

ABKHAZIA 2004: PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION



A woman crosses the bridge over the Inguri river that separates Abkhazia from Georgia on polling day

INTRODUCTION

Since Mikheil Saakashvili became its president in January 2004, the Caucasian republic of Georgia has made increasingly bellicose noises about reintegrating its rebellious former provinces of Abkhazia (in the west) and South Ossetia situated north west of Tbilisi. In fact, a low level conflict is already playing out between Georgian and Ossetian forces which shows no signs of abating. However, the result of the recent presidential election held on 3rd October 2004 indicates that bringing Abkhazia back into the Georgian fold might be achieved without military confrontation.

BHHRG observed the 3rd October 2004 poll which was Abkhazia's first multi-candidate presidential election since de facto independence was achieved on 30th September 1993. The first round was contested by 5 candidates, but the main challengers were the prime minister, Raul Khadjimba, and Sergei Bagapsh, director of the Chernomorenergo electricity company. BHHRG monitored the voting, concentrating its observations in Abkhazia's southernmost district of Gali which borders Georgia proper.

Abkhazia's independence remains unrecognized by the international community putting its status on the same level as that of other breakaway regions in the former Soviet republics i.e., South Ossetia, Transnistria and Nagorno-Karabakh. Therefore, international bodies never monitor their polls. But, if only for the historical record, BHHRG has regularly observed elections in these places and often found them to be well-organized and better conducted than polls in countries praised by the West. However, there were many aspects of the conduct of the 2004 presidential election in Abkhazia that gave cause for concern.

BHHRG travelled to Abkhazia through Batumi in Adjara, where a once relatively prosperous corner of Georgia had already endured five months of direct rule from Tbilisi following the overthrow of the region's president, Aslan Abashidze, in May 2004. The once vibrant central marketplace – always richly stocked with all kinds of food – was now emptied out and closed, never to reopen. In a block of flats BHHRG had visited before Adjara's 'Rose Revolution', water is now available for only half an hour a day. It was, therefore, a pleasant surprise to find Abkhazia relatively humming with life compared to Georgia. Sadly,

most locals in the former Soviet Union seldom travel far enough to make comparisons and are unable to appreciate it when they enjoy higher living standards than their neighbours. For example, Georgia is favoured by the international community for strategic reasons rather than for its (non-existent) 'vibrant' economy.

Perhaps it is too late now for Abkhazia to remain free for much longer from Tbilisi's embrace as the conduct of the presidential election must give rise to fears that this region is also facing its own 'rose revolution'. Although this might tidy up the local geography, no ordinary Georgians or Abkhazians will benefit even though many will be dreaming of future economic largesse coming their way from the West. It never does, but the penny only seems to drop when it is too late.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Origins of Abkhazia

The Republic of Abkhazia ('Apsny' in Abkhaz), internationally recognized as part of ex-Soviet Georgia, is inhabited by a mix of nationalities. The largest ethnic group in Abkhazia today, the Abkhaz, are not Georgian and their language has closer ties to the languages spoken in the republics of Adygea, Karachay-Cherkessia, and Kabardino-Balkaria (north and east of Abkhazia, inside the Russian Federation). Before the 1992-93 Abkhaz-Georgian war, the population stood at roughly half a million, but estimates of the number of refugees who fled south and east from Abkhazia as a result of war hover around 200,000. Abkhazia's population today is roughly 300,000.

It is difficult to trace the origins of an "independent" Abkhazia, but for most of its existence it has not operated under the direct jurisdiction of Tbilisi. In the 14th century, after the Mongols had destroyed Tiflis, Mingrelia (part of Georgia bordering Abkhazia) captured Abkhazia's southern territories, sparking war between the Abkhaz and the Mingrelian-Georgian invaders. For about 300 years from the 16th century until 1810, Abkhazia lived under the Ottoman Empire before Russia invaded and ended Ottoman rule. Russian Tsar Alexander I's recognition of Abkhazia as an "autonomous principality" under Russian protection preceded a series of wars between Russia and Caucasian tribesmen, and between the Russian and Ottoman empires. Huge massacres of the local populations ensued, and the Abkhaz nation was devastated. Many Abkhaz fled to Turkey at this time (Turkey today has a significant Abkhaz diaspora), but some of their descendants have returned to Abkhazia in the post-Soviet era (BHHRG encountered Abkhaz shop owners in Sukhumi speaking Turkish). In 1864 the Russian Empire formally annexed Abkhazia.

