MEMBER PROFILE

ABKHAZIA

Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Abkhazia
**Status:** De facto, largely unrecognised state

**Population:** 240,705

**Area:** 8700 km²

**Capital City:** Sukhum, also known as Akua in Abkhaz.

**Language:** Abkhaz, Russian

**Religion:** Orthodox Christianity 75%, Sunni Muslim 10%, other 15%

**Ethnic Groups:** Abkhaz 50.71%, Armenian 17.39%, Georgian 17.93%, Russian 9.17%

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**OVERVIEW**

Abkhazia is situated on the eastern coast of the Black Sea. It borders Russia in the North and Georgia in the East. In 1992, Abkhazia separated from Georgia, seeking international recognition of its independence. However, only Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Nauru have formally recognized Abkhazia since the separation from Georgia. There is no longer any official Georgian presence in Abkhazia, and the de facto Government of the Republic of Abkhazia, currently headed by Raul Khajimba, has exercised sovereign rule over the area since the September 1993.

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**UNPO MEMBER PERSPECTIVE**

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Abkhazia requests meaningful autonomy for their people through international recognition of their declaration of independence. They request reparations from the Georgian government for the damage caused in the War of Abkhazia in 1992-93. Furthermore, they request compensation for the economic cost of the embargoes placed upon them in 1996 by the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Finally, they request that ethnic Abkhazians and their descendants who fled to Turkey as a result of the 19th century Caucasian War be freely allowed to return to Abkhazia.

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**CURRENT ISSUES**

On 29 May 2011, President Sergey Bagapsh passed away unexpectedly. Consequently, special presidential elections were held on 26 August 2011. Due to Abkhazia's status as a de facto but largely unrecognised state, the elections represented an important step towards successful democracy and equitable treatment of all Abkhazian residents, regardless of ethnicity. Following an invitation by the Abkhaz authorities, UNPO conducted an election observation mission (EOM) to Abkhazia during the elections won by Alexander Ankvab with 54.86% of the votes.

On 24 August 2014, presidential elections were again held again - this time following demonstrations in late May, which ultimately led to the resignation of President Ankvab. Abkhazia’s decision to invite international observers, including UNPO, to monitor the elections signals that there is political will and commitment to ensure transparency and legitimacy of the democratic process in the country. After a first round Raul Khajimba was elected as President of Abkhazia with 50.57% of the votes.

On 24 November 2014, a ‘Treaty of Alliance and Strategic Partnership’ was signed between Abkhazia and Russia, foreseeing stronger cooperation in foreign, defense, economic and
social policy between the two parties. While this treaty signifies a new period in the bilateral relations between Abkhazia and Russia, Abkhazia managed to integrate its own political demands by changing and removing parts from the Moscow draft. As a result of the signing of the treaty, Russian President Vladimir Putin has promised subsidies worth more than $270 million over the next three years.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Between the 11th and 19th centuries, Abkhazia and Georgia existed as two separate and independent countries. The boundaries which exist today were created as a result of the Abkhazian Chachba Dynasty, which drove the Mingrelian population out whilst in power between 1500 and 1680. In 1810, Abkhazia became a protectorate of the Russian Empire, but it preserved its statehood and system of self-governance in the form of a sovereign principality. In 1864, Abkhazia became the last principality to be forcibly annexed to the Russian Empire as a result of the Russian-Circassian War.

After the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917, Georgia and Abkhazia functioned as two independent states. In May 1918, however, the new Menshevik annexed Abkhazia. The Mensheviks in Georgia were overthrown by the Bolsheviks in March 1921, which ended their independence. An independent Soviet Socialist Republic of Abkhazia was proclaimed on 31 March 1921. On 21 May 1921, the Revolutionary Committee of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, recognized the independence of Abkhazia. In 1931 however, Stalin, who was himself Georgian, reduced the status of Abkhazia to that of an Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (Abkhaz ASSR) within the Georgia SSR.

Between 1937 and 1953, Stalin’s policies generated a huge influx of oppressed peoples into Abkhazian territory. Lavrentiy Beria, a soviet politician with close ties to Stalin at the time, encouraged mass Georgian migration into the area often referred to as part of the “Georginization” project. The strict homogenization under Georgian rule greatly contrasted with the traditionally tolerant Abkhazian culture. Between 1937 and 1953, the Abkhaz were deprived of the right to teach their children in their native language. Many Abkhaz were forced to adopt Georgian surnames and in the Gal district, Abkhaz were given new passports indicating their nationality as Georgian. Greeks were deported from Abkhazia in 1949, and immigrants from Georgia occupied the abandoned houses. The entire demographic make-up had been altered. As early as the end of the 19th century, the Abkhaz made up just 55.3% of the region’s population. However, by the end of the 20th century, the Abkhaz made up only 17% of the population; they became a minority in their own homeland.

In 1978, Abkhazian intellectuals signed a letter of protest to the Supreme Soviet of the USSR in which they complained about the status of Abkhazia, and accused the Georgian leaders of pursuing a hardline, oppressive policy, aimed at “Georgianizing” the Republic. Major
demonstrations took place in Lykhny, a sacred place in Abkhazian tradition. The Abkhazian campaign to be incorporated in the Russian Federation was rejected by both Russia and Georgia. Instead, concessions were made to the Abkhaz, including the opening of a University and TV broadcasting in Abkhazia. Moscow also dispersed millions of rubles to Abkhazia, to prevent further large scale protests about living conditions. This money was allocated directly to the people, bypassing the Abkhazian government.

