

## ABKHAZIA: 17 YEARS OF «INDEPENDENCE».<sup>1</sup>

*Losing the motherland – loses everything.*

*Bagrat Shinkuba. The last one of the Departed. M., 1988.*

Abkhazia is located in the northern part of the Colchis Lowland which is known for its mild climate. It is located on the crossroads of trade routes and cultural interaction. It is rich with subtropical fruit trees, medicinal and relic plants. Abkhazia is a perfect resort area and at the same time – an important in military strategy bridge connecting Eastern Europe with Transcaucasia and Asia Minor.

The indigenous population of Abkhazia since antiquity was represented by Abkhaz, who are affined by language with the Circassians living in North-West of Caucasus - the Circassians (Adygy, self-designation “adyge”) and Abasines, who speaks languages of Abkhazian-Adygian family, which has no genetic connections with Kartvelian (south-Caucasian) language family, to which the Georgians refer. (*Shnirelman, 2003*)

Throughout many centuries the history of Abkhazian people – it’s a permanent fight for independence of Abkhazia. Primarily they fought against the Ottoman Empire, then against the Russian Empire, then against Georgia in her different appearances (Menshevik republic, then Georgian SSR).

Georgia-Abkhazian conflict of modern time has deep historical roots. By the beginning of the XIX century Abkhazian principality was under the formal protectorate of the Ottoman Empire. In 1810 the incorporation of the principality to the Russian Empire began. Until 1864 it was autonomic de facto. As a result of anti-Russian uprising in 1866 (due to the elimination of the Abkhazian principality and its transition under whole-empire jurisdiction) and the events of the Russian-Turkish war of 1877-1878 many Abkhazians were expelled (or forced to emigrate) from the Russian Empire. At the end of XIX – beginning of XX century the Sukhumi district was a part of Kutaisi Province, and then subordinated to the Russian Caucasus administration in Tbilisi. In 1904-1917 Gagra and adjacent areas were part of the district of Sochi of the Black Sea province. Thus, in pre-revolutionary period the territory of present-day Abkhazia was divided between the administrative and territorial entities of the Russian Empire. (*Lakoba, 1993*).

Until the second half of the XIX century Abkhazia consisted almost exclusively of the Abkhazian population. With the end of the Caucasian War (May 1864) and the elimination of the autonomous Principality of Abkhazia (June 1864) has drastically increased the mass exodus of highlanders from their homeland to Turkey.

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Resettlement was of violent nature, it provoked and encouraged by both Russian and Turkish authorities. This period of their history, the Abkhazians call "mahadzhiirstvo" (meaning "exile"). The largest expulsions of Abkhazians took place after the uprisings in 1866-1867 and 1877-1878 - then inhabitants of North-Western, Middle, and the Mountain of Abkhazia have been evicted. Up to 500,000 descendants of Abkhazian mahadzhirov now live in Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Greece, Australia, Germany, USA, England, Holland, France and other countries, forming the Abkhazian diaspora.

As a result of hostilities in 1877, more than half of the population of Abkhazia fled their homeland. It was the most powerful wave of mahadzhiirstvo - the territory from the river Psyrtscha to the river Kodori was completely depopulated. Sukhumi and the area around it was settled by anyone but Abkhazians. Since the mid 60-ies XIX century flow of migrants rushed there, as a result Abkhazia is very quickly turned into ethnically diverse country. Greeks, Armenians, Russian, Bulgarians, Estonians, Germans and other nationalities, but most of all Georgians (mostly Mengrels) founded their villages here (Lakoba, 1993).

After the February Revolution of 1917 an attempt of political self-determination of Abkhazia was made. Abkhazian national leaders supported the idea of the state integration of the Northern Caucasus region, as a part of proclaimed in May 1918, the Mountain Republic. In June 1918, troops of the Georgian Democratic Republic entered Abkhazia. March 31, 1921 Abkhazian Soviet Socialist Republic was proclaimed, that meant the revival of national statehood of Abkhazia. In December 1921, Abkhazia and Georgia signed a treaty of alliance, which constituted actually federal relations between states. However, in 1931, Abkhazia was incorporated into Georgia as an autonomous republic (Anchabadze, 1994).