Soviet power and the Stalin period

In 1918, as civil war raged around the ex-Russian Empire prior to the consolidation of Soviet power, the Abkhaz established a local government. During the 40 days before the Menshevik Georgian government dissolved it by force, this administration appealed to the new Soviet leaders in Moscow to declare Abkhazia self-governing, and allow it to participate in the formation of the USSR as a constituent member. By May 1921, the Bolsheviks had overthrown the Mensheviks in Tbilisi and the Soviet Georgian government recognized the new Abkhaz SSR as outside Tbilisi's direct jurisdiction. The Abkhaz government resisted the initiative of Soviet Nationalities Commissar Joseph Stalin (a Georgian) to make Abkhazia an "autonomous republic" within the Georgian SSR, and in 1922 the Abkhaz SSR became a signatory to the USSR treaty, acting on a formal par with all other Soviet republics including Georgia. Within a decade, however, Stalin managed to incorporate Abkhazia into Georgia.

In December 1922, Abkhazia was included in the new Transcaucasus Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (ZSFSR), again on an equal level with Georgia. But in 1931, after Stalin had secured control of the Soviet government, Abkhazia was formally subordinated to the Georgian SSR within the ZSFSR. When the ZSFSR was abolished in 1936 (replaced by the Soviet republics of Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan) Abkhazia found itself an autonomous republic (ASSR) within Soviet Georgia. Later, in December of that year, former Abkhaz SSR leader, Nestor Lakoba, died suddenly after an evening with

Georgian SSR leader Lavrenty Beria. Lakoba was declared an “enemy of the people,” while Beria went to Moscow to head the Soviet secret police.

The next year, the Soviet government formed a new Abkhaz alphabet based on the Georgian alphabet, removed the word “Abkhazia” from all official correspondence, and declared everyone in Abkhazia a Georgian. After WWII, Abkhaz schools were closed and new Georgian schools opened. From 1937-1953 Stalin and Beria decreed a series of migrations and relocations that drastically changed Abkhazia’s demographics. A census dated 1877 put the Abkhaz population of Abkhazia at 53%, but the period of Abkhazia’s inclusion in Soviet Georgia from 1931 onwards witnessed a rapid increase in the Georgian population at the expense of the Abkhaz.

Post-Stalin era

With the deaths of Stalin and Beria in 1953, the anti-Abkhaz drive was partially reversed when a new Cyrillic Abkhaz script was introduced, Abkhaz schools reopened, and local self-government returned. However, the Abkhaz continued to bid for more rights from Moscow and in 1978 a group of Abkhaz academics wrote to Soviet leader Brezhnev to request Abkhazia’s secession from Georgia and union with the Russian Soviet republic (RSFSR). The Abkhaz State University reopened, but the 130 signatories to the petition were sacked.

In the late 1980s, the leaders of the rising Georgian national independence movement demanded annulment of all Soviet-created “autonomies” on Georgian SSR territory, including the two autonomous republics of Adzharia and Abkhazia and the autonomous oblast (district) of South Ossetia. In 1990, on the eve of signing a new Soviet Union treaty, Abkhazia declared itself a sovereign republic; the next day the Georgian government declared the declaration null and void. Soon after a majority of Abkhazia’s electorate approved the March 1991 Soviet referendum on creating a new Union of Sovereign States, Georgia’s government canceled South Ossetian autonomy, sparking war between South Ossetia and Georgian forces.

By the time the USSR broke up, official statistics put the Abkhaz population of Abkhazia at c. 18%, while Georgians comprised 44-46%, Russians 14-16%, Armenians 14-15%, and the remainder a combination of Ukrainians, Belorussians, Jews, Greeks, Azeris and Tatars. By 1992 the Georgian population was 240,000 out of roughly 525,000.

The post-Soviet era and the return of Shevardnadze

In 1992, the Abkhaz government, anticipating an attack on its territory, proposed a federal arrangement to fill the void arising from Tbilisi’s abolition of all Soviet-era laws. But 20 days after the United Nations recognized the independence of Georgia under former Georgian SSR First Secretary Eduard Shevardnadze, Georgian forces attacked Abkhazia. Shevardnadze had come to power with enormous political capital and support in the West, particularly from the administrations of US President, George Bush, and British Prime Minister, John Major. He received sympathetic treatment abroad for his offensive against Abkhazia, including the flattering 1995 book, *Conflict in the Caucasus*, by Svetlana Chervonnaia. In fact, the Georgian land, sea and air assault on Abkhazia was conducted brutally and incompetently. The land offensive was led by Tengiz Kitovani, head of the paramilitary National Guard, and by mafia godfather, Jaba Ioseliani, head of the paramilitary Mkhedrioni (‘Horsemen’). Both were members of the triumvirate that overthrew Georgia’s first post-Soviet president, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, and paved the way for Shevardnadze’s return to power. Days after his troops entered Abkhazia, amid atrocity and destruction, Kitovani said: “I cannot stop my men; they need at least three days to satisfy themselves.”

