

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

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Freedom in the World - Abkhazia [Georgia] (2007)

Population:
340,000

Capital:
N/A

Political Rights Score: 5
Civil Liberties Score: 5
Status: Partly Free

Overview

The political environment in Abkhazia remained tense in 2006, particularly regarding relations with Georgia, as it appeared that hostilities could break out, potentially leading to a wider regional conflict. Violence in Abkhazia's Gali district, which had an ethnic Georgian population, remained a persistent problem.

Annexed by Russia in 1864, Abkhazia became an autonomous republic within Soviet Georgia in 1930. The year after the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, Abkhazia declared its independence from Georgia, igniting a war that lasted nearly 14 months. In September 1993, Abkhaz forces, with covert assistance from Russia, seized control of the city of Sukhumi, ultimately defeating the Georgian army and winning de facto independence for the republic. As a result of the conflict, more than 200,000 residents, mostly ethnic Georgians, fled Abkhazia, and casualty figures were estimated in the thousands. An internationally brokered cease-fire was signed in Moscow in 1994, although the territory's final status remains unresolved.

In the October 1999 elections for president of Abkhazia, Vladislav Ardzinba, the incumbent and the only candidate running for office, was reelected. The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), the United Nations, and other international organizations refused to recognize the vote as legitimate. In a concurrent referendum, the results of which were not accepted by any state, a reported 98 percent of voters supported independence for Abkhazia. Georgia denounced the polls as illegal and as an attempt to sabotage peace talks.

Tensions in the Kodori Gorge, an area of Abkhazia controlled partly by Georgia and partly by the separatist government, underscored the fragility of the region's peace. In October 2001, a group reportedly consisting of Chechen rebels and Georgian partisans clashed with Abkhaz troops following a deadly raid on a village in the gorge. The downing of a UN helicopter and the bombing of several Abkhaz villages by aircraft that Georgian authorities alleged had come from Russia intensified the conflict. Tbilisi responded by sending troops to the upper part of the gorge in what it said was an operation to protect ethnic Georgians living there from separatist attacks. Abkhaz officials insisted that despite a UN-brokered protocol calling for the withdrawal of Georgian forces, which was signed by Russia and Georgia in 2002, Georgia had not pulled all of its troops out of the Kodori Gorge.

Deputies loyal to Ardzinba won a landslide victory in the March 2002 parliamentary elections when the opposition Revival and People's Party withdrew most of its candidates in protest over the conduct of the campaign. Government-backed

candidates, who won all 35 seats in the legislature, ran unopposed for 13 of them. Among the problems cited during the elections were that ethnic Georgians displaced by the war were not able to vote, official radio and television promoted progovernment candidates, and the head of the Central Election Commission had disqualified a number of candidates supported by the opposition. As with previous voting in Abkhazia, the international community declared the elections to be illegitimate.

In April 2003, after just four months in office, the government of Prime Minister Gennady Gagulia resigned. Gagulia stepped down following pressure from Amtsakhara, an increasingly powerful opposition political movement representing primarily veterans of the 1992–93 war, which had threatened to organize a mass rally if he remained in office. On April 22, Defense Minister Raul Khajimba was named to succeed Gagulia as prime minister. Subsequently, Amtsakhara also called on Ardzinba to resign as president because of his poor health. Ardzinba, who was undergoing medical treatment in Moscow for an undisclosed illness and was no longer actively involved in the daily running of the government, insisted that he had no intention of stepping down before the next presidential election in October 2004.

In advance of the presidential poll, a new political movement called United Abkhazia (Yedinaya Abkhazia) took shape, with the aim of putting forward a single opposition candidate. However, all three of the new movement's leaders became presidential candidates: Sergei Shamba, the Abkhaz foreign minister; Nodar Khashba, a senior official in Russia's emergencies ministry; and Sergei Bagapsh, a former prime minister. The Central Election Commission barred one of the leading contenders, Alexander Ankvab, for allegedly failing to meet the residency requirement for presidential candidates. The commission also cited his refusal to take a full language test to evaluate his command of Abkhaz, which is the official state language of the Abkhaz Republic. Ankvab, who was the breakaway republic's interior minister during the war of 1992–93, has been among the most prominent of Ardzinba's opponents.

Election officials declared Bagapsh the winner of the October 3 poll with 50.08 percent of the vote, more than the 50 percent needed to avert a second round. The postelection period, from the end of 2004 through the beginning of 2005, featured a series of charges and countercharges between Bagapsh and Khajimba, who had the backing of the Ardzinba administration and Moscow. Ardzinba, who had handpicked Khajimba as his successor, contested Bagapsh's apparent victory and refused to leave office. Meanwhile, Russia had imposed economic sanctions on Abkhazia after Bagapsh was declared the winner. Under pressure from Moscow, Bagapsh and Khajimba ultimately agreed to a deal in which Khajimba would be the vice presidential candidate on Bagapsh's ticket in a rerun of the election. Bagapsh won the presidency in the fresh January 2005 vote, with the newly allied running mates garnering 91 percent of the vote. Turnout was 58 percent of the electorate, a higher-than-expected figure.

