

FREEDOM IN THE WORLD

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Abkhazia

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OVERVIEW:

Abkhazia held a snap presidential election in August following the unexpected death of President Sergei Bagapsh in May. Incumbent vice president Aleksandr Ankvab won with 55 percent of the vote in balloting that was widely lauded as generally free and fair, and took office in September. In contrast to previous elections, Russia did not endorse a candidate, though the Kremlin continued to exert economic and military pressure on the territory.

Annexed by Russia in 1864, Abkhazia became an autonomous republic within Soviet Georgia in 1930. After the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, Abkhazia declared its independence from Georgia in 1992, leading to a year-long war that left thousands dead and displaced more than 200,000 residents, mainly ethnic Georgians. Abkhaz forces won de facto independence for the republic in 1993, and an internationally brokered ceasefire was signed in Moscow in 1994.

Incumbent Abkhaz president Vladislav Ardzinba ran unopposed for reelection in 1999, and a reported 98 percent of voters supported independence in a concurrent referendum. Deputies loyal to Ardzinba won all 35 seats in the 2002 parliamentary elections after the opposition withdrew to protest bias by the election commission and state-backed media.

Under pressure from a powerful opposition movement, Prime Minister Gennady Gagulia resigned in April 2003 and was succeeded by Defense Minister Raul Khadjimba, though Ardzinba refused to step down as president.

An opposition candidate, former prime minister Sergei Bagapsh, defeated Khadjimba in the December 2004 presidential election, but he was pressured into a January 2005 rerun with Khadjimba—who was backed by Ardzinba and Moscow—as his vice presidential running mate. The new ticket won the rerun with 91 percent of the vote.

In July 2006, Georgian troops occupied the strategic Kodori Gorge, the only portion of Abkhazia still under Georgian control, after a Kodori-based Georgian paramilitary group refused orders from Tbilisi to disarm its fighters. The pro-Tbilisi government-in-exile for Abkhazia, composed of ethnic Georgians, was transferred to the gorge later that year.

Members of three pro-Bagapsh parties captured more than 20 seats in the 2007 parliamentary elections, and a number of opposition candidates also won seats, despite claims that Bagapsh interfered with the electoral process.

In April 2008, Moscow increased its deployment of peacekeepers in Abkhazia to more than 2,500, drawing sharp international criticism. After years of rising tension, war broke out in August between Georgian forces on one side and Russian, South Ossetian, and Abkhaz forces on the other. Although the brief conflict centered on South Ossetia, another Russian-backed Georgian territory that had won de facto independence in the early 1990s, Abkhaz troops succeeded in capturing the Kodori Gorge and additional territory on the Georgian-Abkhaz border.

In late August, following a French-brokered ceasefire, Russia formally recognized both Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states, though nearly all of the international community continued to view the territories as de jure parts of Georgia.

A 2009 Russian-Abkhaz agreement authorized Moscow to build and upgrade military bases and reinforce the Abkhaz-Georgian border. Abkhazia later announced that it would transfer control of its airport to Russia, and the government licensed Russia's state-owned oil company Rosneft to explore for oil in the territory.

Bagapsh won reelection in December 2009, capturing more than 59 percent of the vote amid 73 percent turnout. Khadjimba placed a distant second with just 15 percent. Though all five candidates reportedly endorsed Russia's preeminent role in the territory, Abkhaz opposition journalists and politicians, led by Khadjimba, accused the government of ceding undue control to Moscow.

In February 2010, Bagapsh signed a second agreement with Russia, allowing it to build three new bases for naval, air, and ground forces. About 3,500 Russian soldiers and 1,500 border guards were stationed in the territory as of August 2011. In October, Russia's parliament passed an agreement to maintain the bases for 49 years, followed by automatic 15-year extensions.

In May 2011, Bagapsh died unexpectedly after lung surgery, leading to a snap presidential election in August between Vice President Aleksandr Ankvab,

Prime Minister Sergei Shamba, and Khadjimba, running as an opposition candidate. Amid 70 percent turnout, Ankvab won with 55 percent of the vote, followed by Shamba with 21 percent and Khadjimba with 19.5 percent. The election was considered genuinely competitive, and Moscow did not publicly endorse a candidate, though all three promised to maintain strong ties with Russia.

The small Pacific states of Vanuatu and Tuvalu recognized Abkhazia's independence during 2011, joining Russia, Venezuela, Nicaragua, and Nauru. In October, the territory hosted the World Domino Championship, previously reserved for UN member states, as part of an ongoing bid to gain broader recognition.

POLITICAL RIGHTS AND CIVIL LIBERTIES:

Residents of Abkhazia can elect government officials, but the more than 200,000 Georgians who fled the region during the war in the early 1990s cannot vote in the elections held by the separatist government. Most of the ethnic Georgians who remain in Abkhazia are also unable to vote in local polls, as they lack Abkhaz passports, though 9,000 passports were issued to mostly ethnic Georgian residents of Gali for the 2011 presidential election, compared with 3,000 in 2009. None of the separatist government's elections have been recognized internationally.