By late 1993, Abkhaz forces had succeeded in driving Georgian forces out of the territory. The majority of Abkhazia’s 200,000-plus Georgians fled east and south to occupy various Soviet-era hotels and tower blocks, which are still the most conspicuous eyesores in many Georgian cities. As with other unrecognized states such as Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Transnistria, Russian military assistance surely helped the Abkhaz secure territory. Abkhazia’s Russian minority was significantly the third largest nation on the territory and the Russians, no doubt, felt an interest in maintaining the status

quo as opposed to joining a frail, nationalist independent Georgia whose government had become increasingly bellicose toward their country.

In April 1994, the UN, Russia and the OSCE signed a Joint Declaration outlining a resolution of the Georgian-Abkhaz dispute. In May, UN-sponsored negotiations sanctioned deployment of a CIS peacekeeping force (CISPKF) made up of Russian Federation troops to separate the belligerent parties. The CISPKF patrols the Abkhaz-Georgian border, and is “observed” by the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG). In May 1998, fighting erupted in the Gali region of Abkhazia, where tens of thousands of Georgians had suddenly returned. A few hundred people were killed and tens of thousands of Gali residents reportedly fled the area. Since then, a few abductions and killings have occurred on the border, the most publicized being the kidnapping of several UN observers in 1999. But, as with many areas labeled “conflict zones” by the “international community,” Abkhazia has remained mostly peaceful for the last 11 years.

Abkhazia has appeared in the news more frequently lately, as Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili has vowed to reunify the republic with Georgia. Although Saakashvili has repeatedly declared his intention to retake Abkhazia and South Ossetia through peaceful means, he has’ in fact’ already resorted to force. Fighting has erupted in South Ossetia between the Ossetians and Georgian troops, and the South Ossetian capital of Tskhinval is now almost completely surrounded by Georgian tanks in a tense stand-off. Saakashvili has also threatened to shoot Russians visiting Abkhazia on holiday, and in July a Georgian ship fired on a Turkish patrol boat off Abkhazia’s coast.

Russia, the UN, and international recognition

The esoteric world of *de jure* international recognition of nation-states often bears only an abstract relationship to day-to-day life. Abkhazia’s situation is exemplary in this regard. Those Abkhaz BHHRG spoke to who were informed about Abkhazia’s push for international recognition said Abkhazia’s main goal was not annexation by the Russian Federation but, rather, achieving the status of a Russian “protectorate” enjoying “free association” with its neighbor to the north. They likened the situation to that of various Pacific island states such as the Mariana Islands, which achieved this vis-à-vis the United States in a process that took several decades.

This sort of international legal formalism must be a pipedream in a volatile region like the Caucasus. Tiny, remote, and peaceful tropical islands do not have to deal with bombastic, politicians, like Mikheil Saakashvili, who enjoys huge support in the West and often pounds his fist about bringing Abkhazia and South Ossetia back into the collapsed Georgian state. Actively pushing for the UN to crown the current *de facto* situation with a seal of legal approval seems almost perilous in the face of American and British determination to flout the resolutions of the international body’s highest organ, and to side with the Georgians on the matter of Abkhazia.ⁱ The UN itself is guilty of anti-Abkhaz bias in the Abkhaz-Georgian dispute, and recent reports to the effect that UNOMIG is seeking to emulate Kosovo’s policing methods in Abkhazia does not bode well for the lives of ordinary people in the unrecognized statelet.ⁱⁱ

At best, the UN is indifferent to Abkhazia’s fate. BHHRG saw several buildings in Gali district supposedly renovated by the UN. In one polling station, a renovated school, election workers and observers told BHHRG that the UN had allocated money for the renovation project but no accounting of expenditures had ever been done. They said they were promised these funds “every other day” but never received anything from the district administration, a situation that had existed since 1993. Interestingly, these locals did not blame Abkhazia’s central government – labeled a “regime” by its opponents – but pointed the finger at local leaders. In fact, they told BHHRG the Abkhaz leadership was trying to help but so far it did not have enough power!

