Courting Europe: Diplomatic Battlegrounds and the Georgian–Abkhazian Conflict

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ABSTRACT

This article critically engages with Georgian narratives that frame the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict as a confrontation with Russia rather than with Abkhazians: a discourse that denies Abkhazians' agency and recasts them as hostages of Russian power. It revisits a pivotal moment: the EU's recognition of Georgia's Soviet borders, which included Abkhazia, in 1992. Rather than reflecting a neutral stance on a complex territorial dispute, EU recognition empowered an unelected Georgian junta that had ousted the country's first democratically elected president just months prior. Since then, Georgia has sought to extend its sovereignty over Abkhazia with support from the EU. In the absence of a coherent independent strategy for Abkhazia, the EU's alignment with Tbilisi has constrained its role as a

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potential mediator, contributed to Abkhazia's international isolation and deepened its reliance on Russia. This article argues for a more nuanced approach that acknowledges Abkhazian agency and opens pathways for engagement.

INTRODUCTION

The USSR contained a complex patchwork of republics and autonomous regions, each nominally organised around a titular ethnic group. Like Russian Matryoshka dolls, the larger Soviet Socialist Republics housed smaller autonomous republics and regions, each with its own flag, anthem, parliament and other symbols of statehood. These units were never intended to become independent states; rather, they were designed as components of a unified Soviet structure. Their borders and hierarchies were largely devised by Joseph Stalin, often with little regard for long-term stability or ethnic realities.

The sudden, sweeping and relatively peaceful collapse of the Soviet empire was unprecedented and fraught with risk. Instead of critically reassessing the internal borders imposed by the Kremlin, the EU chose to accept them without much scrutiny. This unquestioning recognition solidified Soviet-era boundaries and power structures, regardless of their historical or political legitimacy. In the case of Georgia and Abkhazia, this approach had particularly destructive consequences. Two nation-building projects—each rooted in distinct histories and identities—clashed, culminating in a violent conflict whose legacy endures to this day. Notwithstanding its increasingly prominent role in the South Caucasus, the EU's engagement with the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict has often reinforced rather than mitigated the divide.

Despite the EU's declared aim of 'engagement without recognition', it has in practice largely deferred to Georgian pressure and reinforced Abkhazia's isolation. In this vacuum, Russia has stepped in, offering Abkhazia economic aid, international representation and access to the world—but at the cost of sovereignty and balanced geopolitical relationships. Georgia's deliberate mischaracterisation of the conflict for international consumption has played a crucial role in sustaining this state of affairs. By framing Abkhazia's struggle as merely a symptom of Russian expansionism, Georgia obscures Abkhazian agency and undermines the prospect of dialogue. This article interrogates

that framing, assesses the EU's complicity in reproducing it, and proposes a more nuanced approach.

We interrogate the EU's relationship with Georgia and Abkhazia by situating it within broader questions of recognition, agency and geopolitical instrumentalisation. The article begins with an overview of the Abkhazian people, who remain a marginalised subject in both academic discourse and policy frameworks. It then examines how the EU's recognition of Georgia—including Abkhazia—has shaped the trajectory of the conflict. The article contends that this position emboldened the Georgian junta to assert control militarily, culminating in the 1992–1993 war.

Following this, the article assesses post-war political developments in Georgia and Abkhazia, highlighting the emergence of divergent state-building projects. It examines the evolving official Georgian narratives regarding the conflict with Abkhazia, highlighting the interplay between domestic identity, regional politics and international strategy. Georgian governments have oscillated between depicting Abkhazia as an occupied territory under Russian control and promoting reconciliation based on shared cultural bonds. To maintain claims to territorial integrity, dominant narratives in Tbilisi minimise the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict, portraying Russia as the sole antagonist. This framing not only distorts the historical record—ignoring the initial Georgian military incursion into Abkhazia in 1992—but also overlooks instances of Georgian–Russian cooperation against Abkhazian self-determination during the 1990s. Furthermore, Georgian leaders have consistently dismissed Abkhazians' political agency, depicting them as Russian proxies and denying their national legitimacy. Through a critical analysis of political discourse and diplomatic efforts, the article explores how Georgia's European orientation has been instrumentalised to reinforce territorial claims and delegitimise Abkhazian aspirations.

The analysis then turns to Georgia's pro-EU discourse, arguing that it has been strategically employed to align EU support with Georgia's territorial ambitions. This alignment has contributed to Abkhazia's isolation, pushing it closer to Russia. Finally, the article explores how the Russian invasion of Ukraine has reshaped dynamics in the region. The conclusion stresses the enduring nature of the conflict and the limitations of the EU's approach, which has lacked the nuance required to meaningfully engage with the Abkhazian perspective.

ABKHAZIANS: A DISTINCT PEOPLE

The Abkhazians (or Abkhaz) are indigenous to the Caucasus and the native people of Abkhazia. At 8,600 square kilometres, Abkhazia is somewhat smaller than Cyprus. It has a population of approximately 250,000, of whom a quarter live in the capital, Sukhum/i,[1] and makes up 12.5 per cent of Georgia's internationally recognised territory. Abkhaz and Georgian belong to different language families.[2] Apart from a three-year spell during the chaos that followed the Bolshevik revolution, Abkhazia has not been governed as part of an independent Georgian state since early medieval times. Otherwise, Abkhazia has either been a separate principality, under Ottoman or Russian influence, or part of Soviet and post-Soviet political structures.

Demography has been a consistent challenge for the Abkhazians; their dwindling numbers put them at risk of assimilation or being overwhelmed by other nationalities. Little more than 100,000 ethnic Abkhazians live in Abkhazia today, and the number of native Abkhaz speakers has declined over the past century due to Russification.[3] While Christianity, Islam and paganism have coexisted among Abkhazians for centuries, decades of Soviet rule have left the population largely nonreligious. Following Georgia's bombardment of the South Ossetian capital, Tskhinval/i, in August 2008, Russia recognised Abkhazia (along with South Ossetia) as an independent country

[1] In Russian and English, Abkhazians refer to their capital as 'Sukhum' whereas Georgians use 'Sukhumi' or 'Sokhumi'. In the Abkhaz language it is referred to as 'Aqwa'. There is a similar divergence for the town of Gal/i in southern Abkhazia and the largest town in South Ossetia, Tskhinval/i.

[2] See George B. Hewitt, *Discordant neighbours: a reassessment of the Georgian–Abkhazian and Georgian–South Ossetian conflicts* (Leiden, 2013), 1–5. In the 1930s, a Georgian script was imposed on the Abkhaz language, although it reverted to Cyrillic following Stalin's death in 1953. In his book on the Abkhaz language, former Abkhazian foreign minister Vladislav Chirikba examines the efforts by the Israeli and Irish governments to revive Hebrew and Irish, respectively. He concludes that Abkhaz faces a trajectory more akin to Irish than Hebrew, with its future uncertain but not yet lost. Despite major challenges, Abkhaz still has about 50,000 native speakers, accounting for roughly 20 per cent of the population—a comparatively stronger position than that of Irish (interviews with Chirikba, Sukhum/i, 2009, 2010, 2011; I also interviewed a teacher of the Abkhaz language in 2006 and benefited from discussions with teachers of the Abkhaz language and professors at the Abkhazian State University).

[3] In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, some Abkhazians migrated to the North Caucasus, where their descendants are known as Abazinians.

and a handful of other UN member states have followed suit.[4] The vast majority of countries, however, including all EU members, consider Abkhazia to be part of Georgia.[5]

Given the contemporary close relationship between Russia and Abkhazians, it is easy to forget that in the nineteenth century the two peoples were bitter enemies. Whereas the Georgians had invited Russia to the Caucasus to act as their protectors from Ottoman and Persian tormentors, the Abkhazians, like their better-known Circassian cousins, refused to submit to Russian rule and launched periodic rebellions against encroachments on their territory. In retaliation, Russia forced up to 200,000 Abkhazians to relocate to the Ottoman Empire, an event known in Abkhazian culture as *amha'dzhyrra* ('exile'). Deprived of native leadership and much of its population, Abkhazia fell under direct Russian control and was repopulated by Mingrelians, Armenians, Russians, Greeks and others.[6]

The Bolshevik revolution facilitated the emergence of a short-lived Georgian republic, incorporating a recalcitrant Abkhazian population which was granted autonomy within the new state. Following the Red Army invasion of February 1921, Georgia and Abkhazia became full Soviet Socialist

[4] Abkhazia and South Ossetia are often lumped together but the two cases are fundamentally different. For South Ossetians the most desired objective is independence in a unified state with their ethnic kin in North Ossetia, but when I spoke to their veteran foreign minister Murat Dzhioyev he acknowledged that this is an unlikely prospect as Russia will not allow North Ossetia to secede from the Federation. Unity therefore means joining the Russian Federation (Dzhioyev, interview with the author, Tskhinval/i, 2002). Unlike Abkhazia, South Ossetia does not have an advantageous location and only a solitary tunnel through the Caucasus Mountains connects the region to its patron, Russia. It has no developed infrastructure or tourism potential and enjoys no significant external contacts bar Russia. Its current population is tiny (fluctuating around 35,000–50,000 people) and its territory small (3,900 square kilometres). The population declines in winter, when the Roki tunnel is closed and, consequently, some people migrate to North Ossetia (interview with OSCE official, Vienna, 2011). It has few features or opportunities for independent economic development, let alone statehood. Surveys of opinion consistently show that whereas the vast majority of Abkhazians opt for independence, South Ossetians prefer a united 'Alania' (Ossetia in the Ossetian language) within the Russian Federation. See John O'Loughlin, Vladimir Kolossov and Gerard Toal, 'Inside Abkhazia: survey of attitudes in a de facto state', *Post-Soviet Affairs* 27 (1) (2011), 1–36; Gerard Toal and John O'Loughlin, 'Inside South Ossetia: a survey of attitudes in a de facto state', *Post-Soviet Affairs* 29 (2) (2013), 136–72; Donnacha Ó Beacháin, Giorgio Comai and Ann Tsurtsumia-Zurabashvili, 'The secret lives of unrecognised states: internal dynamics, external relations, and counter-recognition strategies', *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 27 (3) (2016), 440–66.

[5] See Donnacha Ó Beacháin, 'Cheque-mates? Abkhazia's quest for international recognition', *Studies of Transition States and Societies* 11 (1) (2019), 55–76; Donnacha Ó Beacháin, 'Abkhazia and South Ossetia', in Gëzim Visoka, John Doyle and Edward Newman (eds), *Routledge handbook of state recognition* (Abingdon, 2019), 430–48.

[6] A large diaspora of around 500,000 people also exists in Turkey, primarily descendants of those expelled by the Russian Empire in the late nineteenth century (Anzor Mukba, interview with the author, 2009).

Republics. Amendments later that year and in 1925 diluted Abkhazia's status until, in 1931, it was reduced to an autonomous republic within Georgia. A 'Georgianisation' policy was rigorously pursued during the 1930s and 1940s accompanied by substantial Georgian migration to the region. So intense was the settlement of Georgians that by 1989 they constituted the largest ethnic group in Abkhazia, although not a majority.[7] Abkhaz-language schools were shut down and replaced by Georgian-language equivalents. By the late 1940s, broadcasting or publishing in Abkhaz was prohibited in an apparent attempt to 'obliterate the Abkhaz as a cultural identity'.[8] The worst of the repression ended with the deaths of Joseph Stalin and Lavrentiy Beria (both ethnic Georgians) in 1953, although there were popular Abkhazian demands for secession from Georgia in 1957, 1964, 1967, 1978 and 1989. As Soviet power declined, and Georgian nationalists sought to wrestle free from communist control, Abkhazians tried first to remain within the USSR before opting for independence.

