
Abkhazia: Developments in the Domestic and Regional Context

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This is a summary of the event held at Chatham House on 14 October 2014. Viacheslav Chirikba and a roundtable of experts discussed Abkhazia's economic, political and security situation.

Domestic situation of Abkhazia

Viacheslav Chirikba characterized Abkhazia as an evolved, modern state. It has been *de facto* independent since 1993, adopted a new constitution the following year, and passed the Act of State Independence in 1999. Referencing the 1933 Montevideo Convention on the Rights and Duties of States, Chirikba argued that Abkhazia qualifies as a state and should be accepted as such by the international community. It has a political system and the potential for a self-sufficient economy.

Abkhazian infrastructure is currently reliant on support from Russia. Chirikba expressed optimism about the situation and argued that Georgia's policy of wooing Abkhazia economically will not work, as the standard of living is no worse in Abkhazia than it is in Georgia. It will, however, need serious investment and an end to international economic isolation. This isolation is currently seriously stunting its economic growth, and has led to missed opportunities for development.

The tourist industry and associated tourism infrastructure is growing, with 3.5 million visitors in the previous tourist season. Abkhazia also has an estimated 500 million barrels of oil, and additional gas and coal reserves. Rosneft is currently investigating Abkhazia's reserves with a view to extracting.

Chirikba also noted that immigration has increased in the last few years. After Abkhazians and Georgians, the third largest population group is Armenians, many of whom have returned after the war. Their community has two parliamentary deputies and two ministers. Their level of representation in Abkhazian politics needs to evolve. Immigration has also risen from Central Asia. These were originally mainly migrant workers from Uzbekistan and Tajikistan who sent their earnings back home. However, there is a trend towards settling in Abkhazia: whereas migrants were previously young men alone, now they bring their families. No concrete statistics are available, however, because much immigration is illegal.

The point was raised that Abkhazia is democratic, but this is a weakly embedded political system and it could be threatened by Abkhazia's increased reliance on Russian resources since 2008, leading to a reshaping of state–society relations. However, Chirikba highlighted that the democratic process does work in Abkhazia, having brought into power the opposition in both 2004 and 2013. The press, meanwhile, is completely free and civil society does exist, as demonstrated by the recent protests that led to the resignation of Abkhazia's president.

International relations

Abkhazia was isolated internationally in the 1990s, when, under Russian President Boris Yeltsin, the border between Russia and Abkhazia was closed. Relations between Abkhazia and Russia eased when Vladimir Putin came to power; the border regime was relaxed, and in the early 2000s the Russian government began the policy of offering Russian passports to Abkhazians. Some 80 per cent of Abkhazian citizens currently have Russian passports. The Russian Federation officially recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states in August 2008 in the wake of the Russo-Georgian War, which, Chirikba stated, brought an unprecedented level of security to the territory.

Security remains Abkhazia's priority, and its security requirements will be satisfied by nothing less than a non-use of force treaty with Georgia. Georgia, however, refuses to sign an agreement, as it regards both Abkhazia and South Ossetia as non-state actors.

The Geneva International Discussions on Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been under way since 2008, but Chirikba noted that little progress has been made. Georgia will not negotiate with Abkhazian or South Ossetian representatives in plenary sessions. Instead, negotiations are conducted in working groups, which is a source of complaint from the Abkhazian side; it means that the officials in these meetings have no mandate to produce legal agreements. At the recent 29th session, a step forward was taken when some changes were made to the working group format, and the discussion can now move on from format to substance.

The official position of Abkhazia's *de facto* Ministry of Foreign Affairs is that the current situation is irreversible: Abkhazia will never again become part of Georgia. It is therefore crucial that Georgia begins to engage with Abkhazia on a diplomatic level. Western support of Georgia is felt to prolong Abkhazia's security dilemma and provokes the fear that at an opportune moment Georgia will try to retake Abkhazia. Although the discourse has changed, becoming less belligerent since the end of Saakashvili's government, the essence is unchanged. Tbilisi is still focused on restoring control of Abkhazia, simply using different means.

The participants noted that many Western analysts fear that by accepting Russia as Abkhazia's sole security guarantor, the *de facto* Abkhazian government has endangered their sovereignty. The Russian government recently put forward a draft for a Russian–Abkhazian treaty that contained many proposals for increased security cooperation, such as integration of the Russian and Abkhazian armies. However, Chirikba pointed out that Abkhazia will not allow any threat to its sovereignty, and, unlike South Ossetia, does not seek to join the Russian Federation.

Nevertheless, Russia plays a highly important role in Abkhazian security. It was suggested that Abkhazia carry out independent and regular checks on the threat posed by Georgia in order to ensure that Russia's military presence in Abkhazia is proportional to this threat. Chirikba countered that, while the threat of invasion by Georgia had decreased since 2008, Abkhazia would not let down its guard and stake its future on Georgia's promises of peace. A non-use of force treaty with Tbilisi, co-signed by guarantors such as the Russian Federation, the EU and other bodies, is the only option that Abkhazia will accept. The two sides will only be able to discuss economic projects, such as railways and hydropower stations, on a bilateral basis once a peace treaty has been concluded.

After Russia, Turkey is Abkhazia's second largest trading partner by sea, and the second largest investor in Abkhazia, mainly reflecting the large Abkhazian diaspora in Turkey. This economic presence is likely to increase. Abkhazia sees itself as having a 'western vector', but Chirikba defined this as beginning with its nearest western neighbour – i.e. Russia. It treats the prospect of Georgia's plans to join NATO very negatively, and in such a case will be caused to seek reinforced security agreement with Russia.