The reality today is Abkhazia’s *de facto* independence from Georgia and its *de facto* Russian military protection. Although Russia has been less than steadfast lately in its support for allies in the near abroad, it is still Abkhazia’s best hope of staying out of Georgia. A hopeful sign for ordinary Abkhaz was the Russian government’s recent decision to open the Russian-Abkhaz border to rail traffic. Abkhazia has lived under a formal trade embargo since the war of the early 1990s, with even Russia refusing to

recognize it as anything but a “separatist” state. Abkhazia is more fortunate than the other three unrecognized states of the USSR in that it has a port on the Black Sea, but its economy has still suffered from the policies of both Russia and Georgia.

PRE-ELECTION PERIOD

Candidates



A poster for Raul Khadjimba, Abkhazia's former prime minister

5 candidates contested the 3rd October presidential election. Raul Khadjimba, the most recent prime minister, was endorsed by the outgoing president, Vladislav Ardzinba. A former Soviet intelligence officer who served in the 1992-93 war, Khadjimba was portrayed by his most prominent opponents – the camp of former Prime Minister Sergei Bagapsh (1997-2001) – as the “candidate of power.” Yet, not even Khadjimba’s opponents disputed the fact that Ardzinba enjoyed overwhelming respect and popularity among ordinary Abkhaz. The trust placed by Ardzinba in his premier must have boosted Khadjimba’s candidacy in the public eye.



Outgoing president, Vladislav Ardzinba

Khadjimba’s chief opponent, Sergei Bagapsh, is the former Party chairman of Ochamchir district in southern Abkhazia who currently heads the Chernomorenergo electric company. Bagapsh received a financial boost when former Abkhaz Internal Affairs Minister Alexander Ankvab, a Moscow-based businessman, threw his support behind his candidacy. Ankvab had intended to contest the election

himself but Abkhazia's Central Election Commission (CEC) disqualified him for refusing to sit an Abkhaz language test and for not having the minimum residency requirements. Abkhazian law requires a language test only for those wishing to run for public office, not for ordinary voters unlike the Baltic States, where both Latvia and Estonia have strict language requirements for voters in national elections.



Former Abkhaz Internal Affairs Minister Alexander Ankvab, a Moscow-based businessman and supporter of Sergei Bagapsh

The BBC's guide to the presidential election in Abkhazia described Ankvab as the "popular interior minister," but BHHRG met no one in Abkhazia who described the ex-MVD chief in such glowing terms. This oligarch-like figure remained in the shadows of the Bagapsh campaign, although it sometimes felt as if he was the candidate. Bagapsh's coalition included a movement called "United Abkhazia," and Ankvab's "Aytayra" (Revival) party. There was also support from an association of veterans from the Abkhaz-Georgian war called "Amtskhara," which the Bagapsh camp clearly hoped would increase their candidate's patriotic credentials. A similar group of veterans emerged in Armenia after the Karabakh war in Armenia. Known as "Yerkrapah", they surprised local Armenians by supporting the opponents of the country's president and Karabakh war hero, Robert Kocharian, in the 1999 Armenian parliamentary election.

BHHRG's learnt that Amtskhara did not speak on behalf of all its members, never mind all Abkhaz veterans. For example, the chief of staff of the Khadjimba campaign, Guram Inarshba, was himself one of the leading members of Amtskhara and a decorated war veteran. He told BHHRG that he had no alternative but to support a fellow veteran (i.e., Khadjimba), and could not ally himself with someone who had not served in the war of independence.

Also running were the former foreign minister, Sergei Shamba, former Prime Minister Anri Jergenia, and Abkhaz People's Party leader Yakub Lakoba. BHHRG felt that Shamba, who ran on a platform of greater integration with Russia, was generally respected. One shopkeeper, whose husband had been killed in the war, told BHHRG that while she trusted Khadjimba she was afraid that the Bagapsh-Jergenia-Lakoba "mafia" would never allow him to do his job properly, and, therefore, she would vote for Shamba. Otherwise, most people spoken to by BHHRG felt that the election was a two-horse race between Khadjimba and Bagapsh.

The myth of “administrative resources”

Throughout the pre-election period, the Bagapsh camp made much noise about the “administrative resources” that would be used by the “regime” to keep the “opposition” from power. These time-worn terms were – as it turned out – abused by those who voiced them. The terms “regime” and “opposition” were misnomers. Bagapsh and the members of his bloc were ex-government officials running on the strength of their connections and resources. At the same time, like Khadjimba, they proclaimed themselves as pro-Russian and rejected any notion of reunification with Georgia. No one spoken to by BHHRG could identify a single principle overtly at issue in the election; everyone said the choice was between personalities.