RECOGNITION OF GEORGIA AND WAR IN ABKHAZIA

Just as Kosovo's administrative status within Yugoslavia prevented its independence after that state's dissolution—ensuring it remained legally part of Serbia—Abkhazia's designation as an autonomous republic, rather than a full Soviet Socialist Republic, limited its prospects for international recognition. Ironically, the borders and classifications created by the Soviet dictatorship were automatically adopted as legitimate by democratic Europe. Stalin's arbitrary decision to reduce Abkhazia's status to that of an autonomous republic within his native Georgia went unchallenged.[9] In the wake of Milošević's brutal crackdown, Kosovo was granted

[7] This was not a unique practice in the Soviet Union, but usually the strategically placed migrants were Russian. Successive waves of mainly Slavic settlers meant that by 1989 Estonians made up only 61 per cent of the population in Estonia, Latvians constituted a bare majority (52 per cent) in Latvia and Kazakhs were a minority (39.7 per cent) in Kazakhstan. See Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Rob Kevlihan, 'Threading a needle: Kazakhstan between civic and ethno-nationalist state-building', *Nations and Nationalism* 19 (2) (2013), 337–56.

[8] Darrell Slider, 'Crisis and response in Soviet nationality policy: the case of Abkhazia', *Central Asian Survey* 4 (4) (1985), 51–68: 53.

[9] This was not an isolated intervention by Stalin on Georgia's behalf. In 1944, at the height of the Second World War, the Soviet dictator found time to change the border so that Europe's highest peak was 'moved' from Russia to Georgia. Mount Elbrus reverted to the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic in 1956 following Khruschev's 'secret' speech to the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which denounced Stalin.

a path to remedial secession, leading to its recognition by most EU states and more than half of UN members. In contrast, despite Georgia's military invasion of Abkhazia (like the Serbs, they considered the separatist region part of their national territory) and the mass killing of Abkhazians (proportionally much greater in number and severity than what Serbs inflicted on Kosovars), Tbilisi faced no sanctions. Instead, Georgia received international support and aid, while Abkhazia was subjected to a blockade enforced by both Russia and Georgia. Eduard Shevardnadze was fêted internationally as an elder statesman, while Abkhazian leaders remained isolated, unable even to travel abroad.

Almost two years after it declared independence, and three months after the collapse of the Soviet Union, not a single country had recognised Georgia. By way of contrast, 45 countries recognised Estonia even before the formal dissolution of the Soviet Union on 25 December 1991. This reticence in recognising Georgia was not surprising. For starters, it was not clear whom should be recognised and what democratic mandate they enjoyed. In 1991, while still a part of the USSR, Georgians elected Zviad Gamsakhurdia as national leader, but his authoritarianism alienated many and he had a demonstrated intolerance for minorities. Following widespread violence in Tbilisi, Gamsakhurdia was ousted in a coup d'état and replaced by a motley group of warlords, of whom Tengiz Kitovani and Jaba Ioseliani were the most prominent. Georgia was already in deadly combat with South Ossetians and civil war raged in the west as Gamsakhurdia's supporters fought to reinstate him.

Lacking legitimacy, the Military Council invited Eduard Shevardnadze to return from Moscow to chair the executive. On 10 March 1992, he assumed leadership of the State Council, effectively becoming head of state, albeit sharing power with the warlords. As a former Soviet foreign minister widely respected in the West, Shevardnadze played a key role in lending credibility to the new Georgian state and its disputed borders. His appointment transformed Georgia's international image. The next day, New Zealand established diplomatic ties with Tbilisi. Ten days later, so did the United States. Germany, grateful to Shevardnadze for his role in German reunification, became the first EU member to recognise Georgia on 22 March. Recognition quickly snowballed, with Russia following suit on 1 July. By August 1992, 44 UN member states recognised Georgia within its Soviet borders—effectively taking a position on its brewing conflict with Abkhazia.

On 16 December 1991, the European Community had adopted guidelines for recognising new states in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union.[10] These required respect for the UN Charter and the Helsinki Final Act, guarantees for minority rights, and peaceful resolution of disputes.[11] By inviting Shevardnadze to head the government, the Georgian junta gambled that his international stature would override concerns about legitimacy. The wager paid off. EC countries endorsed the junta, 'disregarding the democratic legitimacy of the former president Gamsakhurdia and their traditional pleas for respect for formal procedures in democratic societies'.[12] Despite the absence of a legitimate administration, ungoverned borders, and simmering conflicts with multiple minorities, Georgia was accepted as a member of the United Nations on 31 July 1992. It could now argue that any actions it took in Abkhazia were a purely internal affair.

Recognition came notwithstanding Georgia's internal chaos, lack of control over its territory, and no monopoly on force. The civil war continued until December 1993, when ousted president Zviad Gamsakhurdia was found dead from a gunshot wound. Georgia's economy was a basket case, and its viability as an independent state remained uncertain. Nevertheless, the European Community officially recognised Georgia on 23 March 1992. It was the last former Soviet republic to gain such recognition, a delay the EC attributed to 'the instability of its political situation'.[13] Shevardnadze's return to a position of authority in Georgia and German advocacy on his behalf proved to be the tipping point.[14]

There is scant public documentation on the EC's internal deliberations regarding Georgia's recognition. The process unfolded amid broader efforts

[10] European Parliament, 'The European Parliament and the break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991', briefing 1 July 2022, available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2022/733579/EPRS_BRI(2022)733579_EN.pdf (29 April 2025).

[11] Declaration on the 'Guidelines on the recognition of new states in Eastern Europe and in the Soviet Union', 16 December 1991, available at: https://www.dipublico.org/100636/declaration-on-the-guidelines-on-the-recognition-of-new-states-in-eastern-europe-and-in-the-soviet-union-16-december-1991/ (29 April 2025).

[12] See Bruno Coppieters, 'Western security policies and the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict', in Bruno Coppieters, David Darchiashvili and Natella Akaba (eds), *Federal practice: exploring alternatives for Georgia and Abkhazia* (Brussels, 2000), 21–58: 22–3.

[13] European Commission, 'EC relations with Georgia', memo 17 February 1995, available at: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/memo_95_11 (29 April 2025).

[14] A few months earlier, Germany, driven by strong internal pressures, not least from Catholic Bavaria, had forced the hand of the EC by recognising Croatia despite significant reluctance in Brussels. Germany recognised Croatia on 23 December 1991 and the EC followed suit three weeks later, on 15 January 1992.

to engage with dozens of emerging states after the Soviet and Yugoslav disintegrations. Had Georgia been assessed in isolation and on its own merits, the case for recognition would most likely have faced far greater scrutiny.

In spring 1992, Georgia was in disarray. The only positive development from the EC's perspective was Shevardnadze's return, but he had neither contested nor won an election. Parliamentary elections would not take place until October 1993, after the war in Abkhazia had concluded. Georgia had failed to meet the EC's own recognition criteria—it had not demonstrated respect for minority rights or commitment to peaceful conflict resolution. Instead, it had launched new military campaigns in addition to existing ones.

On 14 August 1992, Georgian armed forces entered Abkhazia on the pretext of 'restoring order'.[15] For the invading Georgians, the war was about maintaining territorial integrity, while for Abkhazians, it was an existential struggle for survival. This was made clear when the commander-in-chief of Georgian troops in Abkhazia, General Giorgi Karkarashvili, occupied the local TV station and warned in a formal televised address to the people of Abkhazia on 24 August that Georgian troops wouldn't take any prisoners of war. Chillingly, he said that if 100,000 Georgians lost their lives, then it would mean that all 97,000 Abkhazians would be killed, and that the Abkhaz nation would be without descendants.[16] It was in a similar vein that Giorgi Khaindrava told *Le Monde Diplomatique* that 'there are only 80,000 Abkhazians, which means that we can easily and completely destroy the genetic stock of their nation by killing 15,000 of their youth. And we are perfectly capable of doing this.'[17]

The Georgian–Abkhazian war, which concluded on 30 September 1993, claimed around 10,000 lives. More than 200,000 ethnic Georgians, including many Mingrelians, fled Abkhazia as the conflict ended, although tens of

[15] Rachel Clogg, 'Documents from the KGB archive in Sukhum. Abkhazia in the Stalin years', *Central Asian Survey* 14 (1) (1995), 155–89: 156.

[16] The TV footage can be seen at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XzvtaZIMy98 (29 April 2025). The speech was reported in, among other places, the Georgian newspaper *7 Days* (no. 31, 4–10 September 1992, 3).

[17] Quoted in Donnacha Ó Beacháin, 'Elections and nation-building in Abkhazia', in Rico Isaacs and Abel Polese (eds), *Nation-building and identity in the post-Soviet space* (Abingdon, 2016), 215. In early 2004, the Georgian government appointed Khaindrava as minister for conflict resolution, a position he held until July 2006.

thousands later returned to the Gal/i district.[18] The war profoundly shaped Abkhazians' perceptions of Georgians and their national identity. During the thirteen-month conflict, Abkhazians lost about 4 per cent of their population. The destruction of Abkhazia's national archives, dating back to 1840, by Georgian troops was a particularly gratuitous act of cultural vandalism. 'In a single night,' Thomas de Waal wrote, 'Abkhazia's documentary history had been virtually erased.'[19]

Georgians lost the war but won the peace, as their sovereignty was deemed to extend over all regions of the defunct Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, including Abkhazia. For Abkhazians, the international community had revived Stalin's cartography, recognising borders devised without popular participation or endorsement.

Abkhazians celebrate the end of the 1992–1993 war as the 'liberation' of Sukhum/i, while Georgians mourn the city's 'fall'. For Georgians, this is a protracted unresolved conflict but for Abkhazians the war's conclusion affirmed their independence. Tellingly, the large memorial in Tbilisi honours only Georgian casualties from the war. No reference is made to the Abkhazians who perished at Georgian hands.[20] This exclusion undermines the Georgian narrative that portrays Abkhazians as brothers, from whom they are artificially separated by Russia.

[18] The number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) or refugees was initially cited at around 200,000 (from a pre-war Georgian population of 239,872) but has been inflated over time, with President Saakashvili regularly (and implausibly) claiming 500,000 IDPs. He did this, for example, in response to a question from the author at the government's 'Georgia's European Way' international event in Batumi (July 2011). It is difficult to ascertain where the figure comes from, and my interview with the minister for IDPs, Koba Subeliani, failed to produce a breakdown. The last Soviet census counted 525,000 residents in Abkhazia, of whom 239,872 were Georgians. Approximately 50,000 of these returned, almost all to the Gal/i region, leaving around 190,000 who might be considered in exile, many of whom have died during the past few decades. In South Ossetia, the Georgian population is not thought to have exceeded about 25,000 before the 2008 war. Georgia's insistence on the 'return' of IDPs (many are descendants of the displaced who have never been to Abkhazia) is about pursuing a Georgian nationalist agenda. If repatriation were a matter of principle, Georgia would have complied with commitments made to repatriate the Meskhetian Turks deported by Stalin to Central Asia in 1944. Upon joining the Council of Europe in 1999, Georgia made a commitment to complete the repatriation of Meskhetian Turks to Georgia within twelve years. However, successive Georgian governments have reneged on this commitment, citing the need for 'appropriate conditions' and expressing concerns that inter-ethnic tensions might result: excuses that could easily be employed to argue against Georgians moving to Abkhazia.

[19] Thomas de Waal, 'Abkhazia's archive: fire of war, ashes of history', *openDemocracy*, 22 October 2011, available at: https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/abkhazia_archive_4018jsp/ (29 April 2025).

[20] A nearby memorial erected to the 2008 war commemorates only the Georgians who died without reference to the Ossetians killed by Georgians.

The 1994 ceasefire[21] remained largely intact until 2008, when the brief war between Georgia and Russia over South Ossetia led to Russia's recognition of Abkhazia as an independent state on 26 August. This augmented Russia's role in the region and eased Abkhazian fears of renewed conflict.

