазии” [“President Aleksandr Ankvab considers that the spread of radical extremism in Abkhazia cannot be allowed”], Apsnypress, 25 December 2012.

<sup>95</sup> Observers linked Gitsba’s assassination to his increasing radicalisation and close ties to Islamist militants from Russia’s North Caucasus, including the late Chechen terrorist Shamil Basayev, who served as Abkhaz “deputy defence minister” during the 1992-1993 Georgian-Abkhaz war. Basayev took an Abkhaz woman as a second wife before returning to Chechnya. Gitsba answered his call to arms by travelling to Chechnya and fighting alongside Basayev during the Chechen-Russian wars from 1994 to 2003. Crisis Group interviews, Sukhumi, February 2013.

<sup>96</sup> “Hunt for Moslems in Abkhazia continues”, Abkhazia.com, 23 September 2011; also “One dies in car blast in Sokhumi”, Civil.ge, 21 September 2011.

<sup>97</sup> “Why repatriates are not welcome to Abkhazia”, www.expertclub.ge, 26 July 2011. Crisis Group interviews, journalists and local residents, Sukhumi, February 2013.

<sup>98</sup> As elsewhere during Soviet times, both Islam and Christianity were greatly discouraged, or at best co-opted by the Soviet authorities, including through clergy with ties to the KGB.

<sup>99</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Abkhaz officials, local Muslims, civil society, Sukhumi, February 2013.

<sup>100</sup> Crisis Group interview, Abkhaz official, Sukhumi, January 2013.

would benefit by exchanging information on security issues, without the exaggerations that lead to the unjustified repression of peaceful believers and – inevitably – the stoking of more virulent forms of radical activity.

### *B. Security in the Gali District and along the ABL*

Since the end of the 1992-93 war, the ethnic-Georgian Gali district has often been the scene of violence. Abkhaz authorities never fully controlled it. Armed Georgian partisans carried out attacks against Abkhaz officials sent to the area, as well as against Russian “peacekeepers”.<sup>101</sup> The locals accused all sides of shakedowns for bribes. Turf wars over trade between local gangs, regardless of ethnicity, have been common.<sup>102</sup>

The period between December 2011 and mid-2012 was particularly violent. According to Sukhumi’s accounts, eight Abkhaz officials or police and one Russian soldier were killed. The Abkhaz blamed most deaths on armed Georgian groups, but some may have been due to criminals roaming the often lawless territory.<sup>103</sup> The Georgians also said Gali was a nesting ground for cultivating “terrorist acts”, especially involving Russian FSB officers organising bombings or attempted attacks deep inside Georgian-held territory.<sup>104</sup>

The Abkhaz denied a European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) request to conduct on-the-ground investigations into claims of Tbilisi-sponsored militant activity after the head of the EUMM made comments they considered offensive, and he was declared “persona non grata”.<sup>105</sup> The Abkhaz move was largely symbolic, since they and the Russian government, in violation of the 2008 ceasefire, have prevented the EUMM from carrying out its mandate to patrol inside Abkhazia (and South Ossetia). EUMM visits to Abkhazia have been strictly limited to infrequent “meetings” with Georgian, Russian, Abkhaz and international officials. Because of their objection to

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<sup>101</sup> Under the terms of a 1994 agreement between Georgia and Russia, 1,800 to 2,500 “peacekeeping troops”, officially under the aegis of the post-USSR Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), but in fact all from Russia, were stationed in Abkhazia, mostly in Gali, until the 2008 war. They were frequent targets of insurgents, again mostly in Gali. Successive Georgian governments accused them of openly taking the Abkhaz side and doing nothing to protect local Georgian civilians.

