

## Analysis

### A European Path for Abkhazia: Yesterday's Pipe Dreams?

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#### Abstract

In 2004, many optimistic observers hoped that a democratizing Georgia with the prospect of European integration would provide a more attractive interlocutor for Abkhazia to negotiate a mutually acceptable resolution to the conflicts, with the possibility of a reconfigured political relationship between Sukhumi and Tbilisi. Those hopes came into question after hostilities in South Ossetia in summer 2004 and then faded after the Georgian military operation in the Kodori Gorge in July 2006 and the increasing political standoff between Georgia and Russia caused by Georgia's striving for NATO membership. The Abkhaz leadership never warmed to European initiatives because they always started with support for Georgia's territorial integrity. A number of unresolved questions now burden Europe's efforts to contribute to a conflict resolution process in the region at a time when the most likely outcome is that Russia will be able to effectively annex Abkhazia.

#### Unrealized Hopes

When Georgia, together with Armenia and Azerbaijan, was accepted into the "European Neighbourhood Policy" group of states in the spring of 2004 in response to the Georgian "Rose Revolution", optimistic observers assumed that the country's convergence with Europe could contribute significantly to a peaceful resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict in the middle- to long-term. The hope, shared in Georgia and the West alike, was that with support from Europe, Georgia would make solid progress in reforms seeking to strengthen democracy, the rule of law, and economic liberalization, resulting in convergence with the EU to the extent that the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia would want to peacefully reunite with Georgia on a "Path to Europe".

On the Abkhaz side, as well, there was a real hope, at least among the supporters of authentic independence, that an opening towards Europe would not only give the de-facto republic additional political and economic alternatives to its lopsided dependence on Russia, but also allow it to reach a sustainable peace with Georgia as part of a move to include the Southern Caucasus in a long-term process of European integration.

Five years later, little seems to remain of this "European option". The military escalation between Georgia and Russia over South Ossetia and the unilateral recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia by Russia appear to have solidified the hostile separation of Georgia and Abkhazia far beyond the foreseeable future. The prospects not only for reintegrating Abkhazia into the Georgian state, but also for any other possible form of peaceful Georgian-Abkhaz reconciliation, that would take into account Georgian interests and include a rehabilitation of refugees, appear to be more bleak than ever. How-

ever, the outlook for an independent, European development trajectory for Abkhazia beyond annexation by Russia is similarly unpromising.

In the following article, we will attempt to show in a few broad strokes how the main actors have been disposed in the past five years towards the idea of a "European perspective" for Georgian-Abkhaz relations, and will subsequently enquire as to options for reinvigorating a "European perspective" to resolve the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, at least in the long term.

#### Georgia: NATO First

When negotiations between Brussels and Tbilisi on the European Neighbourhood Plan (ENP) for Georgia were underway in 2004 and 2005, the government of President Mikheil Saakashvili exhibited a proactive and demanding attitude, much to the surprise of the European Commission. The Georgian delegation demanded a number of changes concerning the master plan presented by Brussels. One of its most urgent demands was that provisions for EU involvement in the Georgian separatist conflicts be established in a prominent place in the action plan. However, the Georgians did not envisage the EU's role to be that of an impartial negotiator, but expected Brussels to complement the US as an ally and counterweight to Russia in the efforts to reestablish Georgian control over the secessionist regions. At this time, one fundamental problem of the Georgian policy approach, as well as of the European one to some extent, was the belief that the secessionists could be enticed to "return to Georgia" through economic and political incentives alone, without addressing the actual conflicts and their causes.

In June 2006, the Georgian government presented a peace plan designated as a "road map" that concurred

in one essential point with the “Key to the Future” document presented two months earlier by the Abkhaz side (see below): It advocated consultations “on the involvement of Abkhazia in European regional institutes and projects, including the European Union Neighbourhood Policy, and Black Sea cooperation processes”. Of course, the Georgian and Abkhaz sides disagreed broadly when it came to the concrete conditions of such involvement. However, between autumn 2005 and summer 2006, as the Georgian president’s special envoy for Abkhazia at the time, Irakli Alasania, met with unusually positive responses in his numerous official and informal contacts with the Abkhaz de-facto government, it certainly seemed conceivable that pragmatic and temporary solutions could be found that would facilitate the inclusion of Abkhazia in the ENP program below the threshold of the sensitive status issue.