On 25 August 1990, on the eve of the signing of the new Soviet Union Treaty, the Abkhazia Supreme Soviet passed a Declaration of Sovereignty of Abkhazia. Sovereignty was also declared by South Ossetia. The following day, Georgia formally rejected the two declarations of sovereignty, which led to armed conflict between South Ossetia and Georgia. In 1992, Abkhazia declared sovereignty of its own territory and proposed a federative treaty to Georgia, to fill in the "legal vacuum" that emerged after Georgia's unilateral rejection of all Soviet legal documents. On 14 August 1992, less than three weeks after being accepted into the United Nations, Georgian troops entered the territory of Abkhazia without any prior notification, and launched a land and air attack on the southeast part of Abkhazia and its capital city, Sukhum. The fighting continued for 14 months, claimed 10,000 lives and generated mass forced displacement of around 250,000 Georgians.

In September 1993, Abkhazian forces, backed by the Confederation of the Peoples of the North Caucasus Organization, finally expelled the Georgian troops from the territory of Abkhazia, during battles in which human rights violations were widespread. Negotiations were chaired by the UN and observed by the OSCE and the Group of Friends of Georgia, which was established in 1993 and comprised of Russia, the US, France, Germany and the UK. Russia acted as a mediator. In December 1993, an official ceasefire was signed by Abkhaz and Georgian leaders as worked out by the UN. In April 1994, both sides were present in Moscow and signed the "Declaration on Measures for a Political Settlement of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict", also referred to as the ‘Moscow Ceasefire Agreement’. In 1994, the fighting ended, after Russian troops were deployed as part of the agreement.

The de facto Abkhaz parliament held elections in 1994 and Vlaidslav Ardziba was elected as president. In December 1994, Russia introduced restrictions at the Russian-Abkhaz border, under the pretext of its military action in Chechnya. Russia also introduced economic sanctions against Abkhazia at Georgian insistence in January 1996. On 26 November 1994, Abkhazia adopted a new constitution, once again declaring independence
that was not internationally recognized. The election results in November 1996 were disputed and as such unrecognized internationally. Economic sanctions in 1996 from countries across the world severely affected Abkhazia’s growth and development. However, Russia infuriated the international community by making it easy for Abkhazians to gain Russian citizenship. Abkhazia reaffirmed national sovereignty in 1999. In 1998 and 2001, Georgia launched two more military attacks on Abkhazia.

CULTURE AND ENVIRONMENT

Abkhazians speak Abkhaz, although Russian is also common and shares co-official status. Georgian is widely used in the Gal district, where most of the returned Georgian refugees live.

The majority of Abkhazians are Orthodox Christians, while some of the Abkhazians are Sunni Muslims. There is also a small number of Jews, Lutherans, Catholics and followers of other religions. Most of the Abkhazians live in rural areas. In Abkhazian culture, equine sports and equestrian activities, song, music, and dance are important aspects.

The economy of Abkhazia is heavily reliable on Russia as trading partner, export market and investor. Abkhazia uses the same currency as Russia, the rouble. Another big trading partner of Abkhazia is Turkey.

IMPORTANT FACTS

Since 1993, negotiations between Georgia and Abkhazia have failed to resolve their differences. In fact, Abkhazia and Georgia now seem further away from political agreement than in April 1994, when the ‘Declaration on Measures for a Political Settlement of the Georgian-Abkhaz Conflict’ and its appendix the Quadrivpartite Agreement were signed.

Since 1993, Georgia has undertaken several military attempts to reinforce control of Abkhazia. The deployment of the Georgian Army in Kodori Gorge of Abkhazia in 2006 put an end to a fragile peace process. Georgia and the international community refuse to
recognize the Sukhum-based government, despite the fact that it exercises sovereign rule over its territory. The Georgian recognized Government of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia has no actual jurisdiction in Abkhazia and since 12 August 2008 does not even maintain any presence in the territory.

Abkhazia demanded reparations from Georgia for destruction during the 1992-93 war, as well as for the economic damage suffered due to the sanctions placed on Abkhazia by Commonwealth of Independence States. Within Georgia, there were high numbers of internally displaced people (IDP) after the war; both Georgians forced out of Abkhazia and Abkhazians who fled the situation. Georgian President Saakashvili often used IDPs as a bargaining chip in Abkhazian-Georgian negotiations. Abkhazia argued that the return of ethnic Abkhazians in Turkey, currently banned by sanctions, should also be allowed. Abkhazia demanded recognition as a sovereign state both by Georgia and by the international community.

Although the only countries to have formally recognized Abkhazia's independence are Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Nauru, many other nations have formally signed or recognize the principles of the 1933 Montevideo Convention which gives the definition of statehood. The four criteria for statehood include: 1) a permanent population; 2) a defined territory; 3) a government; 4) the capacity to enter into relations with the other states, by having the capacity to exercise “effective control” over its territory.

Since Abkhazia has a permanent population of around 200,000, 44% of whom are Abkhaz in ethnic origin; has held parliamentary elections since 1996; has a constitution since 1994; and is run by a functioning government which governs over a specific territory and who formally engages in diplomatic meetings with Georgia and Russia, amongst others, Abkhazia appears to present a good case to be considered a state in accordance with international law.
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The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization

Research, layout and editing: UNPO Secretariat and UNPO USA (Washington, DC)

UNPO Advocacy Office
Rue du Pépin 54
1000 Brussels
Belgium
Tel. +32 25 13 14 59