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Freedom in the World 2011 - Abkhazia

Capital: N/A

Population: 216,000

Political Rights Score: 5 *

Civil Liberties Score: 5 *

Status: Partly Free

Overview

Russia continued to tighten its grip on Abkhazia in 2010, and the Abkhaz government faced growing domestic political pressure as a result. In February, Abkhaz president Sergei Bagapsh signed an agreement allowing Moscow to build additional military bases in the territory. The opposition and independent media repeatedly accused the government of ceding too much control to Moscow.

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 an internationally brokered ceasefire was signed in Moscow in May 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 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 also elected, 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 several 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 two territories as de jure parts of Georgia.

A Russian-Abkhaz agreement signed in September 2009 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 and possibly its railway 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 in the first round 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 a naval base in the northern coastal town of Ochamchire, an air base in Gudauta, and a base for ground forces in the Kodori Gorge. Russia already had an estimated 4,000 to 5,000 troops in the territory, and air-defense missiles were deployed later in 2010. The opposition and independent media criticized these concessions to Moscow, but Bagapsh argued that Russian support was a political and economic necessity.

Vice President Aleksandr Ankvab, who had served as prime minister during Bagapsh's first term, survived an assassination attempt in September when an unidentified attacker fired a grenade launcher at his home. Observers speculated on a range of possible political or criminal motives.

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 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.

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 year's end. All the major Russian television stations also broadcast into the territory. Private broadcasters received increased government scrutiny ahead of the 2009 election, and one television station was denied a license. Nevertheless, Abaza-TV, a private station based in Sukhumi, supported the opposition during the election. In May 2010, the opposition complained of inadequate access to broadcast media.

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*, which also supported the opposition in 2009. In August 2010, *Novaya Gazeta* published two articles that criticized Bagapsh's concessions to Russia and demanded that Georgian officials from the 1992 war be extradited from Moscow to stand trial as war criminals. President Sergei Bagapsh responded publicly and at length to all such criticism during the year.

Internet access has increased since Russia's 2008 recognition of the territory's independence, though some legal restrictions apply to both traditional and online media. In September 2009, a journalist received a suspended three-year prison sentence for allegedly libeling the president in an online article that was reprinted in Abkhazia's newspapers.

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. 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. A Sukhumi imam escaped a failed assassination attempt in July 2010, and another Muslim cleric was shot dead a week later, but police were unable to determine the motive or perpetrator in either case.

The Abkhaz constitution offers some protection to ethnic minorities seeking education in their native languages. Armenian-language schools generally operate without government interference, but Gali residents report a deficit of Georgian-language textbooks and instruction. Some of Gali's ethnic Georgian students regularly travel to Georgian-controlled territory to attend classes. Ethnic Georgian residents who hold Georgian passports are restricted from studying at Sukhumi State University.

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. Although most nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) rely on funding from outside the territory, the NGO sector exerts a significant degree of influence on government policies. However, Abkhaz NGOs are not permitted to monitor elections.

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.

The human rights situation for the ethnic Georgian population in Gali has worsened since the 2008 war. Residents have reported increased pressure from the Abkhaz authorities, and they continue to suffer from widespread poverty. A July 2009 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. The current legal status of ethnic Georgian residents remains unclear.

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, and Abkhaz authorities have resisted proposals to allow their return. Russian border guards, who control the de facto border, hamper freedom of movement for Gali Georgians, many of whom rely on unofficial cross-border trade and receive pensions from Tbilisi, though Gali residents have reported greater mobility inside Abkhazia. Ethnic Russians have reported that their homes have been confiscated under obscure nationalization laws.

Since the 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, which they claim is necessary since Abkhaz travel documents are not internationally recognized.

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, women remain underrepresented in government positions, holding just four of the 35 seats in Abkhazia's parliament. After years of campaigning by Abkhazian women's groups, a law on gender equality was passed in 2008, yet it has shown little impact on political life.

** 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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