The most active migration of Georgians in Abkhazia lasted during 1937-1953 years through another settling in the Abkhazian villages, as well as settling by the Georgians of Greek villages, released after the deportation of Greeks from Abkhazia in 1949. Overt public policy of forced assimilation of the Abkhaz conducted during this period. (Lakoba, 1993). In the course of political repression many prominent representatives of the Abkhaz people were killed. A policy of Georgianisation of Abkhazia was carried out: Abkhazian language studying has been withdrawn from the school curriculum and replaced by studying Georgian, respectively the teaching staff has changed; Abkhazian alphabet was translated from the Latin alphabet (introduced in 1928) into the Georgian graphical basis (and since 1954, again based on the Russian alphabet); Abkhazian place names were replaced with Georgian; Abkhazians had difficulties in social advancement and others. The Georgians from the inner regions of Georgia were moved to the territory of Abkhazia. (Anchabadze, 1994; Lakoba, 1993).

In the XIX century Abkhazians perceived Georgians as servants of the Russian Empire. But in the XX century the imperial discourse was replaced with the nationalistic. Abkhazian population was pinning its hopes on ethnonational self-

determination with the exit from Georgia. In 1957, 1967 and 1977 representatives of the Abkhazian ethno-national intellectuals were preparing an appeal to the leadership of the Soviet Union with requests to withdraw from the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic and the occurrence of the RSFSR (or formation of an independent Abkhaz SSR).

In 1978, when adopting the Constitution of the Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, a compromise solution was made - the Abkhaz language, along with the Georgian and Russian became a state on the territory of autonomy. At the XI Plenum of the Communist Party of Georgia (June 27, 1978), then First Secretary Eduard Shevardnadze spoke out against the “excesses” of the Georgian communists in the “Abkhaz issue” (Markedonov, 2008).

Thus, the “Russian factor” in the Abkhaz movement arose long before the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict of modern times. Abkhazian leaders have repeatedly proclaimed their unity with the peoples of the North Caucasus, and in their requirement spoke (yet to the Soviet authorities) about the desirability of their inclusion into the autonomous republic of Russia (which included seven North Caucasian autonomies). According to the majority of the Georgian researchers, Brezhnev’s Soviet Union has assumed a number pro-abkhazian measures.

Since the beginning of ethno-national self-determination of Georgians during the Perestroika period the “Abkhazian issue” has intensified. In March 1989, in the village Lyhny of the Gudauta district 30 thousand people gathered, it was announced there on the need to return Abkhazia, “the political, economical and cultural sovereignty in context of the Lenin idea of federation.”

Abkhazian Forum “Aidylara” on July 8, 1989 addressed to the Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR , M.S.Gorbatchev, requesting the immediate imposition of a special order of the management of Abkhazia. The first armed clashes between Georgians and Abkhazians happened in Sukhumi on 15-18 July 1989. 12 people were killed within two weeks of the tragic July 1989. It was then that the fundamental prerequisites of the tragedy of 1992 were laid. The change of the ethnographic situation in Abkhazia in the past 100 years among the three groups is reflected in the following table: \*

	1886	1897	1926	1939	1959	1970	1979	1989
<b>Abkhazians</b>	58 963	58 697	55 918	56 197	61 193	77 276	83 097	93 267
<b>Georgians</b>	4 166	25 875	91 967	91 967	158 221	199 595	213 322	239 872
<b>Russians</b>	971	5 135	60 201	60 201	86 715	92 889	79 730	74 913

*Adapted from: S. Lakoba. Hundred Years War against Georgia, Abkhazia. Gagra, 1993.*

Georgian-Abkhazian conflict began as a dispute about the legal legitimacy / illegitimacy of the occurrence of Abkhazia within Georgia, and the same legal validity / invalidity ethno-national self-determination of Georgia and Abkhazia. It is unlawfully to talk about the Abkhazian separatism in 1989 - the beginning of 1992.

At that time Georgians themselves were the separatists against the Soviet Union. At that time Abkhazians opposed Georgian National-radicals and protected existed than single state (Markedonov, 2008). When in spring of 1991, Georgia announced its withdrawal from the Soviet Union, Abkhazia has expressed a desire to remain in the USSR (the majority of the population participated in the referendum on the preservation of the USSR and did not participate in the referendum on the independence of Georgia) and assumed to join the new union - the Union of Sovereign States (USS), the conclusion of which was disrupted as a result of the attempted coup of the State Committee of the State of Emergency. After the formation of the CIS and the refusal of Georgia to enter into it (before 1993), the Abkhazian leadership has announced a desire to independently enter the CIS. July 9, 1991 the Supreme Council of Abkhazia adopted a new electoral law and amendments to the Constitution of the Autonomous Republic - the term "Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic" was changed to "The Republic of Georgia."

