



Abkhazia's Independence Farce

The push for Abkhaz statehood makes a mockery of international law -- and recognition would represent a chilling validation of ethnic cleansing.

BY ANDREI ILLARIONOV | SEPTEMBER 16, 2011

So-called presidential elections took place last month in the breakaway Georgian region of Abkhazia. The fact that the European Union and the United States rejected them as totally illegitimate, however, did not prevent the proponents of the Abkhaz "cause" from continuing their campaign to achieve recognition as an independent state. Russian ministers, of course, [praised the ballot](#). The international community, however, should not be fooled.

The Abkhaz regime exists only because Russia backs it with military might and financial support. Calls for international recognition conveniently overlook how it was established: through the killing of around 10,000 civilians in the 1990s and the expulsion of more than 300,000 people from Abkhazia over the past two decades.

It is for the international courts to define the [legal nature of the atrocities](#) committed by the Abkhaz militia and their Russian allies. But no one should ignore these acts while considering the future of a region that has been forcefully emptied of the overwhelming majority of its population.

The 1992-1993 conflict and the 2008 Russian invasion -- together with the constant harassment and intimidation of the non-Abkhaz civilian population -- have [radically altered Abkhazia's demographics](#). According to Soviet census data, ethnic Abkhaz comprised 17.8 percent of the 525,000 residents of Abkhazia in 1989, while ethnic Georgians accounted for 45.7 percent, numbering roughly 240,000. By 2003, the ethnic Georgian population had decreased by 81 percent to just 46,000 (mostly in the Gali and Tkvarcheli districts); Armenians had been reduced by 41 percent, Russians by 69 percent, Greeks by 87 percent, and others (Ukrainians, Belarusians, Estonians, Jews) by 81 percent.

In the same period, the Abkhaz were the only ethnic group whose ranks increased -- from the prewar tally of just 17 percent to about half the population. The [outrageous process](#) by which this occurred has been denounced as "ethnic cleansing" by the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and many others.

The Georgian side that participated, mostly in the form of militias, in the war that raged during the early 1990s, was also involved -- like the Abkhaz -- in abject crimes. But since then, Georgia, as a government and society, has held its criminals to account. The militias were dissolved and banned, and their leaders jailed. Nothing similar has happened on the Abkhaz side. Nobody was prosecuted, and criminals were rewarded with fame, medals, and stolen

property. Not a single person among the Abkhaz presidential candidates has ever even acknowledged -- let alone condemned -- the ethnic cleansing.

Meanwhile, proponents of the Abkhaz cause ask a powerful question: Why not apply the precedent of Kosovo, which achieved international recognition after a violent separation from Serbia, to Abkhazia?

But replicating Kosovo (a process of recognition that can hardly be described as flawless) is not applicable. The differences between the two cases are stark. First, the most heinous crimes in Kosovo were committed by Serbians, the adversaries of secession; in Abkhazia, they were committed by the secessionists and their Russian allies. Second, the right of return of refugees to Kosovo was a precondition for self-determination; in Abkhazia, the so-called self-determination is linked with the refusal to allow the return of internally displaced people. Put simply, Kosovo's independence was a way of punishing ethnic cleansing. In Abkhazia, such recognition would represent a chilling validation of ethnic cleansing, and a reward to its authors.

And there's more that makes the Kosovo parallel problematic. The processes leading to independence and recognition also could not have been more different. Abkhaz leaders [have refused several peace plans](#) proposed by the Georgian government, the United Nations, and [Germany](#). In Kosovo's case, however, it was the Serbian government of Slobodan Milosevic that rejected peace efforts. After the war, Kosovo came under U.N. administration for nine years before its independence was recognized by a vast coalition of countries, including the United States and most European nations. In Abkhazia, international organizations have been denied entry, and its so-called independence has been recognized only by Russia and three other non-European countries, which all receive Russian financial support.

But the illegitimacy of Abkhazia's independence is not solely due to the failure of the international community to accept its sovereignty. It stems from deeper problems: the past and current actions of Abkhazia's leaders, their ideology of ethnic supremacy, and the Russian military occupation of its territory.

The Abkhaz people do need cooperation with Europe, and they deserve to be part of the world community. But the manner in which this happens is crucial. It cannot be done by validating ethnic cleansing, by ignoring the annexation of Georgia's sovereign territory, or by recognizing elections held in a society that is built on apartheid -- where a vast majority of the population has been expelled and most ethnic Georgians still remaining are [not allowed to vote](#).

Instead, the international community should insist on the implementation of the 2008 ceasefire agreement between Georgia and Russia brokered by French President Nicolas Sarkozy, which stipulates the withdrawal of Russian troops. The next steps must be security guarantees and arrangements provided by international organizations, including ensuring the right of return of all internally displaced people.

Anything short of this throws international law in a waste bin. And any election held before the return of the people who have been expelled can only be a tragic farce.