In February 2006, key players within Abkhazia's elite put their names to a declaration expressing their desire to have Abkhazia recognized as an independent state. President Bagapsh, Vice President Khajimba, Prime Minister Ankvab and Speaker of Parliament Nuzgar Ashuba headed the list of governmental and nongovernmental figures who signed the document. A perception that Georgia was increasingly likely to take military action was believed to have prompted the public

move.

In May 2006, Georgian and Abkhaz officials participated in a UN Coordinating Council meeting, where each side provided the other with peace plans. The Coordinating Council was established by the United Nations in 1997 as a vehicle for discussing issues related to resolving the Abkhaz conflict. The 2006 gathering was the first time since 2001 that the parties had met through this forum. The meeting took up, among other issues, the question of permitting the return of the estimated 200,000 displaced Georgians who fled Abkhazia during the 1992–93 hostilities.

In an effort to reestablish its authority, in July, Georgian troops entered the upper Kodori Valley, the only portion of Abkhazia that has been under Georgian control. The Georgian central government's move into the Kodori Valley was in response to the refusal of Emzar Kvitsiani, the leader of Kodori-based paramilitary group, to disarm his militia groups.

Political Rights and Civil Liberties

Residents of Abkhazia can elect government officials, but the more than 200,000 displaced Georgians who fled the region during the war in the early 1990s could not vote in any of the elections held since Abkhazia's de facto independence. International organizations including the OSCE, as well as the Georgian government, have criticized the polls as illegitimate.

Although the 1994 constitution established a presidential-parliamentary system of government, the president exercises extensive control. Abkhazia's 1994 constitution provides for a president, who is elected with his vice president, for a five-year term. The parliament, or "People's Assembly," contains 36 members who are elected for five years in single-seat constituencies.

The agreement struck in December 2004 between Sergei Bagapsh (now president) and Raul Khajimba (now vice president) in advance of the January 2005 rerun of the presidential election was to provide Khajimba's supporters the right to 40 percent of the positions in the future government, in the event that the Bagapsh-Khajimba ticket was successful. The ethnic Georgian Abkhazian Supreme Council has operated as a government in exile in Tbilisi since being expelled from Abkhazia in 1993.

Opposition political parties include Aitara (Revival. Amtsakhara, a political group representing primarily veterans of the 1992–93 war, is a growing force in the territory's political life.

Corruption in the territory is believed to be extensive. Abkhazia is not listed separately on Transparency International's 2006 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Several independent newspapers are published in the territory. Electronic media are controlled by the state and generally reflect government positions. Private television and radio stations are restricted in broadcasting news with political content. Abkhazia's broadcasting infrastructure is poor, as much of it was destroyed during the civil war more than a decade ago.

Most nongovernmental organizations operating in Abkhazia rely on funding from outside the territory.

Defendants' limited access to qualified legal counsel, violations of due process, and lengthy pretrial detentions are among the systemic problems in Abkhazia's criminal justice system.

The human rights and humanitarian situation in Abkhazia continued to be a very serious problem in 2006. In its July 2005 resolution extending the Georgia observer mission (UNOMIG) through January 2006, the UN Security Council stressed "[t]he urgent need for progress on the question of refugees and internally displaced persons." With increased tension plaguing the region, the mandate was last extended by resolution 1716 (October 2006) and was set to expire on April 15, 2007. In August 2006, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan appointed Jean Arnault as Special Representative of the Secretary-General for Georgia.

The security environment in the Gali district, whose population is largely ethnic Georgian, remained fragile over the course of 2006, with a number of killings occurring during the year. While some Georgian schools operate in Gali, many residents in the district do not have access to education in the Georgian language.

Travel and choice of residence are limited by the ongoing separatist dispute. Approximately 200,000 ethnic Georgians who fled Abkhazia during the early 1990s are living in western Georgia, primarily in the Zugdidi district bordering Abkhazia. Most of these internally displaced persons are unable or unwilling to return because they fear for their safety. As much as 85 percent of the Abkhaz population holds Russian passports and receive social benefits as Russian citizens.

Equality of opportunity and normal business activities are limited by widespread corruption, the control by criminal organizations of large segments of the economy, and the continuing effects of the war. Abkhazia's economy is heavily reliant on Russia.