Rather than resolve conflicting post-Soviet claims on their merits, the EC defaulted to Stalin-era borders and institutional hierarchies. Recognition likely came with the hope that it might nudge Georgia toward democracy and peaceful conflict management. But this hope was not tied to any conditions. In fact, recognition arguably emboldened the Georgian regime, which still lacked a democratic mandate. The EC assumed recognition would mitigate conflict and bolster minority protections.[22] In Georgia's case, it arguably did the opposite.

The EC remained passive during the Georgian–Abkhazian war, issuing only generic appeals for ceasefires and dialogue. The EC did nothing to influence the war's course, protect civilians or avert displacement. When Abkhazian forces repelled the Georgian military, Shevardnadze sought Western intervention, but none was forthcoming. While the West did not ignore the conflict altogether, the Caucasus was seen as relatively remote and of limited strategic importance. A similar dynamic played out in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between neighbouring Armenians and Azerbaijanis. The EC neither protected Abkhazians from the initial Georgian assault nor assisted displaced Georgians when the tide turned. After the war, the EU focus shifted to promoting democratisation in Georgia rather than addressing unresolved conflicts. The West channelled aid to Georgia, while Abkhazia remained internationally isolated—treated as the aggressor rather than the invaded. And despite Georgia's defeat on the battlefield, the EU became committed to upholding a phantom version of its territorial integrity, detached from the political and military realities on the ground.

POLITICS AFTER THE WAR

During the decade following the 1992–1993 war, seats were symbolically reserved in Georgia's parliament for residents of Abkhazia, but these have

[21] The 'Declaration on measures for a political settlement of the Georgian/Abkhaz conflict' was signed on 4 April 1994 by plenipotentiaries of the Georgian and Abkhazian governments in the presence of representatives from the UN, the Conference for Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) and the Russian Federation. On 14 May 1994, an 'Agreement on a cease-fire and separation of forces' was signed, creating a demilitarized security zone on either side of the Inguri River.

[22] Richard Caplan, *Europe and the recognition of new states in Yugoslavia* (Cambridge, 2005), 2.

since been abolished. Tbilisi still maintains a 'government in exile' for Abkhazia, which is completely subordinate to and funded by the authorities in Tbilisi.[23] Opinion polls and surveys demonstrate a consistent interest in restoring Georgia's territorial integrity although it does not usually feature as a major election issue.[24]

Since 1993, Georgia and Abkhazia have developed very different polities, both of which are fractious and considered 'partly free' by the influential Freedom House rankings. Neither is considered a consolidated democracy, and each regime has problems guaranteeing civil rights. Post-Soviet politics in Georgia has been dominated by four powerful and divisive leaders. The first two, Zviad Gamsakhurdia and Eduard Shevardnadze, were overthrown, while the third, Mikheil Saakashvili, is in prison. The fourth and current political heavyweight, Bidzina Ivanishvili, is a multi-billionaire who made his fortune in Russia during the 1990s before returning to Georgia and becoming prime minister in 2012. Ivanishvili has drifted in and out of formal positions according to his whim but is generally recognised to be the key figure directing Georgia's government. His current position—honorary chairman of the ruling Georgian Dream (GD) party—reveals little of his real power or resources (the oligarch's personal wealth eclipses Georgia's annual budget). Georgian politics has always been fractious and combative. The opposition refused to accept the official results of the October 2024 parliamentary elections. Moreover, when Mikheil Kavelashvili was appointed president on 14 December 2024, his predecessor, Salome Zourabichvili, refused to step down and claimed she was the only legitimate head of state.

Abkhazian politics, like its Georgian counterpart, is highly divisive. The country has a presidential system of government, but the national constitution mandates that candidates for the highest office must be Abkhazian and

[23] Interviews with Dali Khomeriki, minister of education and culture of the government of Abkhazia in exile and Besik Silagadze, head of cabinet to the chairman of the government of Abkhazia in exile. I was invited by the government in exile to a wedding in Tbilisi of a Georgian man and an Abkhazian woman who had met in Moscow. On hearing of the story, the Georgian government provided a lavish event for the couple. It is perhaps indicative of the rather modest breakthroughs that have been achieved that this wedding was considered an event of national significance, well attended by Georgia's political elite and afforded ample coverage on state television.

[24] The most detailed polls have been carried out by the Caucasus Research Resource Centres (CRRC), often for international democratisation organisations such as the National Democratic Institute (NDI) and International Republican Institute (IRI).

fluent in the Abkhaz language.[25] Abkhazians are also disproportionately represented in the 35-member People's Assembly. While parliamentary seats are hotly contested, the legislature has traditionally played a less prominent role in political life than the presidency. [26]

The first president, war hero Vladislav Ardzinba (1994–2005), was initially popular, but his ill health shifted much of the governing responsibility to his deputy, Raul Khadjimba. A crisis emerged during the 2004 presidential election when Kremlin-backed Khadjimba refused to concede defeat to Sergei Bagapsh. A compromise was reached, with the two running on a unity ticket—Bagapsh as president and Khadjimba as vice president—an arrangement strongly endorsed by voters.[27]

Bagapsh easily secured re-election in 2009 following Russia's recognition of Abkhazia. However, his unexpected death in 2011 led to an early election, in which then vice president Alexander Ankvab defeated Khadjimba and foreign minister Sergei Shamba. Unwilling to wait for the next election, Khadjimba's supporters forced Ankvab to flee in 2014. Khadjimba subsequently won the presidency in a disputed election with a narrow majority (50.6 per cent) from a reduced electorate.[28] Khadjimba's divisive 2019 re-election was annulled by the Abkhazian Supreme Court and in the following contest (22 March 2020), Aslan Bzhania, who had lost to Khadjimba in 2014, became president. Bzhania's attempts to pass legislation easing property purchases for Russian citizens sparked civil unrest, leading to his resignation on 19 November 2024. Snap elections held on 15 February and 1 March 2025

[25] When pressed on this issue, Abkhazians stress their precarious demographic situation and that when the war for independence was fought the burden of 'shedding blood' fell mainly on Abkhazians, despite their small numbers. As one asked rhetorically: 'So, when it's about dying, only Abkhazians should die but when it's about election, others should be able to run for president?' (Shamil Adzynba, interview with the author, 2011). Most Abkhazians I spoke with accept that this provision will be removed in time but stressed the need to improve the demographic situation and number of Abkhaz speakers in the country. Armenians are the next most significant ethnic minority in Abkhazia and usually secure a few seats in parliament. Many Armenians fought with Abkhazians against the Georgian forces during the 1992–1993 war (interview with Suren Kerselyan, 2006).

[26] See Donnacha Ó Beacháin, 'The dynamics of electoral politics in Abkhazia', *Communist and Post Communist Studies* 27 (1–2) (2012), 165–74; Donnacha Ó Beacháin, 'Electoral politics in the de facto states of the South Caucasus', *Caucasus Analytical Digest* 94 (2017), 3–7.

[27] Donnacha Ó Beacháin, 'Elections without recognition: presidential and parliamentary contests in Abkhazia and Nagorny Karabakh', *Caucasus Survey* 3 (3) (2015), 239–57.

[28] Donnacha Ó Beacháin, 'What happens when an unrecognized country experiences a revolution?', *IPI Global Observatory*, 13 June 2014, available at: https://theglobalobservatory.org/2014/06/what-happens-when-unrecognized-country-experiences-revolution/ (29 April 2025); Donnacha Ó Beacháin, 'Dubious election produces a divisive new president in Abkhazia', *IPI Global Observatory*, 13 June, 2014. Available at https://theglobalobservatory.org/2014/09/dubious-election-divisive-new-president-abkhazia/ (29 April 2025).

produced a narrow election victory in the second round for Badra Gunba, the candidate most closely aligned with Bzhania.

GEORGIAN NARRATIVES

Official Georgian government discourses on how to unite their national territory have vacillated between international initiatives to get foreign governments to treat Abkhazia as an 'occupied territory' to less frequent attempts to engage Abkhazians directly. We will now examine in turn some of the more important narratives.

Framing the conflict

When analysing a conflict, it is vital to identify the warring parties. This might seem straightforward, but when terminology is tailored to complement political narratives, pinpointing core combatants can be challenging.

Georgian politicians and media consider reference to a conflict between Georgians and Abkhazian as Russian propaganda. Rather, they frequently claim that there has never been a dispute between these two peoples, only a struggle between Georgia and Russia. During one typical commemorative broadcast, for example, the official state television channel announced that 'On 14 August 1992 the Russian army invaded Abkhazia and it occupies that territory to this day.' Elsewhere in the same broadcast, the presenter repeatedly referred to the conflict as a 'war with Russia'.[29]

This narrative predominates in official discourse but diverges from basic facts. Eduard Shevardnadze, whose decade-long rule of independent Georgia coincided with the Abkhazian war, recognised that the crossing of the Ingur/i River by Georgia's National Guards in August 1992 was the catalyst for the conflagration. When I interviewed Shevardnadze at his home in October 2008, he confessed that the biggest regret of his career was his failure to fly to Sukhum/i at this time and speak face to face with Abkhazian leader Vladislav Ardzinba, as he understood that the movement of Georgian troops could only be viewed by Abkhazians as an invasion.

Georgia's official narrative of a Russian invasion to seize Abkhazia conflicts with the collaborative actions of the Georgian and Russian governments

[29] Rustavi 2 TV station, 14 August 2011.

in the years following the 1992–1993 war. In February 1994, Boris Yeltsin and Eduard Shevardnadze signed the Treaty of Russian–Georgian Friendship, Good Neighbourliness, and Cooperation.[30] At the behest of the governments in Tbilisi and Moscow, the Commonwealth of Independent States imposed an economic and political blockade on Abkhazia and both Russia and Georgia enforced harsh sanctions on the fragile region. Bereft of permission to travel, let alone recognised passports, Abkhazians were cut off from the world and the international community was disinclined to take an interest in their plight. Abkhazian men were barred from crossing the border with Russia, and even medicine imports were restricted. While life in Georgia continued relatively normally, Abkhazia, still reeling from the war, faced severe hardship, including reported shortages of bread and medical supplies.[31]

Just as Russia supported Georgia on the issue of Abkhazia, Georgia reciprocated on the matter of Chechen separatism. When Russian forces invaded Chechnya in 1994, the Georgian government backed the Kremlin and used the Chechen independence struggle to underline its case against the Abkhazians. Shevardnadze obviously hoped to curry favour with Moscow and present the Chechens and Abkhazians as two sides of the same separatist coin. 'Everything that is happening in Chechnya began with Abkhazia', proclaimed the Georgian president. He described Abkhazian leader Vladislav Ardzinba and his fellow countrymen as being motivated by 'the ideology of aggressive nationalism, of aggressive separatism', which constituted the greatest threat to world order.[32] Shevardnadze said it was important for Russia to remain stable and unified and therefore the Kremlin must defeat the independence movements.[33] Matching its words with deeds, the Georgian government prevented hundreds of Abkhazian fighters from travelling to Chechnya to help repay the debt accumulated in 1992–1993, when Chechens provided Abkhazians with vital military, political and moral support. Tbilisi intercepted radiograms from Chechen forces appealing for assistance from Abkhazian soldiers.[34] There were also reports

[30] Shevardnadze's efforts to secure Russian support were helped by the fact that his Soviet-era protégé Andrei Kozyrev served as the first foreign minister of the Russian Federation (1991–1996). Kozyrev had enjoyed a meteoric rise in the Soviet ministry of foreign affairs when Shevardnadze was at the helm.

[31] 'Catastrophic' bread shortages in Abkhazia', *Tbilisi Radio*, in Georgian, 13 December 1994.

[32] Interview on NTV (Moscow), 9 February 1996.

[33] 'Grozny assault may be near', *Associated Press*, 19 December 1994.

