
Tales From The Black Sea

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SUKHUMI AND TBILISI

The Abkhaz and the Georgians have reason to resent each other—but both need to rebuild trust if they are to have a prosperous future

AT MIDDAY Ochamchira, in Abkhazia, is almost empty. A derelict cement tower and rusty fairground wheel are the backdrop to an empty stretch of Black Sea coast that was once the Soviet riviera. The ageing owner of a bar is reading a book of Soviet recipes, but his only customer is a woman who downs her vinegary red wine and leaves. "This time 15 years ago people were queuing outside," he says. Then there were 25,000 residents; today 3,000 are left.

The ethnic conflict between Georgia and its breakaway enclave, Abkhazia, was one of many detonated by the collapse of the Soviet Union. Recently, this patch of land, in law part of Georgia but in effect controlled by Russia, has become a new frontier between Russia and the West. Two months ago Georgia and Russia came close to war.

Russia accused Georgia of preparing a strike on Abkhazia, mobilised paratroopers and artillery to join its "peacekeepers", and shot down a Georgian drone. Hotheads in Tbilisi and Moscow said that war was all but inevitable.

Diplomatic intervention by Europe and America staved it off, but tensions remain high. This week bombs exploded in the Abkhaz town of Gagra and the capital, Sukhumi, prompting Abkhazia to close its border with Georgia; and Russia reopened a sea route between Sochi and Gagra. On July 2nd a bomb ripped through an apartment block in Sochi, host of the 2014 winter Olympics. The Russians make no bones over linking trouble in Abkhazia to Georgia's hopes of securing NATO membership, which they strongly resist. But even as Georgia and Russia argue, nobody pays much heed to the Abkhaz themselves.

The Abkhaz and the Georgians belong to different ethnic groups but have shared this bit of Black Sea coast for centuries. When the Bolsheviks occupied Georgia, Abkhazia was given the status of a Soviet republic. Only in 1931 did Stalin (a Georgian) turn Abkhazia into an autonomous region of Georgia. Later his secret-police chief, Beria (also a Georgian, born in Abkhazia), resettled Georgians from the western part of the country in Abkhazia, tipping its ethnic balance further in favour of Georgians. Abkhaz schools were shut and the language was banned.

When the Soviet Union fell apart, various ethnic time-bombs planted by Stalin across the Caucasus began to go off. In August 1992 Georgia, itself in near anarchy, began a war in Abkhazia. Nominally under the rule of Eduard Shevardnadze, the country was run by nationalist warlords who recruited criminals to their armies. These troops pillaged Abkhazia, defeating the ill-armed Abkhaz. When the tide of the war turned and the Abkhaz, helped by Chechens and Russian mercenaries, stormed back, they massacred ethnic Georgians.

Atrocities were committed on both sides, and some 250,000 of the pre-war Georgian inhabitants (who accounted for 45% of the total population) were forced out through ethnic cleansing. But the Abkhaz look back on the conflict as a war of independence and show little sympathy for Georgian refugees. Their mistrust of Georgia is boosted by Russia's anti-Georgian propaganda.

Russia, which fanned the conflict first by encouraging the Georgians, then backing the Abkhaz, has throughout played a highly dubious role.

It claims to be an impartial peacekeeper, but it has strong vested interests. The Russians have ignored sanctions on Abkhazia meant to force the Abkhaz to take back their refugees, and have also given most Abkhaz Russian passports that let them travel abroad. With 90% of the population enlisted as "Russian citizens", watching Russian television, using Russian money and receiving Russian pensions, Abkhazia is barely autonomous. And though the Russians often talk about Kosovo as a precedent, they do not really want to see Abkhazia's independence.

The Abkhaz realise the dangers of assimilation into Russia and are wary of Russian nationalism. When Russia tried to dictate their choice of president, Abkhaz voters picked his rival. Yet even if integration with Russia seems unappealing, to many the idea of being part of Georgia is worse. "At least Russia did not fight against us," says Stanislav Lakoba, head of Abkhazia's security council. He adds that Georgia's hard line and Europe's indifference have driven Abkhazia into Russia's arms.

The Abkhaz also know that the only reason for the sudden interest in their plight is Russia's increasing belligerence. But Sergei Bagapsh, the de facto president, has ruled out replacing or even altering the Russian peacekeeping force. "Our interests will be represented only by Russia," Mr Bagapsh said after meeting Dmitry Medvedev, Russia's president, recently.

Some of the blame for this situation rests with Georgia's president, Mikheil Saakashvili. When he swept to power in 2004, he did not use his popularity to apologise for Georgia's past actions or disown the legacy of his predecessors. By late 2004, Georgia was getting closer to a deal with Russia and a no-use-of-force agreement with Abkhazia, but neither document was signed. Mr Saakashvili said that "we are not inviting separatists to Georgia, we will ourselves return to Abkhazia." His populism irritated the Abkhaz, as did his decision to banish Irakli Alasania, the only man the Abkhaz side trusted as a negotiator, as ambassador to the UN in New York.

In 2006 the Georgians forced their way into the upper Kodori gorge, violating a 1994 peace agreement. They said they had to clear the area of a local warlord. But Paata Zakareishvili, a Georgian analyst, believes he could have been nabbed in Tbilisi. Ruslan Kishmaria, who oversees Gali, a region where 50,000 Georgian refugees spontaneously returned after the war, says Georgia refuses to let the UN verify their return. Georgian television channels disseminate false reports of Georgians being assaulted from the Abkhaz side. Earlier this year the UN secretary-general said that "inaccurate reports originating in the Georgian media and occasionally the Georgian authorities...have contributed to growing distrust and insecurity."

In the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that Mr Saakashvili's latest peace plan, offering Abkhazia unlimited autonomy, was dismissed as propaganda by the Abkhaz. Mr Saakashvili announced it on Georgian television (which is blocked in Abkhazia).

When it was delivered to the Abkhaz, they refused to touch it.

Georgia talks of developing free-trade zones in Abkhazia, but is yet to lift sanctions that do not work anyway. Mr Alasania, whose father was killed in the 1990s war, says that "the key to this conflict lies not in Washington or Moscow but in Tbilisi and Sukhumi...we have to take the first steps towards reconciliation." Rebuilding trust between the two sides may take years—and even then it may not lead to full reintegration of the country. But if Georgia wants to stay democratic and prosperous, it has no other option. And

if they want to preserve their sense of identity, the Abkhaz must do their bit too.