The incumbent “regime,” referred to by the opponents of Khadjimba, remained obscure to BHHRG during the time spent in Abkhazia. President Ardzinba’s endorsement meant that Bagapsh and his supporters could imply that Khadjimba held the strongest cards but the ensuing conflict between the president and the Central Election Commission indicated that the so-called “regime’s” control was less than overwhelming. Furthermore, Ardzinba removed Khadjimba from the post of prime minister three days after election day and replaced him with Nodar Khashba, a former mayor of Sukhumi. This may have been designed to make Khadjimba’s situation easier by relieving him of official duties, but it left the former head of the “regime’s” government to wage a legal struggle without the benefits that might be gained from his official status.

Khadjimba’s control of “administrative resources” in the campaign were also mythical as, from everything BHHRG could gather, the security services, police, border guards, state media and regional government apparatus – at least in Gali district – were controlled by people working for the Bagapsh camp. As for the media, Khadjimba had the support of one local television channel, Abkhaz TV. BHHRG heard allegations that this channel gave disproportionate coverage to Raul Khadjimba during the days leading up to October 3rd. However, on Oct. 1st and 2nd BHHRG watched plenty of programming about other candidates that did not seem negative. Furthermore, when BHHRG visited the Abkhaz state press agency, Apsnypress, material critical of Khadjimba was lying around, including a copy of a free newspaper, “Choice of Life” which featured insulting articles about Khadjimba, including one entitled “Who did Comrade R. D. Khadjimba serve?” calling into question Khadjimba’s service record during the 1992-93 war.ⁱⁱⁱ Interestingly, considering Khadjimba’s tag as Russia’s candidate, the paper was published in Sochi, Russia.

Another example of the myth surrounding the Khadjimba campaign’s control of “administrative resources” was amply demonstrated by something called Form 9, a document issued to people who have lost their passports, and which legally entitles its holder to vote in elections without the usual identity documents. The government organ responsible for distributing Form 9 is the Ministry of Internal Affairs, or MVD. A member of the Khadjimba campaign staff, Aida Khonelia, told BHHRG that the MVD in Abkhazia was in the hands of the Bagapsh people who had tried to organize uprisings in Autumn 2003, and Winter and Spring 2004. Now, she said, the MVD was giving out Form 9s to anyone; Georgian non-residents were coming over the border from Georgia into Abkhazia to vote by the thousands using this document. She alleged that the Bagapsh camp was trying to pull off an “Adjaran scenario” in Abkhazia.

BHHRG spoke to Abkhaz Internal Affairs Minister Beslan Beia, who said he had “no idea” how many Form 9s were currently operative in Abkhazia even though he admitted that his ministry was responsible for issuing them. He also said that, in the pre-election period, he had gone to “all the villages and met with all the local administration chiefs” and “personally agreed” with them on how many militiamen were needed in each polling station to “guarantee public order” on polling day. He reacted belligerently to questions about police misconduct on polling day and said any queries about illegality arising from the profusion of armed guards inside the polling stations should be directed to the CEC, not the MVD.

To put it mildly, there was no sense that the Khadjimba campaign was pulling more strings in Abkhazia’s “power ministries” or the machinery of state control than Bagapsh’s people. The only explanation for the Bagapsh camp labeling Khadjimba’s supporters the “party of the regime” was that Raul Khadjimba’s candidacy had received not only endorsement from President Ardzinba – viewed by ordinary Abkhaz as a

father-of-the-nation figure – but also, reportedly, a nod from the Russian government. However, if President Putin had publicly stated a preference for Khadjimba he must have done so in a very low-profile fashion. BHHRG never heard nor saw such explicit support from the Russian head of state, making the constant allegations that Khadjimba was a “candidate of power” in any meaningful sense very difficult to believe.

Likewise, BHHRG found complaints from Khadjimba’s opponents – including members of the local NGOs (see below) – that the Russian media was overwhelmingly on the side of Abkhazia’s premier overblown. For example, Russian state news agency ITAR-TASS reported on Oct. 5th that Bagapsh was “well ahead” of Khadjimba, with all districts counted except Gali.^{iv} This was misleading, since the Abkhaz CEC had stressed all results were only “preliminary,” not official. Russia’s NTV and ITAR-TASS reported on 6th October that a re-run election would be held in Gali district.^v This was also not true, since no final agreement had been reached on this between the campaigns of the two front-runners and Abkhaz law prohibits repeat elections in only one district. On 19th October, Russian Radio broadcast an interview with a Moscow-based political analyst in which he said there were “frantic attempts to avoid the democratic procedure of transfer of power” in Abkhazia and Bagapsh was the “obvious victor” in the eyes of the people of Abkhazia.^{vi} Maybe most Russian media have been overwhelmingly and enthusiastically supporting the candidacy of Khadjimba, but the fact that Russian television, wire reports and radio have all reported events this way – using the terms “Georgia’s Abkhaz elections” and “breakaway region” in their headlines – has not created much confidence in the supposedly solidly pro-Abkhaz, pro-Khadjimba stance of broadcast and print media in Moscow.