In July 1992 the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet adopted a decision to abolish the Constitution of the Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of 1978 and to restore the Constitutional project of 1925. The cancellation of the legal framework occurrence of Abkhazia within Georgia, and the response of the Georgian authorities - the intervention of the State Council of Georgia to the territory of Abkhazia - was the start of a major armed conflict. Georgia-Abkhazian conflict from inter-ethnic confrontation in Abkhazia escalated into a military clash between the Georgian government and rebel territory. Since then, the Abkhaz national movement from the Soviet-backed turns into a separatist. The main goal is the secession from the independent Georgia. In autumn 1993, Georgia suffers a military defeat and actually loses its control over the territory of Abkhazia. August 14, 1992 one of the most serious inter-ethnic conflicts in South Caucasus - Georgia-Abkhazian - developed into a full-scale war, which lasted for 14 months. As a result of the confrontation 8 thousand people were killed, 18 thousand people were injured and more than 200 thousand people have been displaced.

Since 1994, the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict, in spite of some excesses in 1998 and 2001, converted into the format of the negotiation process between the opposing parties with the participation of Russia and international structures. Topics of negotiations are the status of Abkhazia and the problem of the return of Georgian refugees to their former places of residence.

The beginning of attempt of "defrost" was the Kodori operation of Mikhail Saakashvili (July 2006). The process of negotiation between the conflicting parties was suspended. The Georgian authorities tried to change the format of the negotiation process, representing the so-called "Abkhazian government in exile" (consisting largely of ethnic Georgians) as the sole legitimate representative of the republic. The Georgian president tried to present the authorities of self-proclaimed Abkhazia solely as Russian puppets. According to Mikhail Saakashvili (16 July 2006), "*it is not ethnic conflict (conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.). These are*

*imposed on us political conflicts. They are connected with attempts to ex-Soviet forces, remnants of the old Soviet imperialist thinking, to gain control over at least some of the neighboring territories.”* Abkhazians insist on their right for the statehood on the basis of national self-determination. Georgia claims that the principles of the inviolability of international borders and national sovereignty guarantee her the right to have control over the territory of Abkhazia, from which Georgian majority was expelled during the war. As such, the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, according to many analysts (e.g., EU Special Representative for South Caucasus Peter Semneby) remained in a “frozen” state.

August 9, 2008 Abkhazia joined by South Ossetia to the armed conflict between Georgia and South Ossetia under an agreement on military assistance between the members of the Commonwealth of Self-styled States. August 12, 2008 the Abkhazian armed forces occupied the upper part of Kodori Gorge, which had been previously left by the Georgian military. Abkhazian troops thus gained control over the entire territory of Abkhazia. August 13, 2008 Abkhazia officially announced the completion of the operation of oust of the Georgian troops from the Kodori gorge, after that the active hostilities ended. August 26, Russian President D.A. Medvedev, signed decrees recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, “taking into account the freely expressed will of the Ossetian and Abkhaz peoples and being guided by the provisions of the UN Charter, the 1970 Declaration on principles of International Law concerning friendly relations among states, CSCE Helsinki Final Act 1975 and other fundamental international documents.” This decision led to sharply negative international reaction. Abkhazia and South Ossetia were recognized by Nicaragua (September 3, 2008), Venezuela (October 10, 2009) and Nauru (15 December 2009).

September 30, 2010 Abkhazia celebrated 17 years of victory in the “Great Patriotic War of the Abkhazian people”- the Georgia-Abkhazian war of 1992-1993. Traditionally it is celebrated in Abkhazia, as a Day of Victory and Independence. Abkhazia actually has been living in Independence for 17 years. Despite its small territory, demographic problems, the fragility of existing institutions, weak government, and also in spite of the political, economic blockade, they have survived and become stronger in their desire to secede from Georgia (Popescu, 2006).

All Abkhasian society has consolidated around the main goal – to accept international recognition. An important role plays the fact that residents of the country feel the precariousness of the current situation. This feeling makes them accept many world events through the prism of a possible war, and generates a mentality of a “besieged fortress”, which does not contribute to conflict resolution, economic and political development.

Abkhazia, in the opinion of its leadership, meets the criteria of statehood set out in the Montevideo Convention in 1933. In this document, the state is defined as “subject of international law, has the following characteristics: a permanent

population, defined territory; government and the ability to enter into relations with other states.” According to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Abkhazia, Sergei Shamba, “*the recognition will give us only a seat at the UN and embassies ... Everything else we already have.*”

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