<sup>102</sup> Ankvab, after being elected de facto president in August 2011, vowed to put a stop to shake-downs by gunmen of traders in mandarins and hazelnuts, Gali’s main cash crops. He seemed to have some success, though there were reports, on a much smaller scale, of similar activities in early 2012. In December 2011, Valmer Butba, a retired colonel and former head of an anti-terrorist unit, was assassinated in Gali. Tbilisi had accused him of masterminding an assassination attempt on a Georgian interior ministry (MIA) official in the autonomous Georgian Ajara region in May 2010. Crisis Group interviews, local officials, Sukhumi, February 2013; Georgian officials, Tbilisi, June 2012. See also “Abkhaz sources: ‘Terrorist act foiled in Gali’”, *Civil.ge*, 12 January 2012.

<sup>103</sup> “Report regarding terrorist activity of the special services of Georgia on the territory of Abkhazia”, Apsnypress, Sukhumi, 15 October 2012. “Statement by the Foreign Ministry of Abkhazia ‘On the resumption of Georgian Terrorist Activity on the Territory of Abkhazia’” (document provided to Crisis Group), Sukhumi, 21 June 2012.

<sup>104</sup> At least ten Gali residents were detained in connection with the 2009-2011 allegations of a pre-meditated bombing campaign in Georgia. For discussion of the incidents and their implications, see Johanna Popjanevski and Svante Cornell, “The 2009-11 Bombing Campaign in Georgia”, Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies Program, Johns Hopkins University, Washington DC, March 2012. Crisis Group Europe Briefing N°65, *Georgia-Russia: Learn to Live Like Neighbours*, 8 August 2011.

<sup>105</sup> The Abkhaz objected to remarks regarding assassinated Abkhaz security officials made by the EUMM chief of mission, Andrzej Tyszkiewicz of Poland.



the head of the EUMM, the Abkhaz also refuse to participate in meetings of the only security-related mechanism on the ground, the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM).

In a tacit admission that armed groups in the Gali district previously operated with government support, Georgia's new administration vowed to crack down on them and end any official ties.<sup>106</sup> According to the Abkhaz, there have been no such violent attacks since mid-2012. Reports of general crime have also fallen off significantly, they and the EUMM say, even though Gali residents remain leery.<sup>107</sup>

Gali villagers in remote areas near the ABL where Russian troops are erecting facilities, and there is no police presence, also complain of abusive behaviour – beatings, harassment, or verbal abuse – by Russians. In one case, locals from the village of Nabak-evi sent a written appeal to the Sukhumi authorities to intervene. Unusually, Ankvab sent police investigators to collect evidence.<sup>108</sup> Locals later told journalists that senior Russian officers came to the area and reprimanded at least one alleged culprit.<sup>109</sup>

The Georgian-populated Gali district of Abkhazia and ABL should be a special area of cooperation, with an emphasis on security. Given Georgian willingness to admit in effect the previous existence of government-sponsored armed groups, the Abkhaz could help reinforce stability by resuming participation in IPRM meetings and joint fact-finding missions to investigate violence. To allow the Abkhaz to save face, without change of the EUMM head of mission, IPRM meetings organised at an expert level should be encouraged.<sup>110</sup>

### C. *Travelling across the ABL*

Travelling across the ABL between Abkhazia and Georgia has become more difficult, especially after Russian border guards sealed off the ABL and, in late September 2012, took full over control of the only existing “official” crossing point.<sup>111</sup> Abkhaz officials said four additional checkpoints would be open by the end of March 2013, but this has been postponed until later in the year. The Russians, at least, seem to have no interest or sense of urgency about increasing border crossings, but for the people of Gali, this is imperative, as soon as possible.

Under the current arrangement, many Gali residents must travel for hours on extremely bad roads to reach the lone official checkpoint to cross into Tbilisi-controlled territory. Some want to use medical services, others to buy goods not available in the district's few stores or main bazaar. Due to the lack of crossing points, many still try to cross via unofficial routes, leading to a constant cycle of tensions with Russian troops, detentions and fines. The sealing of the ABL has left many locals who do not possess Abkhaz “passports” feeling increasingly isolated, fearing loss of contact with

<sup>106</sup> Crisis Group interview, Abkhaz official, Sukhumi, February 2013; also, “Sokhumi wants EUMM head to be replaced, Civil.ge, 3 May 2012.