In July 2006, President Saakashvili’s Abkhaz policy, which had already been oscillating between de-escalation and confrontation, took a sharp u-turn. Alasania and the minister in charge of conflict resolution issues, Giorgi Khaindrava, were relieved of their portfolios. The Georgian armed forces occupied the Kodori Gorge, which is situated on the Georgian side of the armistice line and was demilitarized after the ceasefire, in order to put down the rebellion of a rogue Georgian warlord. In the course of this operation, the region was renamed the district of “Upper Abkhazia” and designated as the official seat of the Abkhaz government-in-exile. The Kodori Gorge, as well as the Gali region in the south of Abkhazia, which is populated by Georgian returnees, were the scene of numerous manipulations and violations of the armistice treaty by the Georgian, Abkhaz, and Russian sides over the following two years. Talks with the Abkhaz side had been disrupted; furthermore, in September 2006, the Georgian government also began to obstruct Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue initiatives by Western European governments unless they submitted to the control of the Georgian government from the outset. This approach was justified, off the record, by concerns that in the course of the debate over Kosovo, the Abkhaz might succeed, like the Kosovars, in winning recognition and legitimacy for their independence aspirations.

The deterioration of the Georgian-Abkhaz situation coincided with two developments that had considerable influence on the conflict regions: The deepening domestic divide in Georgia, culminating in the violent crackdown on major demonstrations in November 2007, and the way in which the European discourse was completely replaced by the question of the country’s imminent NATO accession. Instead of the vague prospect of

long-term convergence with the EU, the Georgian government now focused its policy on a rapid US-sponsored process of NATO accession as a way of winning effective security guarantees vis-à-vis Russia as well as extracting from the alliance unequivocal support for Georgia in its separatist conflicts. Instead of Europeanizing the conflict regions, the new strategy was to push for an internationalization of the conflicts in order (from the Georgian point of view) to ward off Russian aggression with the help of the US and NATO.

### **Abkhazia – Multivectoral Orientation or Russia First?**

In Abkhazia, the attitude towards the EU during the last five years has been cautious and ambivalent. Fundamental skepticism and distrust towards the EU as part of the political “West” have been strong, since Western European countries and even more so the US are blamed for one-sided partisanship towards Georgia that ignores both the causes and the development of the conflict. At the same time, the close link to Russia as the protector state is regarded, even by critics of Russian policy, as the only guarantee against military and political revanchism by the Georgian side.

However, in the years leading up to the events of August 2008, there were frequent (at least verbal) expressions of views that went beyond regarding the relationship of Georgia and Abkhazia to the EU as a zero-sum game. On the one hand, it was believed, a successful democratization and Europeanization of Georgia would reduce the threat of war for Abkhazia. On the other hand, a stronger EU engagement in the region would ensure a more stable geopolitical balance. Finally, it was believed that Abkhazia had an interest in gaining support for its own transition towards democracy and the rule of law in order ultimately to benefit economically and politically as a recognized partner in the Black Sea regional integration process. Since his electoral victory in 2004, achieved against Russian pressure, de-facto Abkhaz President Sergei Bagapsh and his entourage have tirelessly emphasized that Abkhazia was pursuing a “multivectoral foreign policy”. This was expressed most visibly in the “Key to the Future” document presented by Bagapsh in April 2006, the first paragraph of which stated:

“The processes of economic integration in the Black Sea region and prospects for more intensive economic and regional cooperation within the framework of the ‘European Union’s broad neighborhood strategy’ could become the [guarantees for...] good-neighborly relations.”

At the same time, the de-facto Foreign Ministry was even elaborating an Abkhaz version of an ENP action

plan. However, these intentions were only given limited expression in terms of practical, independent policy. While there was a certain openness towards carrying out EU projects that went beyond humanitarian aid to include civil society, human rights protection, and confidence-building between Georgia and Abkhazia, the Abkhaz side did not develop any reform efforts of its own modeled on EU norms in the problematic areas of justice, anti-corruption measures, or government administration. Furthermore, the Abkhaz leadership under Bagapsh, in spite of some positive steps, continued to waver on the matter where, despite obvious security-policy dependency on Russia, evidence of independent action would have been essential for creating confidence with external actors – in the matter of equal political and legal status for the approximately 50,000 Georgians who (with informal Abkhaz permission) have returned to the Gali region.

Since the Georgian deployment in the Kodori Gorge, Abkhaz foreign policy has fully returned to the Russian slipstream. The leadership of the breakaway territory has not been able or willing to embark upon independent political initiatives towards Georgia or the EU ever since.