But, assuming the Russian leadership did openly express its preference for Khadjimba, since all the campaigns stressed (publicly) the necessity of Abkhazia’s “pro-Russian” orientation and resistance to reunification with Georgia regardless of who emerged victorious, Khadjimba’s status as Russian favourite was a disadvantage for the other contenders from the perspective of popular will. Abkhazia’s populace is palpably pro-Russian, and the claim by the anti-Khadjimba “Nuzhnaya Gazeta” editor-in-chief Izida Chania – that the Abkhaz still remembered what the Russians did to them in the 19th century^{vii} – strikes BHHRG as absurd. Ordinary citizens of any country do not “remember” events that occurred outside their lifetimes, and Russia is still perceived by most people in Abkhazia as the most benign regional power. Maybe as a result of this advantage enjoyed by Raul Khadjimba the Bagapsh camp resorted to accusations that did not conform to reality but which received ample airing in press and media.

The Bagapsh camp complained about an open air concert held on Victory Day, the 11th anniversary of the Abkhaz forces’ defeat of the Georgians on 30th September. The concert took place in a stadium before c. 5,000 people and was attended by a handful of MPs from the Russian Duma, including Liberal-Democratic Party leader Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and “United Russia” member Artur Chilingarov. Prime Minister Khadjimba reportedly appeared on stage with the Russian politicians and the Russians made overt statements in his support. Zhirinovskiy was reported to have warned the audience that if they did not vote for Khadjimba, Russia would close the border, refuse to pay pensions to Abkhazia’s residents, and take away everyone’s Russian passport (Abkhaz are eligible for Russian passports and many hold them).

Although Mr. Zhirinovskiy is a deputy speaker of parliament and therefore, formally, a senior figure in the Russian political establishment, his endorsements are a two-edged sword. He and his party have never garnered more than c. 10% support in any Russian parliamentary election since 1993, and he is clearly off-putting to a majority of people, not only in Russia but abroad. In 2001, he came to Minsk to express support for Alexander Lukashenko in the Belarusian presidential election and Lukashenko (wisely) refused to meet or thank him. However colourful Zhirinovskiy may be, his typically jingoistic speech prompted Bagapsh, Ankvab, Shamba and everyone opposed to Khadjimba to trumpet “violation!”

The local civil society NGOs – the League of Voters for Fair Elections and Center for Humanitarian Programs (see below) – claimed that the event violated the law that prevents foreign citizens campaigning on behalf of Abkhaz candidates. Raul Khadjimba reportedly said he could not control Russian politicians’ public statements of personal opinion, a reasonable assertion. Ominously though, a Shamba campaign staffer commented to BHHRG that Khadjimba’s admission that he lacked “control” meant he should not be elected head of state. Khadjimba campaign chief-of-staff. Guram Inarshba told

BHHRG on Oct. 2nd that he regretted the incident and had already apologized to the other campaigns for it. The Bagapsh team told BHHRG that members of the Khadjimba campaign were already defecting to their side over the issue, but BHHRG found no first-hand evidence that this had happened.

In fact, it seemed that the support the Khadjimba campaign received from official Moscow was rather paltry. BHHRG did run into a couple of TV reporters from “TBLI” (TVTs) channel, controlled by the Moscow Mayor. The two were unabashed about the pro-Khadjimba slant of the channel, saying this was the editorial line Mayor Yuri Luzhkov wanted. But, as was witnessed in Georgia’s autonomous republic of Adjara earlier in the year, Mr. Luzhkov’s support is not exactly an “ace in the hole” for politicians under the gun. In March, Mr. Luzhkov had attempted to personally intervene on behalf of his close friend, Adjara leader Aslan Abashidze, in his dispute with President Saakashvili. But after his visit, the collapse of the Adjara government seemed almost to accelerate. BHHRG heard rumours that Alexander Ankvab and Yuri Luzhkov were personally close, but that Luzhkov, a leader of the United Russia Party that controls the Duma, was nevertheless publicly backing Khadjimba for president.