<sup>107</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Abkhaz official, Sukhumi, January 2013; EUMM official, Tbilisi, January 2012; residents, Gali, February 2013.

<sup>108</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Abkhaz officials, Sukhumi/Gali; journalists, Sukhumi/Gali/Tbilisi; residents, Gali, February 2013.

<sup>109</sup> Crisis Group interviews, journalists in regular communication with Gali residents, Tbilisi, March 2013; RFE/RL, 8 March 2013.

<sup>110</sup> At the 12 December 2012 meeting of the Geneva International Discussions: “All participants reiterated the need to resume the meetings of the Gali Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism (IPRM)”, press communiqué, co-chairs. [www.osce.org/cio/98130](http://www.osce.org/cio/98130).

<sup>111</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Gali, June 2012.

relatives on the Georgian-controlled side.<sup>112</sup> The new regime has also led to the deaths of several critically ill patients lacking “permits” to cross into Georgian territory.<sup>113</sup>

Abkhaz officials say about 13,000 passports, up from 3,000 in 2010, have been issued to Gali Georgians, but many more remain “stateless” under Abkhaz laws.<sup>114</sup> Gali residents tend to take the documents to travel more easily across the ABL or use them to travel to Russia, where they are accepted for entry due to Moscow’s recognition of Abkhazia. Though Georgia at first railed against what it considered forced “passportisation”, the subject has been equally controversial among Abkhaz, who fear giving “citizenship” to all in the Gali district would risk diluting their tenuous position as the entity’s dominant ethnic group. Obtaining the document can be relatively expensive and take many months or even years, but Georgian authorities apparently no longer penalise Gali residents who choose to do so.<sup>115</sup>

Most Gali residents retain their Georgian passports to travel to Georgia and benefit there from basic support and services. But if local Abkhaz authorities spot a Georgian passport, “it is confiscated and torn up”, residents say. If the Georgian government is consistent in its policy of recognising Abkhaz “passports” on a par with Georgian ID documents within Georgia, then the Abkhaz authorities could at a minimum stop confiscating Georgian passports in Abkhazia. In 2012, only one ethnic Georgian was elected to parliament to represent the whole population of the Gali district. At the local level, very few Georgians hold administrative positions.<sup>116</sup> Sukhumi should do more to promote stability by taking steps to include local Georgians in administrative or government structures, especially in local police.

Another good-will gesture would be to allow schooling in the Georgian language in Gali. Since 1995, Georgian-language education has essentially been prohibited – the official languages of instruction are Russian and Abkhaz. Although instruction in Georgian is still widespread, locals say the Abkhaz authorities have increasingly been enforcing laws on instruction in Russian or Abkhaz. This breeds resentment and decreases the quality of education, due to poor command of Russian, let alone Abkhaz, among teachers and students alike.<sup>117</sup> In addition, Russian border guards have occasionally refused to let schoolchildren under the age of thirteen or fourteen cross at the official checkpoint into Georgian-controlled territory, where they receive instruction in the Georgian language. Legal and practical obstacles to receiving an education in one’s mother tongue should be lifted.

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<sup>112</sup> The Abkhaz authorities say up to 100,000 ABL crossings took place during a three-month period in 2012 alone, illustrating that many ethnic Georgians stay in Gali only part time. Others, whose homes were damaged or looted, stay in Gali only occasionally to tend crops or check on their property. Crisis Group interviews, officials and residents, Sukhumi, Gali, Zugdidi, January-February 2013.

<sup>113</sup> Statement provided to Crisis Group: “Tragic Facts November 10-December 10, 2012”, Georgian State Ministry for Reintegration, Tbilisi, 21 January 2013.

<sup>114</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Gali, June 2012.

<sup>115</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Gali, June 2012.

<sup>116</sup> Crisis Group interview, Gali, June 2012.

<sup>117</sup> The 31 schools in Gali officially offer instruction only in Russian or Abkhaz. Georgian is taught as a separate course, though many teachers continue to teach in it when they feel they are not under official supervision.