[34] 'Tbilisi stops 200 Abkhaz fighters heading for Chechnya', from the *Vesti* programme, Moscow television network, in Russian, 11 January 1996.

of a joint Russian–Georgian battalion patrolling the Chechen border and of Russian military helicopters travelling between Tbilisi and Chechnya to supply Russian servicemen.[35]

Shevardnadze did his best to advertise Abkhazian support for Chechnya, hoping that Yeltsin would, in his words, 'take the decision that will serve Russia's, and not only Russia's, interest'. The Georgian leader claimed with satisfaction that 'many politicians confirm now that Chechen and Abkhaz separatism are as similar as two halves of an apple', and continued:

> I should reiterate that the Chechnya tragedy stems from Abkhazia. It was in Abkhazia that the misfortune taking place in Chechnya started. I believe that all will be settled and Russia's statehood, unity and integrity will be preserved and this will give us additional confidence that we will be able to resolve our own problems faster and more effectively.[36]

Shevardnadze proclaimed that 'no other way of action is available to Russia, and that the preservation of territorial integrity is of vital importance for the Russian state, as it is for other countries'. When the Russian invasion of Chechnya descended into barbarism, Shevardnadze addressed mounting qualms about civilian atrocities by emphasising that 'in their constitutions the most democratic countries rule out any possibility of secession',[37] although neither Georgia nor Russia at this time could be described as democratic.

As neighbouring states facing separatist challenges, Russian and Georgian interests converged during much of the 1990s. Parallel to this, Abkhazians and Chechens found common ground as they endeavoured to establish themselves as states independent of Georgia and Russia respectively. On receiving an Abkhazian delegation seeking help, Chechen President Dzhokhar Dudayev said 'the pain of Abkhazia has become our own. Abkhazia must and will inevitably become free, independent, and sovereign. Peace and tranquillity will not come to the long-suffering land

[35] 'Joint Russian–Georgian battalion protecting Chechen border', *Iprinda*, Tbilisi, in Russian, 28 November 1994.

[36] Foreign Broadcast Information Service (FBIS), *Tbilisi Radio Network*, in Georgian, 23 January 1995.

[37] *Le Monde*, in French (May 1995), FBIS translation, available at: https://abkhazworld.com/aw/publications/archives/1157-fbis-reports-on-chechnya-abkhazia (7 May 2025).

of Abkhazia until all Georgian troops are withdrawn to the last soldier.'[38] Abkhazians in turn supported the Chechens and offered besieged President Dudayev asylum should he require it. Dudayev praised 'the Abkhaz people's support at a time when Chechnya is repelling Russia's armed aggression' and expressed gratitude for the sending of Abkhazian fighters to the battlefield.[39] It is important to highlight this alignment between Russia and Georgia, as well as between Abkhazians and Chechens, especially in light of later narratives that retroactively portray Russia as having occupied Abkhazia in 1992.

EU member states continued to support Georgia's Soviet-era boundaries throughout the 1990s. Speaking to the Georgian parliament in 1996, German foreign minister Klaus Kinkel described the embargo on Abkhazia as 'a serious step in the right direction', and said 'any separatist demands for independence lack any grounds and will not be supported either by Germany or the world community as a whole'.[40] The 'world community' also displayed little support for the Chechens as they fought off the Russian invasion of 1994–1996. President Clinton told Boris Yeltsin that he considered the struggle to be akin to the US civil war, which made the Russian president an unlikely Abraham Lincoln.[41]

Moscow's approach to the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict fundamentally changed when Vladimir Putin took office in 2000. During Putin's early years as president, the Kremlin exploited the Abkhazian issue to exert leverage on Georgia, and to preserve a Russian sphere of influence in the Caucasus. Abkhazians welcomed Russian interest in their cause, from which they derived practical benefits (e.g. passports, pensions), and hoped it would act as a counterbalance to Georgian pressure. This led to increased frustrations in Georgia, which ultimately bubbled over in 2003 when Shevardnadze was ousted and

[38] A. Sadulayev, 'Meeting of Dzhokhar Dudayev with the Abkhaz delegation' (translation from Russian), *Caucasian Chronicle* 6 (10), 20–26 February 1993. See 'Selected FBIS reports on Chechnya, Abkhazia & the Chechen war', available at: https://abkhazworld.com/aw/publications/archives/1157-fbis-reports-on-chechnya-abkhazia (29 April 2025). Dudayev had earlier (1992) said that the only viable future was to unite the mountain peoples of the Caucasus as a confederation 'to give the right of self-determination to every nation here and to withdraw immediately Russian troops from Caucasian territory'. This would include several republics that found themselves in the Russian Federation following the Soviet Union's collapse, as well as Abkhazia. See also FBIS, 'Caucasian Confederation Set to Aid Chechnya', 19 December 1994, available at: https://abkhazworld.com/aw/publications/archives/1157-fbis-reports-on-chechnya-abkhazia (29 April 2025).

[39] FBIS, 'Dudayev thanks Abkhaz president for asylum offer', *Iprinda*, Tbilisi, in Russian, 9 October 1995.

[40] FBIS, 'Kinkel supports sanctions against Abkhazia', *Interfax*, Moscow, in English, 24 January 1996.

[41] Paul Basken, 'Clinton supports Yeltsin on Chechnya', *UPI Archives*, 21 April 1996.

replaced by Mikheil Saakashvili, who was 40 years his junior.[42] Saakashvili increased Georgia's emphasis on EU and NATO membership as means to restore the national territory, a strategy already adopted by Shevardnadze.[43]

The EU expressed a clear preference for resolving territorial disputes peacefully, but Georgian governments were reluctant to rule out military options, hoping for European support, including military aid, in dealing with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Saakashvili's push for Georgia to join NATO was partly aimed at securing Western military help to resolve these territorial conflicts. To bolster its standing within NATO and enhance its membership bid, Georgia contributed more troops per capita to fight in Iraq and Afghanistan than any other country, including the United States. Georgian participation in NATO operations was framed as fulfilling its obligations to the West, with the expectation that this would lead to reciprocal support to subdue its 'breakaway regions'.

Many Georgians today portray the 1992–1993 war as a genocide of Georgians and link this conflict with the more recent Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine. A recent example of this narrative is the campaign 'Before Bucha there was Abkhazia',[44] which attempts to link the Georgian and Ukrainian struggles and frame Russia as the common adversary. Although Ukraine is mentioned, its purpose is to repopulate Abkhazia with Georgians and it echoes the earlier narrative of 'Before Chechnya there was Abkhazia', this time tailored for a Western audience.

The fallacy of amity

Political leaders in Tbilisi have consistently underestimated Abkhazian resistance to Georgia's national project. Abkhazians are considered numerically

[42] Saakashvili came to power as a result of the 'Rose Revolution' that followed popular mobilisation to challenge fraudulent parliamentary results in November 2003. See Francoise J. Companjen, 'Georgia', in Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Abel Polese (eds), *The colour revolutions in the former Soviet space* (Abingdon, 2010), 13–29.

[43] Shevardnadze said that Georgia was 'knocking on NATO's door' with a view to applying for membership in 2005 at the latest (the timing, he said, would depend on relations with Russia). See 'Georgia's knock at Nato's door: quieter but more persistent', The Jamestown Foundation, *Fortnight in Review* 6 (1) (7 January 2000), available at: https://jamestown.org/program/georgias-knock-at-natos-door-quieter-but-more-persistent/ (29 April 2025).

[44] This campaign has involved tours of US and European cities to promote documentary screenings, photography exhibitions and presentations. For example, on 27 September 2024, the anniversary of when Abkhazians captured Sukhum/i, the documentary film was shown at the French National Assembly in the presence of the Georgian president. According to the organisers, the documentary provides 'evidence of the genocide organized by Russia against the Georgians in Abkhazia in 1992–1993'. See 'Before Bucha, there was Abkhazia—a film screening and discussion was held in the French National Assembly' (in Georgian), *Tabula*, 28 September 2024, available at: https://tabula.ge/ge/news/723592-buchamde-iqo-apkhazeti-saprangetis-erovnul (29 April 2025).

insignificant and incapable of surviving without external assistance. Georgians believe they did not lose to the Abkhazians in 1993, but to Russia. One popular Georgian narrative is that their relationship with Abkhazians has traditionally been marked by mutual affection. With this discourse, Abkhazians are referred to as 'brothers' and an integral part of the Georgian nation. Deteriorating Georgian–Abkhazian relations are blamed on Moscow, which has fostered divisions between the two groups. Archil Gegeshidze, who served as Georgia's ambassador to the United States from 2013 to 2016, has exemplified this view:

> When we talk about the conflicts in Georgia, nobody asks the question why Georgians and Abkhazians didn't have conflicts until the Russian Empire came into the Caucasus. We were living together for 25, 26, 27 centuries, even longer, but never before did Georgians and Abkhazians fight each other or all the peoples in the North Caucasus. They never quarrelled until the Russians came.[45]

A variation of this view was expressed by Tamaz Nadareishvili, who headed the Georgian 'government in exile', which claimed to be Abkhazia's legitimate authority:

> I categorically don't accept the assessments … [that state that] there was a conflict inside the country, that Georgians and Abkhaz couldn't agree on something, have quarrelled and now must now reconcile. This is perfectly absurd … The tragedy in Abkhazia can not be assessed as an ethnic conflict between Abkhaz and Georgians. That was a military, political conflict inspired by a third, outer, party, that is by the Russian State, whose aggression resulted in the occupation of Abkhazia – an integral part of Georgia.[46]

The notion that the conflict is primarily with an imperial power conveniently shifts the focus away from negotiations with Abkhazians, placing responsibility on a distant power centre. As one Abkhazian NGO leader noted, this belief might also serve a political and psychological purpose for Georgian nationalists, fostering the hope of eventual reconciliation with Abkhazians:

[45] Archil Gegeshidze, interview with author, 2002.
[46] Tamaz Nadareishvili, *Genocide in Abkhazia* (Tbilisi, 1997), 10–11.

> I think that very often Georgians avoid the truth by saying that the Abkhaz don't reject Georgian culture, because it's a threat to their rule. Instead, they speak about the third party, they speak about Russia interfering … they sometimes avoid blaming Abkhazians for the kind of relations we have with the Georgians, and instead they blame Russians or whoever. Because they still … hope that we can live in one community again. Probably they don't want us to live here, maybe they think that we can live together in one community because it is the only way for them to get back here, and to control Abkhazia. But once they blame somebody else that makes it easy for them to come to terms with Abkhazians, because if they blame Abkhazians, it's a more difficult process of reconciliation but if they say somebody else was wrong, that there's nothing wrong between Abkhazians and Georgians, we can still go on as if nothing happened.[47]

The wounds inflicted by the Georgian–Abkhazian war are too deep to be healed in the foreseeable future. The reality of two separate states has reinforced pre-existing divisions, making a unity of minds, let alone of political institutions, unlikely. Archil Gegeshidze outlined the dilemma facing Georgians:

> the only formula for the lasting solution of the conflict should be based on voluntary reconciliation. No forceful remedy would be a long-term solution of the conflict … But having breathed the air of independence it is very questionable for me that they [the Abkhazians] will ever voluntarily reconcile with Georgians.[48]

One convenient way of overcoming the need to come to terms with Abkhazians is to deny their identity and legitimacy as a nation. Popular notions persist in Georgia that question the historical origins of Abkhazians to undermine their claim to Abkhazia. One theory invented during the 1950s declares that 'true Abkhazians' had been an ancient Georgian tribe only to be replaced in the seventeenth century by interlopers from the north Caucasus.[49] This theory,

[47] Liana Kvarchelia, interview with author, 2002.
[48] Archil Gegeshidze, interview with author, 2002.
[49] See Emil Souleimanov, *Understanding ethnopolitical conflict: Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia wars reconsidered* (Basingstoke, 2013), 116.