Some of Khadjimba’s posters showed him with Russian President Vladimir Putin during their only meeting in Sochi, Russia – an obvious bid to identify the Abkhaz premier with the popular Russian leader in the eyes of the electorate. Nevertheless, financial support for Khadjimba’s campaign from outside sources was clearly insignificant and seemed to have fallen short of what Bagapsh’s people could pony up. Banners, printed material and propaganda for Bagapsh in the run-up to October 3rd were omnipresent. The Bagapsh campaign raised a hue and cry about “black PR” used by their opponents, but BHHRG did not find this credible. The party newspaper of Alexander Ankvab’s Revival party was freely available in Sukhum in the days before the election in addition to “Choice of Life,” whereas BHHRG saw no party newspapers for the Khadjimba camp even in the campaign headquarters which were, incidentally, no grander or better-equipped than Bagapsh campaign HQ. A senior member of the Bagapsh campaign, Oleg Damera, more or less admitted that the “state control” issue was moot, telling BHHRG on 2nd October that the pre-election campaign was “not organized in favour of the regime.”

Civil Society

The two most active non-governmental organizations in Abkhazia are the League of Voters for Fair Elections and the Center for Humanitarian Programs (CHP). They work together closely and their memberships overlap. BHHRG visited both organizations and spoke with their leaders. Both NGOs claimed to be non-partisan and interested only in the conduct of the election, rather than its outcome. However, BHHRG sensed that most – though not all – members of these NGOs supported Bagapsh’s candidacy and viewed the Khadjimba camp negatively. A Khadjimba campaign staffer told BHHRG that the League of Voters and CHP were working directly for Bagapsh’s election campaign, and, indeed, CHP head, Batal Khobakhia, told BHHRG on Oct. 1st that the “candidate of power [i.e., Khadjimba] is using administrative resources.”

However, BHHRG noticed that both NGOs appeared to be working actively, openly, and free of pressure or harassment from the “regime” in Sukhumi. On 1st October, CHP members were preparing a statement to be read out in parliament complaining about the previous day’s Victory Day celebration. The League of Voters boasted to BHHRG that its main achievements to date were forcing the CEC to set the size of the electorate at 165,000, down from about 216,000, and also to introduce clear plexiglass ballot boxes in all polling stations. It should be noted that in an election such as this one, where ballot papers were merely folded once and not placed in envelopes, these urns actually served to compromise the secrecy of the ballot.

Both NGOs were headquartered in well-equipped offices with several computers and Internet connections. And, while both claimed to be self-financing, CHP representatives told BHHRG that the British NGO [Conciliation Resources](#) had provided them with superior Internet services. Also, according to the League of Voters, observer training was provided from abroad by a few groups including the (anti-Kuchma) [Committee of Voters of Ukraine](#) (KVV) and from Natalya Ablova, head of the [Kyrgyz-American Bureau of Human Rights and the Observation of the Law](#). The League of Voters’ observers were not kitted out with a uniform like the green fleece jackets worn by the Fair Elections monitors in Georgia for

the November 2003 parliamentary elections. Nevertheless, the only League of Voters' observer encountered by BHHRG on polling day (in a polling station in Gali) said the organization had deployed a total of 60 monitors throughout Abkhazia's 187 polling stations. If true, this indicated a significant, if not yet overwhelming, presence.

BHHRG also met with Vakhtang Khagba, head of the Soros Foundation in Abkhazia. He said that Alexander Ankvab had made many false accusations against him and his organization, most notably the charge that he supported meetings between Georgians and Abkhaz in Washington. He also showed BHHRG a wire report from the Regnum Information Agency, dated 22nd September, quoting Bagapsh's vice presidential candidate, Stanislav Lakoba, as saying "several members of the Abkhaz government were actively feeding themselves" off the Soros Foundation in Sukhum. Khagba dismissed the charges as absurd but admitted it may have been an attempt by the Bagapsh camp to counteract negative fallout from the public revelation that Mr. Lakoba once took a Soros-sponsored trip to Japan. Khagba complained to BHHRG that many people had been prevented from going to the polling stations on 3rd October resulting in a lot of supplementary votes and a low turnout. He also pointed out that only Abkhazian citizens were legally entitled to vote, and that not all the returnees to the Gali district had Abkhazian citizenship.