#### D. *Confidence Building and Improving Daily Life*

Abkhaz leaders stressed for years that the previous Georgian government aimed to isolate the entity, through legal obstacles on trade, transport, and travel.<sup>118</sup> Much of this was based on the 2008 Law on Occupied Territories that inter alia made it punishable to enter Abkhazia (or South Ossetia) from Russia without a Georgian visa and permission. The law was passed to underline the illegality of the massive Russian presence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia and to retain some sense of sovereignty over the entities and borders. In practice, however, it is mainly a political text that cannot be fully implemented, as Tbilisi lacks most instruments to exert control. The new Ivanishvili government appears leery to confront a possible political backlash and accusations of kowtowing to Russia by repealing the law, but it has shown some willingness to amend associated regulations. It has already introduced legislation to decriminalise in effect entry to Georgia via Abkhazia and South Ossetia, provided the individual procures “permission”, by filling out a web page upon arrival.<sup>119</sup>

Most residents of Abkhazia, except ethnic Georgians from the Gali district, have Russian passports and use them for travel. The previous Georgian government, in July 2011, began issuing “Status Neutral Travel Documents (SNTDs)”, meant to allow Abkhaz and Ossetians to travel abroad, while making it more difficult for them to do so with other documents, such as Russian passports.<sup>120</sup> Within the EU, there is no unified policy on visas for Abkhaz; some member states issue visas to applicants with Russian passports identifiable as being issued in Abkhazia; some do not.<sup>121</sup> Nevertheless only 27 SNTDs were issued by March 2013. Georgian officials say many more Georgian passports were delivered to residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia upon their request than SNTDs. One said the SNTDs had been a failure, and Tbilisi may no longer recommend to countries that they issue visas to holders.<sup>122</sup>

The new government is also considering softening its attitude towards Abkhazia residents travelling on Russian passports, but so far not to those holding passports issued by Russian officials in Abkhazia itself, as this would appear to accept Russian recognition of or jurisdiction over Abkhazia. Yet, rather than setting obstacles to Abkhaz foreign travel, Tbilisi should help find ways to encourage freedom of movement. It has removed rules that complicated travel inside Georgia for those with Abkhazia-

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<sup>118</sup> Liana Kvarchelia, “Georgian parliamentary elections and prospects for Georgian-Abkhaz relations”, International Alert website (undated). “Implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy in Georgia, Progress in 2011 and recommendations for action”, Joint staff working document, European Commission and EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Brussels, 15 May 2012.

<sup>119</sup> Crisis Group interview, Georgian ministry official, March 2013. Modifications to the law have been introduced in parliament.

<sup>120</sup> Liana Kvarchelia, “Georgian parliamentary elections and prospects for Georgian-Abkhaz relations”, International Alert website (undated). The SNTD is a travel document with minimal identification with Georgia. It has a Georgian country code, to indicate country of readmission or consular access in case the document holder commits a crime abroad. The Czech Republic, Slovakia, Latvia, Lithuania, Israel, the U.S., Bulgaria, Poland and Japan currently recognise SNTDs.

<sup>121</sup> Abkhazia’s de facto foreign minister said the documents were “unacceptable” and Abkhazia “would fight for the recognition of Abkhaz ‘passports’ or Russian passports used by Abkhaz citizens”. “U.S. to recognise ‘status neutral’ passports from Georgia’s breakaway regions”, RFE/RL, 6 June 2012. “Implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy in Georgia”, op. cit. Georgia’s previous government asked governments to restrict issuance of visas to residents of Abkhazia holding SNTDs, which, the Abkhaz said, in particular complicated overseas study opportunities.

<sup>122</sup> Crisis Group interview, Georgian minister, Tbilisi, January 2013.

and South Ossetia-issued “passports”, accepting them as valid ID documents within Georgia.