amplified by Zviad Gamsakhurdia during his presidency, remains very popular in Georgia today and complements the aim of resettling Georgians in Abkhazia. When I interviewed one prominent member of the Georgian intelligentsia involved in a well-publicised 'white scarf movement' designed to halt the fighting in Abkhazia during the 1990s, she reiterated important elements of this theory:

> [Abkhazia] was originally and historically Georgian territory, [it] always was Georgian territory … These Abkhazians, who now stick to the Abkhazian language, they are the group of people who not thousands [but] just hundreds of years ago came from the north Caucasus. And this is accepted by all the scientists who are linguists, historians … So the image of Georgia invading so called Abkhazia, which was always Georgia historically [is absurd].[50]

Abkhazians as Moscow's puppets

Another persistent Georgian narrative casts Abkhazians as mere instruments of Russian influence, denying them any independent political agency or legitimate grievances. Tamaz Nadareishvili, for instance, claimed that 'Ardzinba [then Abkhazian President] and his separatist regime … proved perfectly loyal to the directives of [Russia's] imperial forces.'[51] This framing extends back to the Soviet era, when Abkhazians mobilised against their status as an autonomous republic within the Georgian SSR. When I spoke with Eduard Shevardnadze about these protests, he underscored the Soviet strategy of encouraging internal divisions to weaken the republics:

> I remember there were many letters written from the Abkhazians requesting secession from Georgia. These were ordinary nationalists. But the letters were written in Moscow. When I looked at the handwriting, I could feel where it was written, I could feel whether it was an Abkhazian, Russian or Georgian writing it. The

[50] Keti Dolidze, interview with author, 2002. For Abkhazian responses to these assertions, see Stanislav Lakoba, *A response to historians from Tbilisi: documents and facts* (in Russian), Society for the Study of the Adyghe Autonomous Region, Sukhum, 2001.
[51] Nadereishvili, *Genocide in Abkhazia*, 10.

> handwriting was so vivid that it was obvious it was a Russian person writing it.[52]

This suspicion of Abkhazian autonomy continues in more recent discourse. Several Georgian government ministers I interviewed dismissed the well-documented internal political competition in Abkhazia—where rival factions contest elections and vie for influence—insisting that all participants were simply following Moscow's orders. As one minister put it: 'These are puppets. If they stop being puppets they will become victims of Russian special forces or the KGB, literally victims, they will be probably killed; there is no sign of freedom, there are no organisations, not even NGOs.'[53] When I noted that the Kremlin had publicly supported candidates in Abkhazian elections who then lost, the response often shifted to legalism: since the elections lacked international recognition, discussion of them was moot. Any attempt at a nuanced analysis of political dynamics within Abkhazia was invariably dismissed, and the conversation redirected toward 'European values'—implicitly shared by a Georgian minister and myself as a Western researcher, and contrasted with the illegitimacy of Abkhazian governance. As the minister put it: 'We can't talk about civilisation when the main European values and principles of interaction between countries are neglected in Abkhazia. There are no possibilities to implement any kind of EU activities, principles and values there.'[54]

Georgia's European narrative

This brings us to the role that the EU and related narratives have played in the conflict. The portrayal of Georgia as a long-lost and undervalued European nation serves a clear strategic purpose. For if Georgia is seen as an integral part of Europe, the EU might be more inclined to support its struggle against Russian influence and back its territorial claims. As well as bolstering Georgian narratives of the conflict, the pro-EU discourse has been harnessed for domestic political aims. Public opinion surveys consistently show that a majority of Georgians believe EU membership would enhance national

[52] It is a peculiar claim to make, not least because Abkhazian leaders—all known and identifiable—took considerable risks to add their names to the letters sent to Moscow. Moreover, while Georgians regularly reached the apex of political power in the Soviet Union, Abkhazians remained a relatively obscure nation. Indeed, Shevardnadze was a key figure in implementing the very Soviet policy he subsequently deprecated.

[53] Koba Subeliani, interview with author, 2011.

[54] Subeliani, interview with author, 2011.

security and support the restoration of territorial integrity.[55] The EU flag flies outside all major government buildings, and its prominence in Tbilisi often exceeds that in many actual EU capitals.[56]

During his presidency (2004–2013), Mikheil Saakashvili made the case that Europe bore a responsibility for Georgia's fate. At his inauguration in January 2004, he raised the EU flag beside the Georgian one and declared:

> [the European] flag is Georgia's flag as well, as far as it embodies our civilization, our culture, the essence of our history and perspective, and our vision for the future of Georgia … Georgia is not just a European country, but one of the most ancient European countries … Our steady course is toward European integration. It is time Europe finally saw and valued Georgia and took steps toward us.[57]

This notion—that Georgia, as an 'ancient European' country, should 'return to Europe' through EU membership—became a defining theme of Saakashvili's administration. He personalised the conflict resolution process, frequently asserting that Georgia's territorial integrity could be restored during his tenure.[58] The ministry for conflict resolution was renamed the ministry for reintegration (of the national territory), a move many viewed as provocative and likely to deter engagement with Abkhazians. A pro-Tbilisi administration was installed in Abkhazia's Kodori Gorge, and European diplomats were encouraged to engage with it rather than with the authorities in Sukhum/i.

There was a clear convergence of identity politics and strategic interest. Much of the pro-EU rhetoric implied that Georgia, as a bastion of democracy—used interchangeably with 'Europeanness'—deserved Western protection

[55] For example, President Salome Zourabichvili said that 'If there is a real way by which we can get back Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region [South Ossetia] tomorrow, it is precisely by joining Europe', *Interpressnews*, Georgia, 23 April 2025.

[56] The EU flag is also that of the Council of Europe and it is open to all members of this body to fly the flag. However, as few people are aware of this fact, the flag is generally considered to represent the EU.

[57] Donnacha Ó Beacháin and Frederik Coene, 'Go West: Georgia's European identity and its role in domestic politics and foreign policy objectives', *Nationalities Papers* 42 (6) (2014), 923–41: 930.

[58] The collapse of Aslan Abashidze's police state in Adjara in May 2004 gave the new Saakashvili administration false hope in dealing with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Though Adjara had a status within the Georgian SSR equal to Abkhazia and superior to South Ossetia, and despite the independence of Aslan Abashidze's post-Soviet presidency from the Georgian government, Adjara never aspired to international recognition as a separate state. See Donnacha Ó Beacháin, 'Roses and tulips: dynamics of regime change in Georgia and Kyrgyzstan', *Journal of Communist Studies and Transition Politics* 25 (2/3) (2009), 199–216: 215.

from external threats. However, Saakashvili's attempts to internationalise the conflict through the involvement of military personnel and appeals for an EU role in policing the conflict zones were consistently rejected.

Successive governments in Tbilisi have maintained that EU integration will act as a magnet to attract Abkhazia. Georgia's potential role as a beacon for backward and brainwashed Abkhazians was presented in stark terms by Koba Subeliani, minister for internally displaced persons, resettlement and refugees from the occupied territories:

> The new technologies will deliver the messages from the rest of Georgia about the civilisations, about the educational opportunities, about national development. In this way, we will introduce the ways of modern life, a new life which will be attractive for young Abkhazians as well. The Russian propaganda that operates in Abkhazia was very active during Soviet times. Our parents' generation was told that Europeans and Americans are cannibals and eat human beings. The same propaganda is working in Abkhazia, Russian propaganda is telling them not to believe in the EU, in America, in the civilised world, but to believe only in Russians.[59]

When I asked the minister whether Abkhazians believed this propaganda, he replied:

> They are terrorised. They are under a terrorist regime and have no freedom of speech. And one day it will become a subject for discussion for the civilised world and the people living in Abkhazia will realise that they have been isolated from the rest of the world because of Russian propaganda.

According to this narrative, Georgia's embodiment of 'European values'—and, by extension, its place in the 'civilised world'—reinforces the moral imperative of extending its control over Abkhazia. However, Georgia's 'return to Europe' relies less on civilisational claims than on implementing and respecting EU laws and practices. While successive Georgian governments have proclaimed their commitment to EU integration, they have repeatedly refused to approximate national legislation with key components of the European *acquis*.

[59] Interview with the author, 2010. Subeliani was minister for this portfolio from 2008 to 2012.

Over time, the idea of the EU as a panacea took hold among political elites and large segments of civil society. Seeking international security guarantees is nothing new for Georgia. Historically positioned at the crossroads of empires and repeatedly subjected to invasion, the country has long sought external protectors. The EU is simply the latest in a line of perceived saviours. As party secretary Shevardnadze told the Georgian Communist Party Congress in 1976: 'For Georgians, the sun rises not in the east, but in the north—in Russia.'[60] In recent decades, however, that sun is considered as rising in the West—in Brussels.

THE EU'S APPROACH TO GEORGIA AND ABKHAZIA

Prior to the 2008 war, the EU's approach to the South Caucasus region had been cautious and incremental. When Georgia joined the Commonwealth of Independent States in 1993, it became eligible for inclusion in the EC's Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) programme, launched two years earlier to support the transition to market economies and democratic societies in former Soviet states. At this stage much of the EU's attention was focused on the South Caucasus as a transport and energy hub. Azerbaijani fossil fuels were travelling through Georgia and onwards to Europe. As a result, Georgia participated in the EU's TRACECA (Transport Corridor Europe–Caucasus–Asia) initiative launched in 1998. However, the EU did not play a major role in regional mediation efforts. The UN took charge of conflict management processes between Georgians and Abkhazians, while the OSCE supervised disputes between Georgians and South Ossetians and between Armenians and Azerbaijanis over Nagorno-Karabakh.

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) Action Plan for Georgia in 2006 downplayed conflict resolution, focusing instead on governance reform. The EU's financial contributions to projects within Abkhazia were relatively small, especially compared to Russian support.[61] Georgia gained a bevy of new cheerleaders within the EU when it underwent a major enlargement in 2004 and 2007. Ten new post-communist states joined and these instinctively

[60] Quoted in Adrian Brisku, *Bittersweet Europe: Albanian and Georgian discourses on Europe, 1878–2008* (Oxford, 2013), 116.

[61] Interviews with Alexander Ankvab, 2011 and Maxim Gvinjia, 2011, who were Abkhazian president and foreign minister respectively.

accepted Georgia's framing of the Abkhazian conflict through the prism of relations with Russia.

The 2008 war, which pitted Georgians against Russian, South Ossetian and Abkhazian forces, proved to be a watershed in the EU's relationship with the Caucasus. President Saakashvili had made unifying the national territory a top priority and during his first term in office, military spending in Georgia jumped from around $74 million in 2003 to a peak of $923 million four years later. The figure was destined to be higher in 2008 but quickly declined following the August war ($876 million in 2008). The share of GDP spent on defence ballooned from 1.1 per cent in 2003 to 9.2 per cent in 2007.[62] While responsibility for the war remains hotly disputed, the initial Georgian bombardment of Tskhinval/i, which began on 7 August 2008 and left hundreds of Ossetians dead, was difficult to reconcile with notions of brotherly friendship. Taking advantage of the conflict in South Ossetia, Abkhazian forces expelled Georgian troops from the small, sparsely populated Kodori Gorge, the only part of Abkhazia under Tbilisi's control.

By its decision of 2 December 2008, the Council of the European Union established the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia (IIFFMCG).[63] Compiled by Swiss diplomat Heidi Tagliavini and aided by 30 European military, legal and history experts, the final report was published on 30 September 2009. Summarising the findings for international diplomats in Brussels, Tagliavini said that while Russia had responded with disproportionate force, it was Georgia that had triggered the war and Georgian explanations for the massive attack on the South Ossetian capital lacked credibility. The report concluded: 'The shelling of Tskhinvali by the Georgian armed forces during the night of 7 to 8 August 2008 marked the beginning of the large-scale armed conflict', before adding 'There is the question of whether [this] use of force … was justifiable under international law. It was not.' [64]

[62] See The World Bank, 'Military expenditure (% of GDP) – Georgia', available at: https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?locations=GE (29 April 2025).

