

Abkhaz

Profile

There is no reliable data on the demography of Abkhazia or the precise number of Abkhaz, itself a highly politicized issue. Abkhaz officials claim an ethnic Abkhaz population of 110,000, but this may be an overestimate. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) estimated the total population of Abkhazia to be in the region of 180,000–220,000 in 1998. International Crisis Group, on the basis of the 2005 electoral roll, estimated the total population of Abkhazia to be in the region of 157,000–190,000. Abkhaz are thought to constitute some 35 per cent of the total population of the republic.

The Abkhaz (Apswa in Abkhaz) speak a distinct north-west Caucasian language related to Circassian and the (extinct) Ubykh languages. They are concentrated in the unrecognized Republic of Abkhazia, although many Abkhaz have emigrated on a semi-permanent basis to the Russian Federation since Abkhazia's secession from Georgia. A very small number of Abkhaz remain in Georgia (3,500 according to the 2002 Georgian census). The Abkhaz language has had a literary tradition since the late nineteenth century based on successive Latin, Georgian and Cyrillic-based scripts. The religious orientation of the Abkhaz is ambiguous and syncretistic: Christian, Muslim and animist traditions have been salient in different historical periods.

Historical context

Abkhazia historically formed one of many principalities with a history of feudal semi-independence from the Georgian kingdoms; the name Apkhazeti was also used to denote western Georgia as a whole in the eighth to eleventh centuries. Linguistic evidence suggests that Abkhaz and Kartvelian languages have been in close contact for at least two millennia, although Georgian nationalist ideology portrays the Abkhaz as more recent newcomers to the region since the seventeenth century. The Russian Empire annexed Abkhazia in 1864, precipitating a massive emigration of the region's Muslim population to the Ottoman Empire, a movement known as the Muhajirstvo.

During the period of Georgian independence in 1918–21 and the early Soviet period, Abkhazia enjoyed republican status with treaty ties to Georgia, the binding nature of which remains a subject of heated controversy between Georgian and Abkhaz historians. Abkhazia was subsequently subsumed within Georgia as an autonomous republic in 1931. The remainder of the Stalinist period was characterized by the large-scale in-migration of Georgians (mainly Mingrelians) into Abkhazia and the repression of Abkhaz cultural institutions. Although cultural policy shifted in the 1950s towards enhancing Abkhaz rights, there were periodic demands from the Abkhaz for transfer to the Russian republic on grounds of discrimination at the hands of Georgians. These demands were most concretely rooted in the demographic marginalization of the Abkhaz, who by 1989 constituted only 17.8 per cent of the autonomous republic's population. Other sources of contention between Abkhaz and Georgian populations in Abkhazia included allocations of political posts, language policy and education.

Georgian moves towards independence exacerbated Abkhazian fears, leading to the outbreak of clashes

between local populations in Abkhazia in 1989. President Gamsakhurdia of Georgia negotiated a short-lived power-sharing agreement with the Abkhaz in 1991, which was rendered obsolete by the incursion of Georgian paramilitaries into Abkhazia in August 1992. Support from North Caucasian volunteers as well as locally stationed Russian units contributed to an Abkhaz victory and the de facto secession of Abkhazia from Georgia. The war involved serious human rights violations on both sides, with extensive ethnic cleansing, harassment of Abkhaz, Georgians and other ethnic groups, hostage-taking and indiscriminate shelling of civilian populations. As a result of the war the majority of Abkhazia's Georgian population was displaced to other regions of Georgia.

Negotiations to resolve the conflict have taken place under the auspices of the United Nations, while CIS (Russian) peacekeeping forces, mandated originally by the Sochi Agreement brokered by the Russian Federation in July 1993, were stationed in Abkhazia. The negotiations process has been blocked by disagreement over the prioritization of the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs), favoured by Georgia, or the prioritization of determining Abkhazia's future status, favoured by the Abkhaz. Since the ceasefire of 15 May 1994 significant though disputed numbers of Georgians have been able to return only to Abkhazia's southernmost Gali district, most of whom were displaced for a second time following a new outbreak of violence in May 1998.

Current issues

Abkhazia is now one of a number of de facto states in the former Soviet Union seeking international recognition as an independent state, although leading Abkhaz politicians often cite increased integration with the Russian Federation as their goal. Abkhaz sources claim that the Abkhaz now constitute a plurality in Abkhazia, alongside significant Armenian and Russian minorities. These groups demonstrate outward support for Abkhazian secession from Georgia, although this may be contingent on the preservation of a Russian orientation in Abkhazia's foreign policy. The Abkhaz Constitution contains non-discriminatory clauses and grants minorities the right to native-language primary and secondary education. In practice, Russian is the lingua franca in Abkhazia (and is recognized as a second state language in the constitution) and also the first language of many Abkhaz. Efforts to increase the role played by the Abkhaz language have been restricted by a lack of institutional capacity and qualified teachers, as well as resistance from russophone Abkhaz.

Politics in Abkhazia continue to be dominated by the conflict with Georgia and the fluctuating interest of regional powers in resolving it. Although many commentators, especially in Georgia, assume that Russia controls developments in Abkhazia, this is misleading. This was demonstrated in Abkhazia's (internationally not recognized) presidential election of 3 October 2004, when it was widely assumed that the Russian-backed candidate and then-prime minister Raul Khajimba, also supported by the ailing outgoing President Vladislav Ardzinba, would win. Overt Russian support for Khajimba backfired however, and following the count Abkhazia's Supreme Court declared businessman Sergey Baghapsh the winner. Pressure on the Supreme Court to reverse this decision, compounded by Russian pledges to intervene in defence of its interests in Abkhazia, led to a stand-off between supporters of each candidate. The conflict was eventually resolved by an agreement between Baghapsh and Khajimba to run new elections, in which they would run on a joint ticket as president and a new post of vice-president respectively. This compromise succeeded in capturing 90 per cent of the vote in new elections, and the new administration took office in February 2005. Parliamentary elections were held in March 2007 despite opposition from Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili and his US allies. There was a 44 per cent turn-out for the elections and, of the 34 candidates that stood the second round, 26 Abkhazians, three Russians, three Armenians, two Georgians and one Turk were elected.

There is little doubt that Russia's leverage in Abkhazia is considerable. Due to a formal blockade from the Georgian side, Russia provides Abkhazia's only external economic contact and destination for its

principal exports of nuts and citrus fruits. Russians also provide the bulk of the tourists who still make use of Abkhazia's once flourishing tourist industry (official Abkhaz sources claim more than 1.5 million tourists visited Abkhazia in 2005, compared with 400,000 in 2004). Significant numbers of the population in Abkhazia have also acquired Russian passports, and are regularly described by Russian political figures as 'Russia's citizens'.

Trends in the peace process in 2006 offered cautious grounds for optimism. In May the Coordinating Council, a forum established by the UN in 1997, convened for the first time since January 2001. High-ranking officials on both sides indicated that initial agreements had been reached on the issue of the return of Georgian IDPs beyond the Gali district and on the contentious issue of Georgian-medium education in Abkhazia. However, agreement on the status and mandate of (Russian) CIS peacekeepers in Abkhazia remains elusive, as does any kind of consensus on what kind of status Abkhazia may in the future enjoy vis-à-vis the Georgian state. Concepts for this status have been presented for public discussion in Georgia, which envisage different forms of autonomy ranging from limited self-government to confederal status with numerous constitutional guarantees. Neither option at present, however, would satisfy Abkhaz desires for unqualified independence.

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