Georgian ministers say they are also open to streamlining any legal procedures blocking residents of Abkhazia or South Ossetia from getting visas to study abroad and to allowing issuance of such visas to Russian passport holders. They say they also would like to work with European and other foreign governments to expand sponsored higher education opportunities for Abkhaz residents. Special quotas for Abkhazia residents who want to study in English-language Georgian educational institutes are also being considered.<sup>123</sup>

The Ivanishvili government has promised to extend the previous government’s program to deliver free medical assistance to people from Abkhazia. Medical care is in a deplorable state throughout the entity, with many seeking help in either Russia or Tbilisi.<sup>124</sup> In Gali, the situation is acute, as there are only a few badly equipped hospitals and first aid clinics.<sup>125</sup> But as free medical care is perceived as a ploy to lure Abkhaz slowly back under the Georgian fold, the entity government has begun spending significant sums to pay for medical care in Russia or other countries. A senior official said Sukhumi paid for 350 such trips to Russian, Turkish, Israeli and Ukrainian hospitals in 2012 alone.<sup>126</sup>

The Abkhaz authorities also routinely forbid import of medicines from Tbilisi-controlled territory, thereby driving up prices or causing shortages. Locals say if the authorities discover medicine manufactured in Georgia, it is confiscated, and the pharmacies are fined.<sup>127</sup> Basic humanitarian needs should not be politicised. The Abkhaz authorities should not only permit pharmaceutical imports, but also continue allowing its people travel to Georgia for care.

#### *E. Trade and Transport*

Almost all of Abkhazia’s “official” trade and border crossings go via the land border at the Psou River with Russia. But the new Georgian government acted quickly to remove regulations that made it virtually impossible to use Georgian roads to bring large quantities of goods into Abkhazia from across the ABL. Now, instead of a special government decree, any appropriate ministry can grant instant permission on Abkhaz request, though commercial trade over the ABL, passable currently only via a lone, narrow and very dilapidated bridge, is still extremely rare. A Georgian minister who said the Abkhaz had already used the easing of this restriction mentioned a recent shipment of computers via two long-haul trucks that entered Georgia from Turkey and went on to Abkhazia.<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Georgian ministers, Tbilisi, January-February 2013.

<sup>124</sup> The Abkhaz authorities say they have sponsored 1,400 people for medical care outside Abkhazia, mostly in Russia. The Georgian authorities state that approximately 1,700 from Abkhazia have received medical care through state-sponsored health-care programs.

<sup>125</sup> For example, only one hospital in Gali has ambulances, forcing many doctors outside of Gali town to walk kilometres to reach patients.

<sup>126</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Abkhaz officials, Sukhumi, January-February 2013; also, [www.gazeta-ra.info/index-1.php?ELEMENT\\_ID=5420](http://www.gazeta-ra.info/index-1.php?ELEMENT_ID=5420).

<sup>127</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Gali, June 2012. Only the hospital in Saberio has a special arrangement with the de facto authorities, because they provide medical assistance to workers at the Inguri Hydropower station which provides electricity for both the Abkhaz and the Georgians.

<sup>128</sup> Crisis Group interview, senior Georgian official, Tbilisi, January 2013.

The Law on Occupied Territories has also been used to interdict ships headed to Abkhaz ports that have not cleared Georgian customs. Although there was a spate of Georgian interventions involving foreign (mostly Turkish) ships in the period 2008-2010, such incidents have significantly declined.<sup>129</sup> To resolve the problem, Turkish authorities suggest that Georgian custom officials check goods in Turkey before the vessels depart, but they are not planning to instruct Turkish vessels on route to Abkhazia to dock first in Georgian ports as Tbilisi has requested.<sup>130</sup>

To further facilitate trade and increase freedom of movement, the new government says it is willing to consider restoring the rail link over the ABL between Georgian- and Abkhaz-controlled territory. This has been out of service since the 1992-1993 war; in many places, the line no longer exists, lengthy sections having been dismantled for scrap.<sup>131</sup> This proposal has been floated often since the 1990s by both Tbilisi and Sukhumi but has always fallen victim to political, financial, or technical disputes.<sup>132</sup> Abkhaz leader Ankvab said Georgia has not raised the rail link with Sukhumi, but it would be possible to study the idea.<sup>133</sup>