[63] This was the first time the EU launched a fact-finding mission as a political and diplomatic response following the conclusion of a ceasefire agreement. See Heidi Tagliavini, 'The August 2008 conflict in Georgia', *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the American Society of International Law* 105 (2011), 89–94.

[64] *Independent International Fact-Finding Mission Report on the Conflict in Georgia* (September 2009), vol. I, 11, available at: https://www.echr.coe.int/documents/d/echr/hudoc_38263_08_Annexes_eng (29 April 2025); *BBC*, 'Georgia "started unjustified war"', 30 September 2009, available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/8281990.stm (29 April 2025); Ahto Lobjakas, 'EU report on 2008 war tilts against Georgia', *Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty*, 30 September 2009, available at: https://www.rferl.org/a/EU_Report_On_2008_War_Tilts_Against_Georgia/1840447.html (29 April 2025).

After the 2008 war, the EU opted for an unarmed monitoring mission (the EUMM) instead of peacekeepers. While the mission helped defuse tensions, its role was, and remains, limited to Georgian-controlled territory. At best, its presence signalled to Moscow that Brussels had a role to play, albeit a modest one, and it provided some reassurance to Georgians.[65] Following Russia's veto of the UN and OSCE missions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia respectively, the EU took on a more prominent role, if only for lack of alternatives.[66] In addition to the EUMM, an EU special representative (EUSR) for the crisis in Georgia was created in 2008.[67]

The Georgian government remained defiant after the war. Saakashvili claimed that Russia had sought to annihilate his country and therefore presented Georgia's survival as a major achievement.[68] The head of the National Security Council, Giga Bokeria, stressed that Abkhazia's fate was not merely a Georgian matter but a challenge for European security and freedom. The EU, he argued, had a key role to play: Georgia was returning to Europe, 'where we belong', and 'until we meet those challenges [of taking control of Abkhazia and South Ossetia] the goal of Europe whole and free is not fulfilled'.[69] The government in Tbilisi argued that the EUMM needed to be augmented by a 'hard security element on the ground' combined with strong messaging from the EU to Russia that its actions in Georgia would incur repercussions.[70] Acceptance of the status quo would, according to Bokeria, 'legitimize the instrument of force and ethnic cleansing to redraw European borders'.[71]

The 2008 war exposed the limitations of EU efforts to prevent military conflict. However, it was the very lack of strong or coherent involvement that pushed the EU to the forefront of endeavours to negotiate a ceasefire and then monitor and maintain the peace. The US and NATO were unacceptable

[65] Sergi Kapanadze, deputy minister for foreign affairs, interview with author, 2011.

[66] EU Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy, Štefan Fűle, in response to a question posed by the author at 'Georgia's European Way' international conference, Batumi, Georgia, 22 July 2011. According to Georgia's then minister for Euro-Atlantic relations, Sergi Kapanadze, the EU role in Georgia before the 2008 war was 'almost nothing'. After the 2008 war the eyes of the EU were opened 'and they adopted a far more active approach than hitherto' (interview with author, 2011).

[67] This position was merged in 2011 with the EUSR for the South Caucasus, a position that had been established in 2003. Since then, the official title is the EUSR for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia.

[68] Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili, in response to question posed by the author at 'Georgia's European Way' international conference, Batumi, Georgia, 22 July 2011.

[69] Giga Bokeria, secretary of the National Security Council of Georgia, interview with author, 2011.

[70] Bokeria, interview with author; Saakashvili, in response to question posed by author at 'Georgia's European Way' conference.

[71] Bokeria, interview with author.

mediators for Russia, not to mention the Abkhazians and Ossetians, while the OSCE had been discredited for its failure to prevent a large-scale conflagration.

In December 2009, the EU Council's political and security committee approved a strategy of 'non-recognition and engagement' towards Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Though never published, the policy suggested a willingness to engage with Abkhazians and Ossetians through confidence-building measures.[72] Tbilisi's main initiative after the 2008 war was the State Strategy on Occupied Territories, which required Georgian government approval for any engagement between Abkhazia and the outside world.[73] Linking non-political cross-border cooperation to a broader 'de-occupation' strategy hindered existing collaborations and many new initiatives were stalled.[74] This led many to conclude that Georgia's strategy on the occupied territories had been devised to influence international opinion rather than the separatists (even the strategy's name was guaranteed to thwart its ostensible aim of reaching out to Abkhazians and Ossetians).[75] Abkhazians viewed it as a direct response to the EU's new 'policy' of engagement without recognition with the aim of limiting any interaction between them and the international community.

For Abkhazians, the issue of visas to the EU and US puts the policy of engagement to the test. As most countries don't recognise Abkhazian travel documents, only those fortunate enough to have acquired a passport issued and registered in Russia can avoid the current travel prohibition.[76] Even then, Abkhazians participating in sporting and cultural events have been denied entry to the EU. Students in Abkhazia who, after competitive exams, were chosen to participate in educational exchanges abroad were informed that

[72] See Bruno Coppieters, 'Engagement without recognition', in Visoka et al., *Routledge handbook of state recognition*, 241–55; Alexander Cooley and Lincoln A. Mitchell, 'Engagement without recognition: a new strategy toward Abkhazia and Eurasia's unrecognized states', *Washington Quarterly* 33 (4) (2010), 59–73; James Ker-Lindsay, 'Engagement without recognition: the limits of diplomatic interaction with contested states', *International Affairs* 91 (2) (2015), 267–85; Eiki Berg, 'Engagement without recognition', in Ryan D. Griffiths, Aleksandar Pavković and Peter Radan (eds), *Routledge handbook of self-determination and secession* (Abingdon, 2023), 359–71.

[73] 'On approval of modalities for conducting activities in the occupied territories of Georgia', Regulation of the government of Georgia, N 320, Tbilisi, 15 October 2010.

[74] In Abkhazia, I learned that the Georgian government's strategy resulted in enhanced pressure on international NGOs to sever ties with Tbilisi if they were to maintain a presence in Abkhazia.

[75] I benefited greatly from a three-hour interview in October 2010 with the key author of the strategy and modalities, but was not convinced by his contention that Abkhazians would embrace the suggestions for cooperation without taking into account the Georgian government's much-proclaimed objective of 'de-occupation'. Little has transpired since to undermine my opinion on this.

[76] See Ramesh Ganohariti, '(Non) recognition of legal identity in aspirant states: evidence from Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Transnistria', *Citizenship Studies* 27 (7) (2023), 817–34.

this could only take place if they travelled with a Georgian passport.[77] Since recognising Abkhazia in 2008, Moscow has reportedly adopted a more restrictive policy on issuing Russian passports.[78] This may be a deliberate strategy on Russia's part to confine the movements of the Abkhazians to Russia and restrict travel and interaction with the rest of the world. If so, the EU policy complements this objective perfectly. The head of the State Press Agency of Abkhazia (ApsnyPress), Manana Gurguria, argued that whereas one might at some level understand not providing visas to Abkhazia's politicians or government representatives as the EU did not recognise the country, the denial of visas to ordinary citizens who simply wanted to get medical treatment in Europe was 'very strange':

> How can we speak about any engagement if the simple citizens cannot cross the borders? People who go with a cultural or sports mission, they cannot cross borders … The strategy of engagement without recognition is promoted by the EU [but] in Abkhazia people can't see what they can really offer in the frames of this strategy. What are the concrete steps that can be taken? … At the very minimum, people in Abkhazia cannot get real messages about the desire of the EU to get closer to Abkhazia … Here in Abkhazia, it seems that EU countries constantly look to Georgia. What does Georgia say, will it criticise any steps that they are taking? Georgia is strictly against Abkhazian contacts with the rest of the world that cannot be done through Georgia.[79]

Georgia's official aspiration to join the EU and NATO remained intact following the defeat of Saakashvili's United National Movement (UNM) and its replacement in 2012–2013 by the Georgian Dream party led by the billionaire

[77] None of the selected students complied with the demand to acquire a Georgian passport, but the reputation of the organisations offering scholarships was irreparably harmed. The educational organisations were not acting on their own initiative but following the instructions of the Georgian government.
[78] This seems to be based on the argument that as Moscow recognises their national passports, Abkhazians can travel freely to Russia without need of Russian travel documents. Interviews in Abkhazia, August 2011.
[79] Interview with the author, 2011.

oligarch, Bidzina Ivanishvili.[80] In March 2013, parliament passed a comprehensive bipartisan resolution, which proclaimed that integration into the European and Euro-Atlantic structures represented 'the main priority of the country's foreign policy'.[81]

When approaching the issue of Abkhazia, the EU remained unable to pursue a policy that didn't have Georgian government approval. For example, in 2016, Brussels commissioned a review of human rights in Abkhazia and chose Thomas Hammarberg, a Swedish diplomat who had worked for six years as the Council of Europe's commissioner for human rights. The initiative was also approved by the UN and the OSCE. Hammarberg teamed up with Magdalena Grono, an expert from the International Crisis Group,[82] and made several trips to Abkhazia as well as meeting with Georgian officials in Tbilisi. Given that the focus was on human rights, and cooperation was needed from all sides to make an investigation feasible, the report steered clear of evaluating rival constitutional claims. When a draft of the report was shared with officials in Tbilisi, Abkhazia and Moscow, the Georgian foreign ministry strongly opposed its neutral tone.[83] Georgian officials insisted that Abkhazia be referred to as 'Abkhazia, Georgia' and that the treatment of Georgians be labelled 'genocide'. They also argued that discussing Abkhazian legislation legitimised the Abkhazian government. Georgia lobbied hard for the report's suppression, leveraging anti-Russian sentiment to gain support from Poland and the Baltic states.[84] Although it was the most thorough examination of human rights in Abkhazia and shed light on the difficult conditions

[80] Parliamentary elections in October 2012 resulted in victory for the Georgian Dream coalition. To this day it remains the only peaceful transfer of power between government and opposition. The transition from UNM rule was completed in October 2013 with the victory of Georgian Dream presidential candidate Giorgi Margvelashvili. Saakashvili, who was constitutionally prohibited from running for a third term, stepped down after almost ten years at the helm and fled the country (he has since been imprisoned in Georgia). Within a month of Saakashvili's departure Ivanishvili formally withdrew from politics for the first time, but he is generally considered to direct Georgia's government from behind the scenes.

[81] 'Parliament adopts bipartisan resolution on foreign policy', *Civil.Ge*, 7 March 2013, available at: http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=25828 (29 April 2025).

[82] In September 2024, Grono was appointed EU special representative to the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia, replacing Toivo Klaar, who had held the position since November 2017.

[83] 'It was agreed that the approach to be taken in this project was one of strict status-neutrality. No position was to be taken on how the political conflict issues should be resolved – other than the need to protect human rights. In fact, the status-neutral approach was also a prerequisite for this field research based assessment to be feasible.' Thomas Hammarberg and Magdalena Grono, 'Human rights in Abkhazia today', Stockholm and Brussels, July 2017, 3.