### **Russia – “No NATO” First**

Similar to the Georgian and Abkhaz sides, Russia has always had difficulties in comprehending the language of the “soft approach” as a hallmark of EU policy. While, despite the EU’s financial engagement, its promises of material and political advantages to be derived from a values-based rapprochement with Europe necessarily appeared vague to the Abkhaz leadership, and were furthermore conditional from the start on the stipulation – unacceptable to the Abkhaz side – of a return to the Georgian state, Russia offered “hard currency” that was more in accordance with Abkhazia’s immediate requirements and much in response to immediate fears of a rearming Georgia: Military protection, passports, pension payments, economic investment, and tourists. Thus, the EU’s actions were largely allowed to proceed unimpeded, since over the past five years, only one issue has ultimately mattered both for Russians (who opposed it) and for Georgians (who were in favor): The prospect of NATO membership for Georgia, which Russia perceived as part of US-led policy to roll back Russian influence in the Southern Caucasus. The strategy of de-escalation and détente, which was included, at least in rudimentary form, in the EU policy towards the Abkhaz conflict, thus rapidly fell victim to the escalation fueled by Russia and Georgia: While the Georgians were fanning

the flames to generate more international attention and indignation towards Russia, the Russians were eagerly doing the same in order to turn the spotlight on the potential NATO member’s volatile secessionist conflicts. The outcome is well-known: Since the August 2008 war, there has been no more talk about early NATO membership for Georgia, and Russia’s control over Abkhazia and South Ossetia is stronger than ever.

### **The EU – Soft-Power Approach and Increased Political Involvement**

Unlike the US, which began to pursue a clear geopolitical strategy in the Caucasus at the end of the 1990s and has become a close ally of the Georgian state with its aspirations for NATO membership, the EU hesitated for a long time to strengthen its engagement in the Southern Caucasus. Many in the EU believed that this region was too distant and too complex, while at the same time being too close and important to Russia for the EU to compete with Moscow here. As far as the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict was concerned, the EU’s ability to effectively mediate between the parties to the conflict was compromised from the start by the fact that the European institutions lacked the political will to engage in any kind of conflict analysis and strategy that would potentially question the unanimous support of Georgia’s territorial integrity..

The ENP aside, a “Common European Policy on Georgia” has so far remained largely elusive, especially given that policies concerning Georgia often run into the EU’s Russia policies which are perhaps even more divisive. Coordination between the various interests and policy approaches of the European Commission, the Council, and the 27 member states remains difficult even after the war of August 2008. Furthermore, until the beginning of the Geneva multi-party negotiation “Geneva Talks on Georgia” after that war, the EU had no mandate for becoming involved in negotiation processes.

At the level of the Commission and its delegation, the EU has extended considerable support for the economic rehabilitation of the immediate conflict zones and the improvement of the humanitarian situation since the mid-1990s, and even more so since the inclusion of Georgia in the ENP program. EU-funded projects have been as depoliticized as possible and were not conditional on progress in the conflict resolution process (rebuilding infrastructure, hospitals, water supply etc.). In 2006, the EU started to support income-generating activities outside the immediate conflict zone. These included other parts of Abkhazia, such as the capital of

Sukhumi, and western Abkhazia. In addition, the EU offered support for civil society development and confidence-building measures, such as capacity-building for NGOs and universities, supporting civil society dialogue with the authorities, and supporting meetings between civil society leaders from Abkhazia and Georgia.

It is precisely because of the “apolitical” nature of its work and its overtures that the European Commission was able over a long period to gain access to decision-makers in Abkhazia. However, apart from financial assistance, there was little success in communicating more general political messages and information about the EU to a broader audience in the sense of a “soft-power” approach.

As demands by some EU member states and by Georgia for more active political engagement by the EU in the Abkhaz conflict became more vociferous, the latitude for European programs in Abkhazia was reduced accordingly. On the one hand, the Georgian government was increasingly forceful in voicing its claim for complete political control of all EU projects conducted in Abkhazia. In return, the Abkhaz side became notably less tolerant in the matter of projects being referred to in tenders, contract papers, etc. as part of the “EU programs in Georgia”.

In 2004, the EU responded to demands for stronger political engagement by nominating a EU Special Representative (EUSR), whose initially quite limited mandate was later extended to include “contributions” to peaceful resolution of the Caucasus conflicts. In regular journeys to Georgia and Abkhazia, the EUSR, together with several EU ambassadors accredited in Tbilisi, ensured that the EU was perceived more visibly as a political actor. Due to the continuous emphasis on Georgia’s territorial integrity as the point of departure for Europe’s political engagement, however, Georgians and Abkhaz became convinced that the EU was supportive or hostile to their respective positions.

### **After the August War: Finding the path back to “Europe”?**

In the conflict region itself, the events of August 2008 have considerably reduced the scope for political action. At the international level, Russia has irrevocably removed itself from the official position of a “facilitator” through its invasion of Georgia and the unilateral recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. At the same time, the role and the political responsibility of the EU have visibly increased through its co-chairmanship of the “Geneva Talks on Georgia” and the deployment of a military observer mission to Georgia, albeit only on the Geor-

gian side of the conflict divide at this time. The EU now has a second special representative on the ground in the Southern Caucasus, especially appointed for the conflicts in Georgia. Its Eastern Partnership Initiative has given the ENP a broader political profile in Georgia as well. In the Abkhaz perception, however, the EU has now permanently joined the Georgian side as an actor in the political process, and must be kept at arm’s length and treated with extreme caution.