The proposal is, however, complicated by the geopolitical realities of the South Caucasus and its other myriad armed conflicts and potential flashpoints. The new Georgian government, evidently as an olive branch to Russia, stressed that opening the rail link would also mean that the train traffic could be restored between Russia and Armenia – strategic allies without a common border. This raised alarms in Azerbaijan, which is in a state of war with Armenia, that the line could be used to forge a military land link between Armenia and Russia and give Moscow another supply route to its Gyumri base in Armenia.<sup>134</sup> Under what appears to be pressure from Azerbaijan, which supplies Georgia with discounted natural gas, the new government at first backtracked.<sup>135</sup> But on 18 January 2013, during a visit to Armenia, Ivanishvili essentially denied that the idea was dead. He said restoring the link would be “possible”, but “the issue was complicated” because of troubled relations between Georgia

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<sup>129</sup> According to the Georgian interior ministry, in 2011 there were no interdictions of ships for attempting to enter or having previously entered ports in Abkhazia. In 2012 six vessels were cited for having previously visited Abkhazia without authorisation and later docking at Georgia’s ports of Anaklia, Poti or Batumi, or were detained en route to the entity. Crisis Group interview, interior ministry official, Tbilisi, January 2013.

<sup>130</sup> Crisis Group interview, Turkish official, Ankara, February 2013.

<sup>131</sup> A preliminary agreement has been made to re-surface the Inguri bridge, the only connection over the ABL currently open.

<sup>132</sup> “Найти баланс противоречивых отношений” [“To find a balance between contradictory interests”], *Echo Kavkaza*, 12 November 2012.

<sup>133</sup> “Никто к руководству Абхазии по поводу возобновления сквозного железнодорожного сообщения через республику не обращался” [“Nobody approached the Abkhaz leadership to restore the transit rail link across the republic”], *Apsnypress*, 18 January 2013.

<sup>134</sup> Until 2008, Russia supplied its military base in Gyumri through Georgia. In 2006 Georgia and Russia concluded a five-year agreement that stipulated terms of transit for military cargo and personnel, but the agreement was in effect suspended in 2008, then not prolonged in 2011 by the Georgian parliament, leaving Iran as the only supply route for Russia.

<sup>135</sup> “If Ivanishvili continues his attempts to restore railway links with Armenia, then Azerbaijan might put its economic projects with Georgia on hold and support the separatist regimes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia”, said an Azerbaijani ruling party legislator. “Азербайджанский парламентарий предупредил правительство Грузии о последствиях проармянской политики” [“Azerbaijani MP warned the Georgian government about the consequences of its pro-Armenian policies”], *Day.az*, 7 November 2012. “Georgia will not restore railway to Russia through Abkhazia”, *Vestnik Kavkaza*, 28 November 2012.

and Russia and “uneasy relations with our Abkhaz brothers”.<sup>136</sup> In any case, resumption would require a thorough economic and environmental assessment to determine utility.<sup>137</sup>

#### F. *Reinvigorating International Engagement*

In 2009, Russia vetoed continuation of the more than 100-strong UN observer mission operating mainly in Abkhazia, as well as of the large OSCE mission in Georgia that ran programs in both Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>138</sup> Privately, some Abkhaz officials say they would have preferred the UN force to stay, but officially Sukhumi supported Russia’s Security Council veto.<sup>139</sup> The EU established the EUMM after the 2008 war but has subsequently been denied access to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Today Abkhazia is markedly more isolated, with international engagement now largely limited to the work of a very few humanitarian and civil society bodies.