[84] See Joshua Kucera, 'Georgia thwarts EU engagement with Abkhazia' *EurasiaNet*, 17 August 2017, available at: https://eurasianet.org/georgia-thwarts-eu-engagement-with-abkhazia (29 April 2025).

faced by Georgians there, the EU chose not to release its own report, much to the frustration of the authors.[85]

Georgia's EU membership process has been influenced by geopolitical factors. The country's association agreement with the EU was finally signed in June 2014, just after Russia's annexation of Crimea and on the same day as Moldova's and Ukraine's association agreements. In a joint resolution drafted in large part as a response to Russian intervention in Ukraine, the European Parliament declared that Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine have a European perspective and may apply to become members of the Union provided they adhere to the principles of democracy, respect fundamental freedoms and human and minority rights and ensure the rule of law.[86] On securing visa-free travel to the Schengen area in 2017, the government in Tbilisi suggested that this would incentivise people in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to integrate with Georgia. According to this argument, free access to the EU would demonstrate the tangible benefits of association with Georgia and contrast with the isolation and limited travel opportunities available under Russian patronage. However, as securing these benefits required Abkhazians and Ossetians to acquire Georgian documents, hopes for greater engagement or reintegration proved to be ill-founded.

When Ukraine decided to apply for EU membership within days of Russia's full-scale invasion, Georgia quickly followed suit, despite a request from Kyiv not to. However, while the applications of Ukraine and Moldova for candidate status were quickly approved, Georgia initially received a weaker substitute, which involved acknowledging the country's 'European perspective'. For many in Georgia, the EU decision was interpreted as a rebuff and evidence

[85] Hammarberg and Grono published their report at Sweden's Olof Palme International Centre, where Hammarberg used to be secretary general. The report is available at: https://www.palmecenter.se/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/Human-Rights-in-Abkhazia-Today-report-by-Thomas-Hammarberg-and-Magdalena-Grono.pdf (29 April 2025). Hammarberg reflected: 'What is interesting is that they back off under pressure, even from an EU non-member state. It's not a good sign. They broke their promise.' Quoted in Jonathan Steele, 'The Abkhazia human rights report the EU doesn't want you to read', 17 August 2017, available at https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/abkhazia-human-rights-report-eu-doesnt-want-you-read (29 April 2025). While moderating a panel at the 2019 South Caucasus Security Forum in Tbilisi, I raised the issue with the EU special representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia, Toivo Klaar. While highlighting that he did not hold the position of EUSR when the decision was made, he reflected that 'there were certain political aspects to the report which at the time the EU felt it was prudent to listen to the sensitivities that our Georgian partners have in that regard'. The session can be viewed at: https://gfsis.org/en/south-caucasus-security-forum-may-2019-tbilisi-georgia-ii-session-2/ (29 April 2025).

[86] 'Joint motion for a resolution on Russian pressure on Eastern Partnership countries and in particular destabilisation of eastern Ukraine', 16 April 2014, 2014/2699(RSP), available at: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/RC-7-2014-0436_EN.html (29 April 2025).

of the reputational damage caused by successive government policies, not least those that had undermined democratic values and minority rights. While Georgia was eventually awarded candidate status in December 2023, the EU has since frozen the process due to Georgia's democratic backsliding, which has ignited an intense conflict between government and civil society. Despite the impasse, the official position remains that the EU 'firmly supports Georgia's territorial integrity' and considers Abkhazia to be 'Georgia's occupied breakaway region'.[87]

Routine declarations of fidelity to European values in Georgia have not been matched by political practice, however, particularly in the sphere of minority rights. On 4 September 2024, the EU said it 'deplored' Georgia's anti-LGBT legislation.[88] The Georgian government in turn has regularly depicted the EU as a threat to national traditions and family values. Georgian Dream has made common cause with Hungary's premier, Viktor Orbán, and has claimed it will advance 'to Europe with dignity'.

Although Georgia achieved long-sought EU candidate status in December 2023, the relationship between the EU and Georgia has sharply deteriorated as the ruling Georgian Dream party passed laws curtailing civil society and media freedom, most notably the controversial 'foreign agents' law mirroring Russian legislation. This move, along with other oppressive measures and flawed elections, signalled a turn away from official European values. Massive public protests erupted, and the government responded with increasing violence against demonstrators, arrests of activists and journalists, and purges of civil servants participating in protests. As the country drifted further into repressive authoritarianism, the Georgian government announced in November 2024 that it was suspending its EU integration process until 2028.

RUSSIA'S FULL-SCALE INVASION OF UKRAINE

Many of the contradictions associated with the EU's approach to Georgia and Abkhazia were underlined following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in

[87] Council of the European Union, 'EU relations with Georgia', 25 July 2024, available at https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/georgia/#integrity (29 April 2025).

[88] European External Action Service, 'Georgia: statement by the spokesperson on the legislative package on "family values and protection of minors"', 4 September 2024, available at: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/georgia-statement-spokesperson-legislative-package-family-values-and-protection-minors_en (29 April 2025).

February 2022. Rather than implementing sanctions against Russia, Georgia became a haven for Russian businesses and facilitated sanction avoidance. The Kremlin lavished plaudits on the Tbilisi government, ended visa requirements for Georgians and restored flights between the two capitals. While Russia's full-scale invasion has warmed relations between Georgia and Russia, it has only intensified Abkhazia's isolation. In October 2022, the EU banned Abkhazians (and South Ossetians) holding Russian passports from entering its territory. As Abkhazian passports are not recognised, this effectively communicates that Abkhazians must obtain Georgian passports in order to travel to the EU.[89] Abkhazian civil society leader Liana Kvarchelia has questioned the logic of this decision:

> I would like to draw attention to the fact that the press-release of the European Council states that 'this decision is a response to unprovoked and unjustified aggression by Russia against Ukraine'. But then – excuse me, if you please – the Abkhazian people were themselves the victims of just such unprovoked and unjustified aggression, albeit on the part of Georgia. It turns out that in our case, the European countries are encouraging the aggressor state, *viz.* Georgia, while they are punishing the victim of Georgian aggression. And it is by restricting our right to free movement, to access to medicine, to education within the EU that they are punishing us. Here our youth will not have such an opportunity, people in need of medical services will not be able to enter the EU for treatment. Of course, it is clear that in this case, as far as the countries of the European Union are concerned, geopolitical considerations are unfortunately more important than a neutral stance, which could make the position of the European Union much stronger.[90]

Although largely unnoticed outside of the Caucasus, tensions between Abkhazia and Russia have escalated since 2022. One of the early triggers

[89] Technically, this applies only to passports issued by the Russian embassy in Abkhazia, but this is the only route for most Abkhazians. For how this has affected Abkhazians see *Jam News*, '"The world denies our existence". How Abkhazia's young people are doing after EU sanctions', 22 October 2023, available at: https://jam-news.net/the-eu-does-not-recognize-the-abkhazian-passport/ (29 April 2025).

[90] Liana Kvarchelia, 'The EU decision was not absolutely inevitable', *Ekhokavkaza*, 20 October 2022 (in Russian), available at: https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/32093455.html (29 April 2025).

centred on a controversial plan to lease 184 hectares of land in Pitsunda to Russia for 49 years, a move requested by Putin himself. Mass protests erupted as many Abkhazians feared creeping annexation and the legalisation of land sales to Russians. Russia's ambassador to Abkhazia threatened to withdraw security and investments if the legislation was not passed. Amid these tensions, Moscow also refused to provide additional electricity and cut budgetary support to Abkhazia. In response, the Abkhazian government proposed measures to counter anti-Russian sentiment, drawing criticism from local opposition as an attempt to suppress dissent. Leaked reports of Kremlin officials pressuring Abkhazian leaders to make Russia-friendly decisions, combined with Moscow's partial military withdrawal from Abkhazia to support its war in Ukraine, fuelled fears of Abkhazia becoming vulnerable to Georgian claims.[91] The example of Azerbaijan taking advantage of Moscow's distraction in Ukraine to seize the Armenian-populated Nagorno-Karabakh region in 2023 provided a worrying precedent for Abkhazians. On 1 September 2024 Russia suspended financial support to Abkhazia and promised to raise electricity prices, citing the Abkhazian government's 'failure' to meet obligations arising from inter-state treaties. It was also reported that it would revoke the Russian citizenship of the Abkhazian MPs who blocked the passage of a law facilitating Russians buying apartments in Abkhazia.

Bzhania failed to secure legislative approval for Kremlin-backed proposals in the Abkhazian parliament. Following widespread civil society mobilisation, the national assembly rejected both the 'Apartment Law' and the Russian 'Investment Agreement', which Moscow had strongly advocated. Many Abkhazians feared these measures would increase Russian control over the property market and deepen Moscow's influence in the republic. Intense public protests also led parliament to reject a controversial 'foreign agents' law, similar to the one enacted in Georgia and Russia. Facing mounting opposition and loss of credibility, Bzhania was forced to resign as president.

In response to the rejection of these measures, Russia imposed punitive economic sanctions to pressure Abkhazia into compliance. The Kremlin froze financial aid, creating significant budget shortfalls, and ordered Russian tour operators to stop selling trips to Abkhazia, threatening the republic's tourism-dependent economy. Additionally, Russia banned the import of Abkhazian mandarins, citing dubious sanitary concerns widely seen as a

[91] Kristel Vits, 'Left out in the cold? The crisis in Russian–Abkhazian relations leaves Abkhazians scared of the future', De Facto States Research Unit, 6 November 2024, available at: https://defactostates.ut.ee/left-out-in-the-cold-the-crisis-in-russian-abkhazian-relations-leaves-abkhazians-scared-of-the-future/ (29 April 2025).

pretext for political retaliation. Abkhazians viewed these actions as coercive punishment for resisting legislation perceived as a threat to their sovereignty.

Abkhazia remains deeply dependent on Russia, its primary backer since Moscow recognised its independence in 2008. Although many Abkhazians initially saw Russian support as a means to strengthen their sovereignty, this reliance has increasingly threatened their ability to maintain genuine self-governance.

During the October 2024 parliamentary elections, the ruling Georgian Dream party declared that if it was re-elected, restoring the country's territorial integrity would be its top priority.[92] While election rhetoric like this wasn't new, it seemed that the government's emphasis was increasingly on gaining the 'lost territories' through close relations with Russia rather than the EU. There is growing concern in Abkhazia about the implications of the ever-improving relations between Russia and Georgia. Many Abkhazians now worry that Russia could use Abkhazia as a bargaining chip in its dealings with Georgia.[93] The fear is that Moscow might sacrifice Abkhazian interests for broader geopolitical gains such as strengthening ties with an increasingly cooperative Georgia. Therefore, at the time of writing, Abkhazians face simultaneous pressure from Georgia, Russia and the EU.[94]

CONCLUSION

The EU has maintained a consistent stance in support of Georgia's territorial integrity, including its claims over Abkhazia. Yet this seemingly principled position has come at significant cost. The EU's early and uncritical recognition of Georgia's Soviet-era borders in 1992—borders shaped and revised under Stalin—fuelled a violent conflict that remains unresolved. At the time, this recognition lent legitimacy to a Georgian military junta that had deposed the democratically elected president just months earlier. Seizing upon the EU's endorsement, the junta launched a military campaign in Abkhazia that would ultimately fail, but the consequences have endured to this day.

[92] Nino Narimanishvili and David Pipia, 'How Georgian Dream leverages territorial integrity in its election campaign', *Jam News*, 18 October 2024, available at: https://jam-news.net/how-georgian-dream-is-leveraging-territorial-integrity-in-its-election-campaign/ (29 April 2025).

[93] 'Abkhazians follow Georgia's elections closely, but quietly', *OC Media*, 30 October 2024, available at: https://oc-media.org/abkhazians-follow-georgias-elections-closely-but-quietly/ (29 April 2025).

[94] See Donnacha Ó Beacháin, *Unfinished empire: Russian imperialism in Ukraine and the Near Abroad* (New York, 2025), chapter 7.

What followed was a lasting entrenchment of the EU's support for Georgia's vision of its national territory, often at the expense of any serious engagement with Abkhazia itself. By aligning with Georgia's narratives—particularly the portrayal of Abkhazia as a victim of Russian occupation—the EU has undermined its own credibility as a neutral actor and forfeited opportunities to serve as a constructive intermediary. In doing so, it has contributed to Abkhazia's increasing dependence on Russia, exacerbating the very dynamics it seeks to mitigate.

