Abkhazia at the center of turf battle

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Georgia and Russia vie for the region, now a hub of post-Cold War hostilities.

LOWER ESHERA, GEORGIA â€" In this half-abandoned place of rusting ports and skeleton homes, there is a land that is recognized by nobody.

Fifteen years since its bloody war with Georgia, the breakaway republic of Abkhazia is a surreal spot where Soviet isolation lingers, the Cold War never ended and people cling to facades of statehood.

Now, with Russia and the United States engaged in a high-stakes power grab in the former Soviet Union, this forlorn slip of lush beaches and snowy mountains has emerged as a hub of new tensions between the Cold War enemies.

To the dismay of U.S.-backed Georgia, which still considers Abkhazia to be part of it, Moscow has already distributed passports to nearly all the people here and encouraged them to vote in Russian elections. Tensions have ramped up in recent weeks, after Kosovo declared independence from Serbia, a traditional Russian ally. Moscow bitterly objected, warning that Kosovo's example would embolden other breakaway regions and destabilize Europe.

Russia turned to Abkhazia to drive its point home. Moscow suddenly freed this place from harsh sanctions and hinted that it might soon recognize Abkhazian independence.

"We were flying up to the sky with happiness," said Tamara Ezugbaya, head of this seaside village and the mother of five sons, four of whom died fighting Georgia in the early 1990s war.

But among leaders here, there is a lurking wariness of Russian motives. The powerful northern neighbor is more interested in territorial expansion than in Abkhaz independence, they fear, and may simply absorb Abkhazia.

Russia's attachment to Abkhazia is both sentimental and strategic.

Soviet-era vacations in the pristine mountains and on the balmy beaches of Abkhazia are still a fresh memory for many Russians. Soviet leaders such as Stalin and Khrushchev vacationed in private dachas here, and many Russians feel a fond entitlement to this strip of fertile, subtropical land where the Caucasus Mountains slip off to the Black Sea. Russia's interest is also piqued by the steady encroachment of Western military might into Eastern Europe.

With Georgia striving to join the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, many observers believe Russia is empowering breakaway republics on its border -- Abkhazia and similarly strife-laden South Ossetia, also claimed by Georgia -- in order to build a buffer zone between itself and its Western-armed neighbor

On Wednesday, Russia said it planned to establish "special relations" with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and Georgian Foreign Minister David Bakradze said his country would regard such a move as annexation of its territory and "a gross violation of international rules on . . . territorial integrity," the Interfax news agency reported.

The Russian parliament has been pushing to beef up the number of Russian

peacekeepers stationed in Abkhazia and suggested that Moscow might fight on the side of the breakaway republic in the event of Georgian military aggression.

"For us the main thing is not to be in between two superpowers at a complicated time of dividing zones of influence," said Sergei Bagapsh, the president of Abkhazia's self-declared government. "We're watching the situation very, very carefully."

But Bagapsh acknowledged that Abkhazia hungrily snatches up all the help that Moscow throws its way. Police wear Russian uniforms. Elderly people collect Russian pensions.

"Since the war nobody has asked us, how do you live? How do your children live?" Bagapsh said. "Nobody was interested. Not Europe. Nobody. Only Russia gave us aid. Only Russian peacekeepers stood up here."

Today, with sanctions removed and independence talks underway in Moscow, Abkhazia is waiting for ships to flock back to the abandoned ports; trains to creak back to life; tourists to flood south. People here expect to sell massive quantities of stone and other building materials to Russia in preparation for the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, which sits just over the border.

Abkhazia is a vast junkyard of collapsed structures and resurgent nature.

Roads are dotted with the shells of homes, picked clean of all but the frame.

Staircases to nowhere rise from tangles of vine. Cows claim the right of way on shattered roads, stepping among the bomb craters and puddles.

Abkhazia has a flag, license plates, visas, border guards and the government. There is also a quixotic campaign to distribute Abkhaz passports. "They are not recognized elsewhere in the world, but inside the country they are very much in effect," says a government official without irony.

The factories are blighted, offices shut down. Families have turned to their gardens to survive; to their milk cows and chickens; their fruit and nut trees. The economy is broken, but the people don't starve.

The government says that more than 200,000 people live in Abkhazia; most independent analysts believe the real number is lower. In any case, the official figure is less than half of the more than 500,000 people who lived in this then-thriving resort and citrus farming belt before the war erupted.

The fight was brutal on both sides. In the end, as ethnic Abkhazians emerged as victors, ethnic Georgians were driven out in an orgy of torture, rape and looting.

For Georgia, Abkhazia is an open wound. Thousands of refugees from the region linger in limbo in Tbilisi, the Georgian capital. The Georgian government has vowed to bring Abkhazia back within its borders.

Abkhazians swear it will never happen. "God forbid!" said Ezugbaya, the mother whose four sons were killed. She is a slight woman with a house in a mandarin orange grove, her gray hair pulled back into a bun, wearing black all these years. Her sons died in quick succession, within six months, the first two in the same battle. Her mother was paralyzed with shock; her husband grieved to death. "I don't think a single Abkhazian living here will allow this, as long as they're alive," she said.

But Georgia is furious over Russian interference here. Leaders have called for a boycott of the Sochi Olympics if Abkhaz goods are used to build the sports facilities, and have also warned that any more Russian peacekeepers posted to Abkhazia would be seen as "an act of aggression against the Georgian state with all ensuing consequences," a Foreign Ministry statement said.

In the Abkhaz city of Sukhumi, the once-thriving port is a ship graveyard, with rusted craft wedged into the sand. Two men sat listlessly in an office overlooking the deserted coast, Lenin's stern face keeping watch from the wall.

Asked what they were up to, the men laughed ruefully. Everything is at a standstill, they said. They were just waiting around for Russia to make things better.

At the Sukhumi airport, out past the destroyed hotels and crushed Pepsi-Cola plant, abandoned helicopters and airplanes litter the runways. No international flights run in or out of Abkhazia these days; the only things taking off now are a United Nations helicopter, crop planes and the occasional flight to the mountains to drop off scientists or skiers.

"I am personally worried about losing sovereignty," said Vyacheslav Eshba, the chief of aviation. "But if they say, 'You Abkhazians can't be independent, you have to be a part of something,' then Abkhazians would rather be a part of Russia, which has oil and gas and where our fraternal people live."

Outside, a handful of idle men in camouflage showed off the private plane of former Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze, who had to flee Abkhazia during the war. A faded Soviet flag was still visible on its wing. The Abkhazians flew the plane at first, the men said, but then fuel became too expensive.

It's a relic from another time, and nobody knows quite what to do with it.