It is all the more urgent that a consistent European strategy for Abkhazia be developed that is based on a realistic assessment of the current situation and includes credible incentives for an “aperture towards Europe” for both parties to the conflict. In terms of dealing with the immediately involved belligerent parties, a stronger EU engagement is burdened with several difficult questions, only a few of which will be mentioned here in conclusion:

How can the EU succeed in postponing the status issue at the Geneva negotiations and other talks on Abkhazia, despite its fundamental support for Georgia’s territorial integrity, to the point where negotiated solutions supported by all sides become feasible? How to find common ground for practical cooperation?

How can the EU’s engagement and visibility in Abkhazia be intensified despite resistance from the Georgian and Abkhaz sides? How can the Georgian government be convinced to give up its policy of isolating Abkhazia, which only serves to further increase the already strong trend towards factual annexation by Russia? How can the ongoing interest in Europe and a “multivectoral foreign-policy alignment”, which is shared by many Abkhaz people, be leveraged positively? Which formal arrangements are feasible that would allow the EU to carry out and maybe even expand its projects in Abkhazia in the fields of human rights, civil society, the media, and confidence-building measures?

In view of the tense security situation and the lack of mutual trust, how can the Georgian and Abkhaz people agree on cooperative security management for the Georgian population in the regions of Gali and Kodori, which are located on the Abkhaz side? The importance of a possible transformation of these two regions from conflict hotspots into bridges between Georgia and Abkhazia cannot be overstated. Which flexible solutions are feasible concerning matters such as citizenship, identity cards, etc. for Georgians in Gali that would meet the security demands of both sides?

How can the “Eastern Partnership Initiative” be designed to allow Abkhazia to participate without the precondition of recognizing Georgia’s territorial integ-

riety? Which flexible arrangements are conceivable for the issuing of visas for Abkhaz holders of Georgian passports that would allow Abkhazia to be included in European education and exchange programs?

Which measures would allow the EU to enhance the efficiency of its necessary long-term engagement on behalf of political and legal reforms in Georgia? The success of these reforms is a precondition for the country's peaceful domestic consolidation and thus also for greater flexibility towards the secessionist republics.

Since the events of August 2008, the prospects of peaceful reconciliation between Georgia and Abkha-

zia, whether in the framework of a common state or as two cooperating independent states, have become even more distant. The same is true to an even greater extent for the possible integration of both into a "political Europe" expanded to include the Black Sea region. Nevertheless, that seems to be the only alternative to the development that currently seems to be the most likely one, namely a factual annexation of the small Abkhaz state by Russia in a Southern Caucasus that will likely be afflicted by geopolitical confrontation and instability for a long time to come.

*Translated from German by Christopher Findlay*

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## Opinion

### Georgia's Relationship with Abkhazia

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#### Abstract

The August 2008 conflict between Georgia and Russia fundamentally changed the situation regarding the separatist territories in Georgia, fundamentally strengthening Russia's position. President Mikheil Saakashvili's government pursued contradictory policies on Abkhazia during 2004–2005, holding talks with the separatist government while also criticizing Russia's role. Georgia's decision to send troops into the Kodori Gorge in July 2006 put its relationship with the separatist region into an irreversible downward spiral. Between 2006 and 2008, the Georgian government could not offer a comprehensive plan for resolving the conflict. Russia played a provocative role at this time, but the Georgian government did its best to ensure that the Abkhaz separatist leadership adopted a pro-Russian position. Moving forward in the wake of the 2008 fighting, the most likely way to resolve the conflict is to reduce Abkhazia's isolation, which only increases Russia's control over it, and develop a more democratic Georgia that will attract Abkhazia away from the authoritarian Russia.

#### A New Reality on the Ground

The six-day armed conflict that took place from 7 to 12 August 2008 between Georgia and Russia was not unexpected, though the beginning was a surprise as were the inadequate and disproportional activities and reactions the two sides took. It was obvious that military preparations, including political components, had been underway for a long time. Nevertheless, this war could have been avoided. Unfortunately, the sides did their best to launch military attacks rather than try to prevent them.

The six-day blitzkrieg produced disastrous consequences. The fighting disrupted all the institutions working to resolve the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts. Accordingly, the parties must redefine the types of conflict that are taking place, the various participants in these conflicts and their status. Russia is seeking to change fundamentally the institutions involved in the conflicts, creating a new reality on the ground. All of these changes present a new challenge for Georgia as new state entities are emerging on Georgian territory. We should take this new