Three decades after the USSR's collapse, neither Georgians nor Abkhazians have achieved their ultimate objectives. Abkhazia is not an independent, recognised member of the international community while Georgia's territorial integrity remains aspirational. Arguably, the main winner from the impasse has been Russia, which has been able to exert leverage over both Georgians and Abkhazians.

At its core, the conflict is an intra-Caucasian struggle between two competing nation-building projects. In the 1990s, Georgia acknowledged its conflict with Abkhazia, accusing the Abkhazians of aggressive nationalism and separatism—labels the Soviet leadership had previously used against Georgian independence efforts. During this period, Russia, grappling with its own secessionist challenges, backed Georgia's stance and participated in a blockade against Abkhazia. Georgia's strategy aimed to force submission through economic isolation, but the embargo only deepened Abkhazian resistance to any future under Georgian rule.

In more recent decades, Tbilisi has reframed the conflict as an exclusively bilateral confrontation with Russia, sidelining Abkhazians in favour of the more internationally palatable narrative of 'Russian occupation'. This framing, easily understood and supported in the West, casts Georgia as a victim of imperial aggression and obscures Abkhazian agency.

Georgia has successfully guided the EU to adopt its interpretation of the conflict. As in the past, Georgia seeks powerful patrons—now the EU and NATO—to secure its sovereignty and help gain control over Abkhazia. While it is understandable that Tbilisi looks to Brussels to counterbalance Moscow, the EU has failed to develop an independent policy. Instead, it has largely aligned itself with Georgia, opening every statement and dialogue with unqualified support for Tbilisi's claims. This approach has prevented meaningful engagement with Abkhazia and undermined the EU's potential as a neutral mediator.

Following the 2008 war, the EU made 'engagement without recognition' a central plank of its policy towards Abkhazia. But while Brussels has been firm on non-recognition, Abkhazians perceive little genuine engagement. In theory, the Georgian government should welcome EU engagement as it potentially challenges Russia's role in Abkhazia, but this has not been uppermost in Tbilisi's considerations. Indeed, the Georgian government has appeared more concerned with maintaining the image of Abkhazia as an occupied territory than with preventing that eventuality. This reflects a broader reluctance within Georgian politics to acknowledge that Abkhazians are not passive instruments of Russian policy but actors with their own goals and grievances. However, there is no surer way to turn Abkhazia into a de facto Russian province than by stipulating that communication with the outside world must be conducted via Georgia—a condition Abkhazians have consistently rejected.

Since 1993, Georgia has refused to sign any agreement ruling out the use of force to alter the status quo. In 2020 and 2023, the Georgian government welcomed Azerbaijan's violent recapture of Nagorno-Karabakh, despite mass casualties and the displacement of an estimated 150,000 Armenians—highlighting Tbilisi's continued openness to coercive solutions.

Framing the conflict strictly as a struggle against Russian imperialism has helped Georgia secure support from post-communist EU members such as Poland and the Baltic states. However, if the conflict were instead viewed as a dispute between Georgians and Abkhazians, international sympathy would be harder to maintain. In such a framing, Georgia might be seen as the aggressor, and Abkhazia as a small nation defending its autonomy. Furthermore, the EU might be less interested in a small Caucasian conflict if it were not presented as part of the broader East–West confrontation.

The EU's policy of denying visas to Abkhazians has proved counterproductive, deepening their isolation and pushing them further into Moscow's sphere of influence. The assumption that making Georgia more attractive will gradually win over Abkhazians underestimates the depth of historical trauma and entrenched ethnic divisions.[95] While Abkhazia's statehood lacks broad international recognition, Abkhazians remain entitled to the full protections of international human rights law. The EU could play a meaningful role here,

[95] Tbilisi exercised a far greater gravitational pull on South Ossetia and economic arguments had potential to persuade some Ossetians to reconsider their position. These hopes largely evaporated following the Georgian bombardment of Tskhinval/i in 2008.

but even efforts to monitor rights in Abkhazia have been undermined—such as when Brussels suppressed its own human rights report under pressure from Tbilisi.

For EU initiatives to be effective, they should aim to be status-neutral, as overtly politicised approaches erode trust and sabotage confidence-building efforts. Granting visas to Abkhazians, fostering civil society through education and cultural exchange, and supporting preservation of the endangered Abkhaz language are practical steps that could encourage meaningful contact. Democratisation in Abkhazia, exemplified by elections and peaceful transfers of power, should not be ignored by the EU. By its refusal to engage with their elected leaders, Abkhazians view the EU's commitment to democratic values as inconsistent.

While the EU must challenge Kremlin interference, it should disentangle its policies towards Abkhazia from the broader Russia–Georgia framework. Viewing Abkhazia solely through this geopolitical lens has hindered constructive engagement and weakened the EU's role as a credible actor. A more nuanced, independent approach is vital. European states would do well to interrogate how Georgia has strategically framed the conflict for international audiences and the EU's passive adoption of this framing. A recalibrated EU approach—grounded in dialogue and direct engagement with Abkhazia—remains essential for any sustainable resolution.

INTERVIEWS

Georgia

- **Eduard Shevardnadze:** Minister of internal affairs of the Georgian SSR 1965–1972; first secretary of the Georgian Communist Party 1972–1985; foreign minister of the Soviet Union 1985–1991; first secretary of the Communist Party of the Georgian SSR 1972–1985; president of Georgia 1992–2003.
- **Akaki Asatiani:** Deputy chairman (1990–1991) and chairman (1991–1992) of the Supreme Council of Georgia.
- **Kakha Lomaia:** Minister for education and science 2004–2007; secretary of the National Security Council of Georgia 2007–2008; ambassador of Georgia to the United Nations 2009–2012.
- **Ghia Nodia**: Academic; minister for education 2008.
- **Alexander Rondelli:** President of the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies 1998–2015.

- **Giorgi Kandalaki:** Leader of Kmara Movement, member of Georgian parliament 2008–2020.
- **Konstantin Gabashvili:** MP; head of Foreign Affairs Parliamentary Committee 2004–2008.
- **Sergi Kapanadze:** Minister for Euro-Atlantic relations, deputy minister of foreign affairs 2011–2012; MP 2016–2020.
- **Thornike Gordadze:** Deputy minister of foreign affairs, minister for Euro-Atlantic integration 2010–2012.
- **Dali Khomeriki:** Minister of internally displaced persons, resettlement and refugees from the Occupied Territories of Georgia 2012; minister for education and culture in (Georgian government-funded) Abkhazian government in exile.
- **Besik Silagadze:** Head of cabinet in (Georgian government-funded) Abkhazian government in exile.
- **Koba Subeliani:** Minister for internally displaced persons, resettlement and refugees from the occupied territories of Georgia 2007–2008, 2008–2012.
- **Ketevan Tsikhelashvili:** Minister of reconciliation and civic equality 2016–2020.
- **Giorgi Khutsishvili:** Head of International Center for Conflict and Negotiations 1995–2013.
- **Vasil Chkoidze:** Head of Georgian parliament's staff committee on foreign affairs 2006–2010; president of Georgia's Centre for European Integration Studies until 2012.
- **Gigi Tevzadze:** Founding director of Ilia State University, 2006–2013.
- **Archil Gegeshidze:** Ambassador to the United States 2013–2016.
- **David Rakviashvili:** Deputy minister for reintegration 2008–2010; secretary of the National Security Council of Georgia 2016–2018.
- **David Darchiashvili:** MP 2008–2016; chairman of the parliament's Committee on European Integration 2008–2012.
- **Giga Bokeria:** Secretary of the National Security Council of Georgia 2010–2013.

Abkhazia

- **Alexander Ankvab:** President 2011–2014; prime minister 2005–2010, 2020–2025.
- **Raul Khadjimba:** Vice president 2005–2009, president 2014–2020.
- **Viacheslav Chirikba:** Foreign minister 2011–2016.
- **Sergei Shamba:** Foreign minister 1997–2004, 2004–2011, 2024–2025; prime minister 2010–2011.
- **Maxim Gvinjia:** Deputy minister of foreign affairs 2004–2010; minister for foreign affairs 2010–2011.
- **Leonid Lakerbaia:** Foreign minister 1995–1996; prime minister 2011–2014.
- **Bieslan Butba:** Prime minister 2014–2015.

- **Bieslan Kubrava:** Deputy prime minister, minister of finance 2005–2011.
- **Irina Agrba:** Deputy speaker of parliament 2007–2012; chair of the NGO 'Women in Politics'.
- **Garik Samanba:** MP 2002–2012; chair of the parliamentary committee on security and defence.
- **Irakli Khintba:** Deputy foreign minister 2012–2014.
- **Gennady Gagulia:** Prime minister 1995–1997, 2002–2003, 2018.
- **Sokrat Jinjolia:** Foreign minister 1993–1994; prime minister 1994–1995; speaker of parliament 1996–2002.
- **Anzor Mukba:** Chairman of the State Committee for Repatriation 2005–2010.
- **Marina Gumba:** Editor of *Amtsakhara* (political party newspaper).
- **Natella Akaba:** Member of the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia 1991–1996; minister for information and press 1994–1995; head of the Centre for Democracy and Human Rights and the Association of Women of Abkhazia; secretary of the Public Chamber of Abkhazia 2007–2019.
- **Rita Lolua:** MP 2007–2012.
- **Vakhtang Pipia:** Minister for taxes 2005-2011; chairman of the Committee for State Property and Privatisation 2016–.
- **Konstantin Ozgan:** Chairman of the Supreme Soviet of Abkhazia (Abkhazian ASSR) 1987–1990; foreign minister 1996–1997; minister for economy 1997–1999; chair of the Council of Elders of Abkhazia 2009–2016.
- **Liana Kvarchelia:** Deputy director, Centre for Humanitarian Programs.
- **Senar Gogua:** MP 2007–2012.
- **Alkhaz Tkhagushev:** Co-director of Association Inva-Sodeystvie (AIS), an NGO dedicated to aiding individuals with disabilities, particularly war veterans; co-founder of public movement 'Our Home – Abkhazia' 2016.
- **Aliona Kuvichko:** Director of the League of Voters; co-director of Association Inva-Sodeystvie (AIS); member of the central election commission.
- **Supen Papba:** Abkhaz language teacher.
- **Vitali Smyr:** Minister for agriculture 2004–2007; MP 2007–2012.
- **Albert Ovsepyan:** Deputy speaker of parliament 2006–2010.
- **Lyudmila Khodzhashvili:** Minister for justice 2005–2011; deputy chair of the Constitutional Court of Abkhazia 2016–2021; chair of the Constitutional Court 2021–.
- **Batal Kobakhia:** MP 2007–2012.
- **Oleg Damenia:** Head of the Strategic Studies Centre at the Office of the President of Abkhazia 2009–.
- **Batal Tabagua:** Minister for justice 1995–2003; chair of the Central Election Commission 2004–.
- **Tamaz Ketsba:** Abkhazian representative to the peace negotiations with Georgia during 1990s; MP 1996–2002.

- **Mirab Kishmaria:** Minister for defence 2007–2020.
- **Suren Kerselyan:** Head of the Armenian community of Sukhum/i; deputy prime minister and minister for labour, employment and social security 2014–16.
- **Nugzar Ashuba:** Minister for culture 1986–1992; speaker of parliament 2002–2012.
- **Shamil Adzynba:** First vice premier 2014–2016.
- **Artur Mikvabia:** Prime minister 2015–2016.
- **Diana Pilia:** Chair of the Association of Lawyers of Abkhazia 2012–2015; head of the cabinet of ministers 2015–2017; judge of the Constitutional Court of Abkhazia 2017–.

South Ossetia

- **Murat Dzhioyev:** Foreign minister 1998–2012, 2016–2017.

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