



SENATE SQUARE SOCIETY

Regional Affairs Dispatch I

Appendix B:

ABKHAZIA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Abkhazia is a breakaway region of northwestern Georgia that has operated as a de facto independent state since the 1992–1993 war with Georgia. While it maintains its own government and institutions, its independence is recognized by only a handful of countries, and most of the international community considers it part of Georgia.

Russia is the dominant political, economic, and military power in Abkhazia. Russian financial assistance, trade, energy supplies, and military protection sustain the territory, while Moscow uses its influence to maintain a strategic foothold in the South Caucasus and constrain Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

Despite widespread support for independence, many Abkhazians are wary of growing Russian influence and have repeatedly protested policies perceived as threatening local autonomy. Looking ahead, Abkhazia is likely to remain politically separate from Georgia but increasingly dependent on Russia, with economic stagnation, demographic decline, and unresolved political status remaining its most significant long-term challenges.

I. CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

A. GEOGRAPHIC PROFILE

Abkhazia is a small, breakaway republic in the north west region of Georgia in the Caucasus. Its only other border besides Georgia is Russia to its north. It has 130 miles (210 kilometers) of coastline on the Black Sea, which gives it a wet, humid, subtropical climate with mild winters. The Caucas Mountains in the north have a more severe, colder climate. It is 3,346 square miles (8,665 square kilometers). Its population is around 245,000. Its largest city, capital, and cultural and administrative center is Sukhumi, with approximately 65,000 residents. The main languages spoken are Abkhaz (a Caucasian language), Russian, Georgian, and Armenian.



(Encyclopedia Britannica)

B. HISTORICAL BREAKDOWN

The Abkhazians are indigenous to the area. The area saw colonization by the Ancient Greeks, Romans, and Byzantines, who introduced Christianity to the region. After the year 1008, the Abkhazian and Georgian kingdoms united. The Ottomans invaded in 1578.

Seeking protection from the Ottomans, Abkhazia and Georgia appealed to Russia, which then annexed the region in 1801. The Russian hold of Abkhazia wasn't solidified until 1864, but after that, there was a large displacement of allegedly 60% of its total population, as Muslims were forcibly displaced to Turkey and any non-Christian was deprived of the right to settle in the coastal areas. Much of the land was now left uninhabited, and many Georgians, Armenians, and Russians migrated to settle the vacated lands. The percentage of ethnic Abkhazians during this time is unknown, but the 1911 edition of Encyclopedia Britannica suggested the capital city of Sukhumi to be $\frac{1}{3}$ Abkhazians and $\frac{2}{3}$ Mingrelian Georgians.

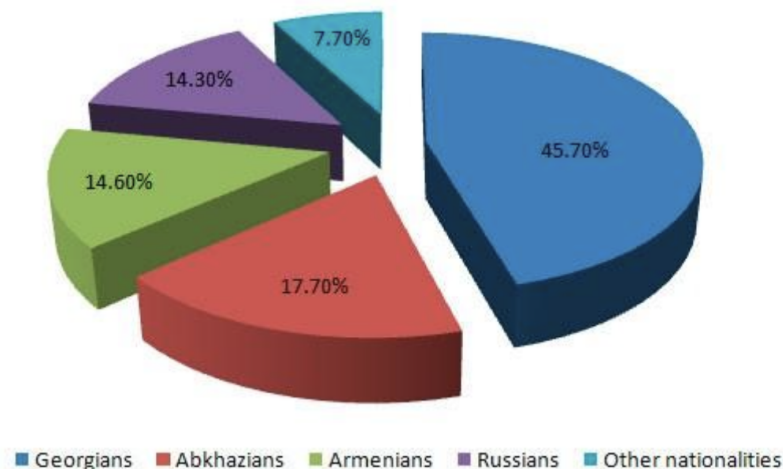
After the Russian revolution, Abkhazia was briefly an independent Soviet republic. However, in 1931, Stalin designated it an autonomous republic subordinated to the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. Thus began the "Georgianization" of Abkhazia, with large numbers of Georgians being resettled there, and the Abkhazian language and their schools being suppressed in favor of the Georgian language.

Major protests and demonstrations began in 1978, and in 1992, tensions erupted with Abkhazia declaring its independence, and Georgia marched in troops, and a brutal 13 month war began between the Abkhazian separatists and the Georgian state. In 1993, the Abkhazians ousted the Georgians. This war resulted in 30,000 casualties and the mass displacement of 200,000 ethnic Georgians from the region.

Abkhazia officially declared independence in 1999, however its sovereignty is only recognized by Russia and a few other nations.

C. DEMOGRAPHICS

Determining the exact population of Abkhazia is difficult, as the Georgian government is unable to conduct a proper census there, and the stats published by the official government is not considered



reliable. As of the last official census in 1989, Abkhazia's population consisted of around 500,000 people, with ethnic Georgians constituting 46%, Abkhazians 18%, Armenians 15%, and Russians at 14%. (1)

According to the last official census, in 2011, its population stood at 241,000, with half being ethnic Abkhazians. 18%

identified as ethnic Georgians, 17% as Armenians, and 9% as Russians. (2) As noted before, this census is not considered reliable.

Over 200,000 ethnic Georgians were forced out during the 1992 war, which was at least half of Abkhazia's population at the time. This act was recognized by both the UN and OSCE as ethnic cleansing.

II. POLITICAL STATUS AND GOVERNANCE

A. INTERNAL GOVERNANCE

The president - who the constitution specifies must be Abkhaz - holds significant power as the head-of-state and commander-in-chief. His cabinet consists of a prime minister and a cabinet of ministers. The People's Assembly consists of 35 members with five year terms.