Even these activities are barely welcome. In October 2012, the Abkhaz prime minister summoned NGOs and international organisation representatives in the entity to inform them they would be required to meet stricter requirements and focus their activities solely on the Gali district. A few weeks after a visit to Abkhazia, a Western ambassador whose country finances several projects in Abkhazia said such restrictions would likely not be acceptable and could force practically all NGOs to leave the entity.<sup>140</sup>

The Abkhaz explain their disinterest in the activities of international organisations, saying that “considering the aid we are receiving from the Russian Federation, as well as our growing capabilities ... the limited financial capacity of these organisations makes republic-wide improvements impossible”.<sup>141</sup> Projects are considered to be piecemeal, focusing too much on emergency aid rather than real development. The EU, its member states, UN organisations and a few bilateral donors like Switzerland currently fund programs in Abkhazia worth approximately \$10-15 million a year, which is minimal in comparison with Russia’s support.<sup>142</sup>

At least one prominent Abkhaz commentator speculated that the move was at the behest of Moscow, though local pride is more likely at work.<sup>143</sup> Many Abkhaz feel genuine anger and disappointment with the EU member states, which, they say, applied “double standards” in refusing to recognise Abkhaz independence after having done so for Kosovo and (in their view) having contributed little concrete in their “engagement-without-recognition” policy since the 2008 war. The Abkhaz have at times refused

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<sup>136</sup> “PM Ivanishvili: There are no problems in ties with Armenia”, *Civil.ge*, 17 January 2013.

<sup>137</sup> A new integrated rail and ferry line between Russia and Turkey officially opened in February. “Samsun-Kavkaz ferry line to link Turkey with Russia, Central Asia”, *Today’s Zaman*, 19 February 2013.

<sup>138</sup> See Crisis Group Europe Reports N°205, *South Ossetia: The Burden of Recognition*, 7 June 2010; *Abkhazia: Deepening Dependence*, op. cit.; and N°53, *Georgia and Russia: Still Insecure and Dangerous*, 22 June 2009.

<sup>139</sup> The UN Mission in Georgia (UNMIG) did regular patrols, most notably in the Gali region, implemented training programs and provided a link to the Security Council.

<sup>140</sup> Crisis Group interview, Western ambassador, Tbilisi, November 2012.

<sup>141</sup> “Леонид Лакербая считает целесообразным, чтобы международные гуманитарные организации сосредоточились на Гальском районе” [“Prime Minister Leonid Lakerbaia considers it appropriate for international humanitarian organisations to focus on the Gali region”], *Apsnypress*, 25 October 2012.

<sup>142</sup> “Александр Анкваб принял посла Нидерландов в Армении и Грузии” [“Alexandr Ankvaab received the Ambassador of the Netherlands to Armenia and Georgia”], *Apsnypress*, 11 September 2012. Crisis Group interview, EU official, Brussels, March 2013.

<sup>143</sup> Crisis Group interview, Abkhaz journalist, Sukhumi, February 2013.

to admit Tbilisi-based diplomats, whose regular working visits, though important to ensure that Abkhaz elites retain a range of information and expert sources, have slowed considerably.<sup>144</sup>

The Abkhaz have slightly softened their stance. An official said that while NGOs would still be required to focus on the Gali region, they could, for instance, keep their offices in Sukhumi.<sup>145</sup> But in practice the critical attitude is having palpable negative effects. The head of a foreign NGO program aimed at promoting ways to slow the spread of HIV and AIDS in Abkhazia said she had in effect been forced to suspend her work. HIV infections, according to medical personnel, have spiked, along with what local residents say is a major rise in addiction to injection narcotics via shared needles.<sup>146</sup> Elsewhere, a European professor with long ties to Abkhazia taught only a single session of a course on the EU at Sukhumi's university before being ordered to stop.<sup>147</sup>

The cooperative efforts of EU police liaison officers based in Zugdidi (on the Georgian side of the ABL) and a UN police liaison, who travel together to Abkhazia regularly for meetings with law enforcement bodies and to give some basic training and expertise, are a rare area of respected international engagement. The EU and the UN could offer to further strengthen this by deploying a police liaison officer to Gali and Sukhumi to conduct courses on international policing standards, including community policing techniques and dealing with violence against women.

