

Flygtningenævnets baggrundsmateriale

Bilagsnr.:	112
Land:	Georgien
Kilde:	Freedom House
Titel:	Freedom in the World - Abkhasia (Georgia) (2008)
Udgivet:	1. juni 2008
Optaget på baggrundsmaterialet:	16. september 2008



Freedom in the World - Abkhazia [Georgia] (2008)

Capital:
N/A

Population:
340,000

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

Overview

Abkhazia held parliamentary elections in March 2007 that were not recognized by the international community, with pro-presidential parties taking a strong majority of seats. The political environment remained tense throughout the year due to deteriorating relations with Georgia and Russia's growing influence in the territory. The problem was exacerbated by a series of violent incidents, including the deaths of two Abkhaz militiamen and a missile attack on a Georgian-controlled portion of Abkhazia.

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, 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 ceasefire was signed in Moscow in 1994, although the territory's final status remains unresolved.

Abkhaz president Vladislav Ardzinba ran unopposed for reelection in 1999. 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 and similarly unrecognized referendum, a reported 98 percent of voters supported independence for Abkhazia. Georgia denounced the polls as an illegal attempt to sabotage peace talks.

Deputies loyal to Ardzinba swept the 2002 parliamentary elections after the opposition withdrew most of its candidates to protest the conduct of the campaign. Government-backed candidates, who won all 35 seats, ran unopposed for 13 of them. State-backed electronic media promoted progovernment candidates, and the Central Election Commission disqualified a number of opposition candidates. Ethnic Georgians displaced by the war were not able to vote.

After four months in office, Prime Minister Gennady Gagulia's government resigned in April 2003 under pressure from Amtsakhara, an increasingly powerful opposition movement comprised mainly of war veterans. Raul Khadjimba was named prime minister, and although Amtsakhara urged Ardzinba to resign as well, he refused to step down before the 2004 presidential election.

Election officials declared former prime minister Sergei Bagapsh of the new

opposition movement United Abkhazia to be the winner of the October 2004 poll, crediting him with enough of the vote—50.08 percent—to avert a second round. Ardzinba, who had handpicked Khadjimba as his successor, contested Bagapsh's win. Khadjimba was also backed by Russia, which imposed economic sanctions on Abkhazia. A compromise was struck under which Khadjimba would be the vice presidential candidate on Bagapsh's ticket during an election rerun. In January 2005, Bagapsh won the presidency with 91 percent of the vote amid a higher-than-expected turnout of 58 percent.

In February 2006, the leaders of Abkhazia's government and nongovernmental elite signed a declaration expressing their desire to have Abkhazia recognized as an independent state. The fear that Georgia was likely to take military action against Abkhazia was thought to have prompted the move.

Georgian and Abkhaz officials in May 2006 provided respective peace plans to the UN Coordinating Council, which was established in 1997 to consider issues related to resolving the Abkhaz conflict. It was the first time since 2001 that the parties had met through the forum.

Georgian troops in July 2006 entered the upper Kodori Gorge, the only portion of Abkhazia under Georgian control. A bout of fighting had erupted in the volatile area in 2001. The new Georgian deployment came after Emzar Kvitsiani, the leader of a Kodori-based paramilitary group, withdrew his recognition of Tbilisi's authority and refused orders to disarm his fighters. After regaining control of the area, Georgian officials said the Abkhaz government-in-exile, based in Tbilisi and comprised of ethnic Georgians, would be moved to the Kodori Gorge.

A series of events in 2007 exacerbated tensions between Georgia and Abkhazia and prompted tit-for-tat accusations between Georgia and Russia as well. On March 11, the Kodori Gorge was struck by an antitank missile, with Georgian officials reporting that a Russian helicopter had invaded Georgia's airspace. The UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) was sent to investigate the accusations. On September 20, two Abkhaz militiamen were killed, and others captured, during a clash with Georgian Interior Ministry forces. Russian and Abkhaz officials claimed that Georgian forces had executed the men on Abkhaz territory. Finally, on October 30, Georgian servicemen were detained by Russian peacekeepers in Ganmukhuri, a Georgian-controlled town on the border with Abkhazia. Though the servicemen were soon released, Georgia and Russia traded accusations, ratcheting up tensions in the restive region. Candidates from more than a dozen parties competed for 35 seats in the March 2007 parliamentary elections, with 18 deputies elected in the first round and the remainder of the races decided in subsequent runoff votes. Opposition members argued that Bagapsh had interfered with the election process to support loyalist candidates. More than 20 seats were captured by members of the three pro-Bagapsh parties—United Abkhazia, Amtsakhara, and Aytayra (Revival), the party of Prime Minister Aleksandr Ankvab.

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 by the separatist government. 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. The president and vice president are elected for five-year terms. The parliament, or People's Assembly, consists of 35 members elected for five-years terms from single-seat constituencies.

Sergei Bagapsh defeated Raul Khadjimba—who was backed by the Kremlin and outgoing president Vladislav Ardzinba—in the December 2004 presidential election, but he was pressured into accepting a January 2005 rerun with Khadjimba as his vice presidential running-mate. The deal included a pledge to grant 40 percent of the positions in the incoming government to Khadjimba supporters. The new People's Assembly elected in 2007 was dominated by pro-Bagapsh parties, but it also included a number of opposition lawmakers; the legislature elected in 2002 had consisted entirely of progovernment deputies due to opposition boycotts and other irregularities.

An ethnic Georgian government-in-exile has operated with the support of the Georgian authorities since Abkhazia achieved de facto independence in the 1990s. The entity moved from Tbilisi to the upper Kodori Gorge after Georgian forces reasserted control over the area in 2006.

Corruption in Abkhazia is believed to be extensive. The republic was not listed separately on Transparency International's 2007 Corruption Perceptions Index.

Electronic media are controlled by the state and generally reflect government positions. A ban prohibiting private broadcasters from airing news or political programming was lifted in 2004, and several live news programs were given broadcasting rights in 2007. However, independent media outlets report continued pressure from the authorities. Though they are hampered by funding and distribution problems, several independent newspapers are published in Abkhazia, including popular opposition newspapers that are critical of the government.

According to the U.S. State Department's 2007 International Religious Freedom Report, the Georgian Orthodox Church claims that it is unable to operate in Abkhazia and accuses the Russian Orthodox Church of tacitly supporting separatism. Other Christian denominations have apparently been able to operate freely.

Most nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in Abkhazia rely on funding from outside the territory, but the NGO sector is relatively vibrant and exerts a degree of influence on government policies.

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. The legal system is based largely on a Russian model. Abkhaz officials reported a prison population of 370 as of 2007.

The human rights and humanitarian situation in Abkhazia continued to be a very serious problem in 2007. The UN Security Council has repeatedly stressed the need to avoid outbreaks of violence and resolve the status of refugees and internally displaced persons. The security environment in the Gali district, whose population is largely ethnic Georgian, remained fragile in 2007; the area's residents were viewed with suspicion by both the Abkhaz and Georgian authorities.

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.

As much as 85 percent of Abkhazia's population 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 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, and Russia's successful bid to hold the 2014 Olympics in nearby Sochi will likely have a notable economic impact on the region.