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Freedom in the World 2010 - Abkhazia [Georgia]

Capital: N/A

Population: 216,000

Political Rights Score: 5 *

Civil Liberties Score: 5 *

Status: Partly Free

Overview

Following its recognition of Abkhazia's independence in 2008, Russia significantly tightened its grip on the territory in 2009. In June, the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) ended its 16-year mission in Abkhazia after an extension was vetoed by Moscow. During an August visit, Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin pledged funding to reinforce the Abkhaz border and establish a military base in the territory. Abkhazia later announced that it would transfer control of strategic assets to Russia, prompting protests by the Abkhaz opposition. In September, Venezuela became the third country, after Russia and Nicaragua, to recognize the territory's independence; Nauru followed suit in December. Also that month, Abkhaz president Sergei Bagapsh easily won reelection.

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 September 1993, and in May 1994 an internationally brokered ceasefire was signed in Moscow.

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 the Kremlin – 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 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.

Candidates from more than a dozen parties competed in the March 2007 Abkhaz parliamentary elections. Members of the three pro-Bagapsh parties captured more than 20 seats, and a number of opposition candidates were elected as well despite claims that Bagapsh had 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 several years of rising tension, war broke out in August between Georgian forces on the one hand 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. It was joined by Nicaragua in September, Venezuela a year later, and Nauru in December 2009. Most of the international community continued to view the two territories as de jure parts of Georgia.

Throughout 2009, Russia steadily increased its influence in Abkhazia, leading the Abkhaz opposition to accuse the government of ceding undue control to Moscow and call for a diversification of the territory's political and economic ties abroad.

The United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG), which had monitored the conflict for 16 years, ended its mission in June after Russia refused to extend its mandate unless the organization recognized Abkhazia's independence. UNOMIG was subsequently replaced by European Union (EU) monitors who could only operate on the Georgian side of the de facto border.

In August, Russian prime minister Vladimir Putin made his first postwar visit to Abkhazia, pledging hundreds of millions of dollars in social spending and additional funding to establish a military base and reinforce the Abkhaz-Georgian border. Abkhazia later announced that it would transfer control of its railway and airport to Moscow, and the government licensed Russia's state-owned oil company Rosneft to explore for oil in the territory.

Bagapsh won reelection as president of Abkhazia in December, capturing more than 59 percent of the vote in the first round amid 73 percent turnout. Khadjimba placed a distant second with just 15 percent. All five candidates reportedly endorsed Russia's preeminent role in the territory.

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. None of the elections have been recognized internationally.

The 1994 constitution established a presidential-parliamentary system, but the president exercises substantial control. 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. The republic was not listed separately on Transparency International's 2009 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Electronic media, the main source of information in Abkhazia, are partly controlled by the state. There are some privately owned and independent news outlets, including several newspapers, but they have reported pressure from the authorities. The government increased its scrutiny of private outlets ahead of the December 2009 presidential election. One private television channel was denied a broadcast license, and a journalist was sentenced to three years in prison for libeling the president in an online article.

Religious freedom in Abkhazia is affected by the political situation. In April 2009, three Georgian Orthodox priests were expelled for alleged spying, and several Georgian Orthodox monks and nuns were expelled from the Kodori Gorge after refusing to recognize Abkhaz authority in the area. The Abkhaz Orthodox Church declared its separation from the Georgian Orthodox Church in September. Though a 1995 decree bans Jehovah's Witnesses, they continue to practice openly in Abkhazia, as do other denominations.

The Abkhaz constitution offers some protection to ethnic minorities seeking education in their native languages. Armenian-language schools generally operate without government interference, but unofficial Georgian-language schools have reported significantly increased pressure since the 2008 war. Ethnic Georgian residents who hold Georgian passports are restricted from studying at Sokhumi State University.

Freedom of assembly is somewhat limited, but the opposition and civil society groups mounted a number of protests in 2009 to challenge the government's allegedly excessive concessions to Russia as well as a proposal to offer citizenship to some ethnic Georgian returnees. Although most nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Abkhazia rely on funding from outside the territory, the NGO sector is relatively vibrant and exerts a significant degree of influence on government policies. Abkhaz NGOs accepted EU grants for the first time in September 2009, following the rewording of the grant terms to make them acceptable to Abkhazia. Abkhaz NGOs are not permitted by the government to monitor local elections.

Defendants' limited access to qualified legal counsel, violations of due process, and lengthy pretrial detentions are among the chronic problems in Abkhazia's criminal justice system, though several Abkhaz NGOs are working on programs to make the judiciary more independent and transparent.

The human rights situation for the ethnic Georgian population in Gali worsened in 2009. Residents reported increased pressure from the Abkhaz authorities, and they also continued to suffer from widespread poverty, particularly after the closure of UNOMIG, which supplied many jobs in the region. A July amendment to a law on citizenship that would have made many of Gali's approximately 45,000 ethnic Georgians eligible for Abkhaz passports – entitling them to vote, own property, run a business, and obtain Russian citizenship and pensions – if they gave up their Georgian passports was scrapped in August following protests by the opposition, which claimed the move would undermine Abkhaz security.

Travel and choice of residence are limited by the ongoing separatist dispute. Most of the ethnic Georgians who fled Abkhazia during the early 1990s are living in Tbilisi and western Georgia. Russian border guards took over the de facto border in May 2009 and hampered freedom of movement for Gali Georgians, many of whom rely on unofficial cross-border trade and receive pensions from Tbilisi. Since the war, ethnic Abkhaz have had greater difficulty receiving visas to travel abroad, including to the United States and EU countries.

As many as 85 percent of Abkhazia's residents hold Russian passports and receive social benefits as Russian citizens, which they claim is a matter of necessity in light of the fact that Abkhaz travel documents are not internationally recognized.

Equality of opportunity and normal business activities are limited by corruption, criminal organizations, and the Abkhaz economy's almost complete reliance on Russia. Russia's successful bid to hold the 2014 Olympics in nearby Sochi will likely have an additional economic impact on the region.

**Countries are ranked on a scale of 1-7, with 1 representing the highest level of freedom and 7 representing the lowest level of freedom.*

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