The 1999 constitution established a presidential system, stating that only ethnic Abkhaz can be elected to the post. The president and vice president are elected for five-year terms. The parliament, or People's Assembly, consists of 35 members elected for five-year terms from single-seat constituencies.

Corruption in Abkhazia is believed to be extensive, and government officials are not required to provide declarations of income. In January 2011, Russia's Audit Chamber accused Abkhaz leaders of misappropriating \$12 million allocated by Moscow for infrastructure development.

Local broadcast media are largely controlled by the government, which operates the Abkhaz State Television and Radio Company (AGTRK). In July 2010, opposition journalists and politicians proposed a package of reforms that would turn AGTRK into an independent public-service broadcaster, though it remained state run at the end of 2011. All the major Russian television stations also broadcast into the territory. Private broadcasters received increased government scrutiny ahead of the 2009 elections, and the opposition complained of inadequate access to broadcast media. By contrast, during the 2011 election campaign the three presidential candidates received equal airtime on state television and agreed to televised debates.

The print media are considered more influential, consisting of several weekly newspapers. The government publication *Respublika Abkhazii* competes with two main independent papers, *Chegemskaya Pravda* and *Novaya Gazeta*.

Internet access has increased since 2008, with an estimated 25 percent of the population online. Some legal restrictions apply to both traditional and online media, including criminal libel statutes.

Religious freedom in Abkhazia is affected by the political situation. The Abkhaz Orthodox Church declared its separation from the Georgian Orthodox Church in 2009, and a number of Georgian Orthodox clerics have been expelled for alleged spying or refusal to recognize separatist authorities. In 2011, the Abkhaz church was split into two factions when a group of clerics formed a new diocese, having objected to the leadership's more deferential stance toward the Russian Orthodox Church. Neither faction is internationally recognized as independent from the Georgian church. Though a 1995 decree bans Jehovah's Witnesses, they continue to practice openly in Abkhazia, as do other denominations. Abkhazia's Muslims, who make up about 30 percent of the population, are allowed to practice freely.

The Abkhaz constitution offers some protection to ethnic minorities seeking education in their native languages. Armenian-language schools generally operate without government interference, but many of Gali's Georgian-language schools have been converted to instruction in Russian, leaving the future status of the remaining Georgian-language schools uncertain. Some of Gali's ethnic Georgian students regularly travel to Georgian-controlled territory to attend classes. Ethnic Georgian residents who do not hold Abkhaz passports are restricted from studying at Sukhumi State University.

Although most nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) rely on funding from outside the territory, the NGO sector exerts a significant degree of influence on government policies. Freedom of assembly is somewhat limited, but the opposition and civil society groups mounted several protests in 2009 and 2010 to challenge the government's increasing dependence on Russia as well as a proposal to offer citizenship to some ethnic Georgian returnees.

Abkhazia's judicial code is based on Russia's, and the criminal justice system suffers from chronic problems including limited defendant access to qualified legal counsel, violations of due process, and lengthy pretrial detentions. Local NGOs have petitioned for significant judicial reform.

Gali's ethnic Georgian residents reported an improvement of their human rights situation in 2011, though they continued to suffer from widespread poverty and their undefined legal status within Abkhazia. Ethnic Georgians are eligible for Abkhaz passports—entitling them to vote, own property, run a business, and obtain Russian citizenship and pensions—but on the condition that they give up their Georgian passports, which provide significant economic and legal benefits.

Travel and choice of residence are limited by the ongoing separatist dispute. Most ethnic Georgians who fled Abkhazia during the early 1990s live in Tbilisi and western Georgia. As many as 47,000 former Gali residents have returned to Abkhazia since 1994, with an additional 5,000 who commute between Abkhazia and Georgia, though the process of obtaining travel permits remains expensive and burdensome for Gali Georgians. Under a law preventing foreigners from buying Abkhaz property, ethnic Russians have been barred from acquiring residences in the territory, and some have reported that their homes have been confiscated.

Since the 2008 war, ethnic Abkhaz have had greater difficulty receiving visas to travel abroad, including to the United States and European Union countries. About 90 percent of Abkhazia's residents hold Russian passports, since Abkhaz travel documents are not internationally recognized. In April 2011, Russia implemented an agreement on visa-free travel between Abkhazia and Russia.

Equality of opportunity and normal business activities are limited by corruption, criminal organizations, and economic reliance on Russia, which pays for half the state budget and accounts for 99 percent of foreign investment.

A strong NGO sector has contributed to women's involvement in business and civil society. However, Abkhaz women complain of being underrepresented in government positions, holding only four of the 35 seats in Abkhazia's parliament.

2012 SCORES

STATUS

Partly Free

FREEDOM RATING

5.0

CIVIL LIBERTIES

5

POLITICAL RIGHTS

5

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