Abkhazia is completely outside of the Georgian media environment, with no Georgian press or tv stations being available. Instead, Russian media and press is the default. Due to almost no countries recognizing its independence, Abkhazia is dependent on Russia, which has a permanent military presence in Abkhazia, for its economy, finances, security, and outside communication, which makes for a tumultuous and unstable political environment.

Due to total economic dependence, leaders in Abkhazia will often attempt to pass legislation that favors Russian economic investment with large tax breaks. The local populace opposes these attempts, as they're worried it will lead to loss of local autonomy. In 2014, the president Aleksandr Ankvab resigned after mass protests in Sukhumi. In 2020, president Raul Khadzhima was also forced out of office by public protests. In 2024, President Aslan Bzhania resigned due to, once again, public protests over a controversial Russian investment plan. The current president, Badra Gunba, took office in April 2025. Public resistance against Russian integration isn't taken as a serious movement, as only the candidates with Russian financial backing, economic backing, and direct media influence. For example, to ensure Gunba's victory during his election, Russia cut financial backing and electricity to Abkhazia for several weeks, only to reinstate them to show the populace what happens when the Kremlin-backed candidate would be elected.

B. INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION

In 2008, President Dmitry Medvedev announced that Russia was hereby recognizing the independence of Abkhazia. Besides Russia, only four UN members recognize the independence of Abkhazia: Nicaragua, Venezuela, Nauru, and Syria. Vanuatu and Tuvalu previously recognized it, but rescinded.

Beyond the UN, it is also recognized by the former self-proclaimed Republic of Artsakh (Nagorno-Karabakh), and the other breakaway Russian-occupied territories: South Ossetia, Transnistria in Moldova, and the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in Ukraine.

As a result, the Georgian parliament declared Abkhazia (along with South Ossetia) to be "Russian-occupied territories." They also severed all diplomatic ties with Russia and Nicaragua.

C. RUSSIA CONNECTION

Abkhazia is of valuable strategic importance to Russia via its location in the Black Sea, its role as a geopolitical buffer, and its use as a leverage against Georgia's NATO and EU aspirations, and to align it with Russian interests. Russia makes use of Abkhazia to exercise its military force, economic control, and political manipulation to enhance its influence not only in the Caucasus, but to NATO and EU member states as well.

Russia relies on Abkhazia's warm weather, deep sea port in Ochamchire as a strategic haven for expanding its naval presence across the Black Sea region, especially as Crimea isn't considered safe enough. Russia also financed the restoration of Sakhumi's Babushera airport, with its civilian and military purpose under Russian control.

Russia has a vested interest in keeping Abkhazia's status unresolved, as it interferes with Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration aspirations. Due to ongoing territorial disputes, Georgian membership into NATO or the EU cannot proceed, and Russia can use it as a cudgel to influence Georgia to act in Russian interests.

Russia's economic control is almost absolute: the Kremlin provides Abkhazia with 85% of its electricity (which it will turn off and on at will), 40-50% of its state budget, and over 80% of its trade. Its currency is the Russian ruble. This level of dependence limits Abkhazian autonomy and gives Russia many tools of influence without direct military involvement.

D. SECURITY AND MILITARY ASSESSMENT

Abkhazian security is deeply intertwined with the Russian military. Russia maintains a military base in Gudauta, and a naval base at Ochamchire with several thousand Russian conscripts. The Abkhazian army itself is a few thousand conscripts, and it lacks an air force, and mostly serves as border guards, infantry, and localized state defense.

Tensions are high with Georgia, which considers Abkhazia an occupied territory. While people can visit Abkhazia from Georgia, it's illegal to enter Abkhazia through Russia, and then enter Georgia. Georgian attempts to retake the territory are deterred by the Russian military presence, which also makes it impossible for the 200,000 Georgians who were displaced to ever make it home. Georgia

and Abkhazia officially have no formal diplomatic relations, and security and diplomatic talks are occasionally handled through Geneva International Discussions.

E. SOCIOECONOMIC PROFILE

The economy is small, with a GDP per capita of around \$1800. Unemployment rate is hard to know for sure, but is estimated to be at least 35%, with the highest percentage being young adults. Young adults in Abkhazia report being most concerned about drug addiction, low wages, corruption and bribery, insufficient social support, and rising costs.

Over 40% of its state budget comes directly from Moscow, and its single largest industry is tourism from Russia. 85% of their electricity comes from Moscow, but rolling power outages, especially in winter, are common. The water supply is also unreliable, with frequent interruptions in many localities.

The Georgia-Abkhazia conflict inflicted economic costs Abkhazia is still struggling to recover from. This includes destroyed private property, destroyed infrastructure, lost investments, unforeseen costs, humanitarian projects, and more. Its lack of international recognition leads it to an over-reliance on Russian support, and costs it other potential international investment and opportunities.

“Brain drain” is creating a major crisis for long-term economic viability, with many young and skilled workers leaving for either Russia or Georgia. This exodus of young and skilled workers means job openings without skilled workers interested in applying for them, ultimately leaving Abkhazia even more dependent on Russia.

F. OUTLOOK

Over the next 3-5 years, Abkhazia is likely to remain politically separate from Georgia while becoming increasingly economically integrated with Russia. Despite periodic anti-Russian protests, there is currently no viable political movement capable of reducing Russian influence. The principal risks include worsening demographic decline, continued infrastructure deterioration, and increased regional tensions stemming from Russia's military use of Abkhaz territory.

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