Another step would be for the EU to again offer to open an office in Sukhumi to provide information on Brussels policies, manage small grants and facilitate links between Abkhazia and EU civil society, such as universities. Similar initiatives have fallen victim to semantics in the past. Russia's reaction to a greater EU presence would have significant influence on Sukhumi's responsiveness. While some Georgian officials have said they were not opposed, others appear leery of thereby legitimising any recognition of the Abkhaz authorities. The EU has already planned a new €4 million program focusing on health, education and livelihoods.<sup>148</sup> It was to begin in November 2012 and should not be delayed longer.

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<sup>144</sup> Crisis Group interviews, diplomats, Tbilisi, February-March 2013; Abkhaz officials, Sukhumi, February 2013.

<sup>145</sup> Crisis Group interview, Abkhaz ministry official, Sukhumi, February 2013.

<sup>146</sup> Crisis Group interviews, medical NGO projects worker, February 2013; local residents, Abkhazia, January-February 2013.

<sup>147</sup> "Шашечные бои" ["Checker-battles"], *Ekho Kavkaza*, 31 March 2013.

<sup>148</sup> Crisis Group interview, EU official, Brussels, March 2013.

## V. Conclusion

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More than two decades after the Soviet collapse, the conflict in Abkhazia is a long way from any solution. Since 2006, Crisis Group has been suggesting that Georgia, Russia and the Abkhaz authorities take gradual, mutually beneficial steps to lessen tensions and repair trust before trying to tackle the extremely sensitive issues of the entity's eventual status. Core issues first singled out in 2007 include return of over 200,000 Georgian displaced persons; increased security guarantees and assurances that force will not be used; improved dialogue; and better access for the residents of Abkhazia to the wider world, especially the EU. All remain equally relevant today.

The nature of the conflict, however, is such that significant progress will only occur when not only Georgia-Abkhaz but also Georgia-Russia relations improve. As long as Abkhazia remains largely dependent on Russia financially and thus politically, it is only able to make independent decisions on local matters. With no prospect of widespread recognition anytime soon and its development fully tied to Moscow, Abkhazia's "independence project" faces an uphill battle; the entity risks becoming increasingly similar to Russian regions in the North Caucasus.

Due to its overwhelming military presence in Abkhazia (and South Ossetia), it appears highly unlikely that Russia has any interest in replaying the August 2008 war. (For its part, Georgia lacks the means to do so.) Two months before full-scale fighting began, Crisis Group warned that the dispute between Georgia and Russia had entered a dangerous phase. Moscow had just declared a new doctrine of intervention anywhere the security of its "citizens" – eg, residents of Abkhaz and South Ossetia with Russian passports – was threatened. It was also trying to prove that Western partners had set a dangerous precedent by recognising Kosovo's independence in 2007. At the same time, Tbilisi insisted it was committed to restoring control over its whole territory and joining NATO, evoking a visceral response from Moscow. The rhetoric over the past five years has cooled, as have Georgia's NATO prospects.

While Moscow's disregard of the EU-mediated 2008 ceasefire should in no way be acquiesced in, Russia, Georgia and Abkhazia should still attempt to take tentative steps toward gradually repairing ties. After all, their peoples are neighbours, with a long and close common cultural and political history. In the short term, it would require only a good-faith effort to unblock the largely semantic stalemate over a non-use of force agreement that has in effect frozen any formal progress. A joint statement issued by the co-chairs of the Geneva International Discussions could open cooperation in areas of mutual interest to Georgia, Russia and the Abkhaz in the areas of security, freedom of movement and trade. Finding the political will to pursue these interests will determine if they desire to emerge from a no-win, long-term conflict that carries profound costs for each.

**Tbilisi/Sukhumi/Moscow/Istanbul/Brussels, 10 April 2013**



**Appendix A: Map of Georgia/Abkhazia**

Administrative map of Georgia



**Appendix B: Russian Military Presence in Abkhazia, as of 2013**



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