Liana Kvarchelia of CHP told BHHRG that the Soros Foundation in Sukhumi was set up through a compromise whereby the board of directors of the Sukhumi affiliate was to be made up entirely of Abkhaz and the decisions on whom to finance would all be taken locally, with zero participation from the Soros Foundation in Tbilisi. She also told BHHRG that – although the CHP was "against any Georgian organization" – the Soros Foundation's deal in Abkhazia meant the Sukhumi branch was "mostly represented by people appointed by the government" who "support Raul Khadjimba." Certainly, BHHRG heard no criticism of Mr. Khadjimba from Mr. Khagba, but Ms. Kvarchelia went so far as to allege that people now jokingly referred to Mr. Khagba's organization, the National Commission for the Protection of Human Rights, as the National Commission for the Protection of the Government.

POLLING DAY

The Vote

BHHRG observed voting in the Gali district of Abkhazia that borders Georgia, where refugees from the 1992-3 have returned patchily over the past ten years. There is now a strong UN presence in the region which makes the unsatisfactory conduct of the poll somewhat bizarre. Surely, UN personnel should have kept a keen eye on the preparation for the poll, including proper oversight of people entering Abkhazia from Georgia at that time? However, an international presence can often act as a cover for foul play rather than an insurance policy against it, which may have been the case here.



Litter is strewn around the walled UN compound in Gali.

The UN headquarters in Gali is a large compound walled off from its litter-strewn environs. A visit to the area gives the powerful impression of an organization insulated from local, day-to-day life to which it is not contributing anything of note. BHHRG encountered Ethiopian, Haile Mamo, a political officer with the UN in Gali who said that the election seemed to be going well. There had been real competition between the candidates who had run active election campaigns. This much may have been true, but a short trip to polling stations visited by BHHRG revealed a less than pretty picture on election day itself - if Mr. Mamo had taken the trouble to go.

On the way to Gali, at 8:10 a.m., BHHRG visited polling station No. 8 in Sheshelet, Ochamchir district, before any votes had been cast. The most notable feature of this polling station was the campaign poster of Sergei Bagapsh attached to the entrance. There were no posters on display for any of the other candidates.

- At 8:30, at polling station No. 1 in District 34 in the city of Gali, BHHRG found that 9 supplementary votes had been cast out of a total of 27, or one-third. This proportion conformed to the situation in most polling stations visited. At 9:15 in Gali No. 3, 9 supplementary votes had been cast out of 36, and at Gali No. 2 at 9:30, the number was 30 out of 95. At this point, the armed guards inside the polling stations were still a low-key phenomenon, usually standing or sitting quietly to the side. However, the situation with regard to uniformed men brandishing automatic weapons inside the voting halls would become worse as the day wore on. At a few polling stations, a mass of voters bunched up outside the front door, when very few voters were inside, gave a sense that certain people were being kept out intentionally in favor of others.
- At 10:40 in Shashikvar No. 1, Dist. 35, BHHRG was told that people from Zugdidi, Georgia, were casting votes. Paramilitary figures hovered in the background as BHHRG asked questions of the commission members, and although BHHRG was told that 8 observers were registered in the precinct, only two were present in the polling station, both representatives of Mr. Bagapsh.
- At 11:35, at Bargebi No. 5, Dist. 35, armed guards were, again, present. The commission chairman here proudly announced that the elections were “already valid” in his precinct because 280 people had voted out of a total of 437 registered. However, turnout appeared small in this rural polling station, and 280 voters at this time represented an average of 80 people casting their ballots per hour – or more than a voter a minute. Furthermore, as with a few other polling places, the commission members were poorly informed as to both the electoral law and the current turnout. One commission member told BHHRG that the precinct had received 550 ballot papers, while the chairman said the number was 600. The chairman and other members of the

commission seemed unaware that it was illegal to have armed, uniformed soldiers walking around among the voters inside the polling station or that campaign posters should not have been displayed inside the building. BHHRG saw campaign posters on the walls inside almost all the polling stations visited, but the violation was especially egregious here since the posters were actually hanging over the entrances to the voting booths. Furthermore, posters for only 4 of the 5 candidates were on display, and when BHHRG asked the chairman whether he thought this was fair, he answered simply that the fifth candidate hadn't given them any posters.

- At Nizhny Bargebi, No. 6, Dist. 35, BHHRG was told there were only 2 observers and 4 commission members, representing a strange situation in the event of a split vote on the commission. At Ganakhleba No. 9 at 12:30 p.m., there were likewise only two observers, and BHHRG was told that 252 people had already voted out of 347 registered. Unusually, only 2 names were on the supplementary list.
- At Otobaia-2 No. 4, Dist. 33, at 2:40 BHHRG found that 242 had voted out of a total of 250 registered. 84 of the votes cast were supplementary, more than one-third. However, only two ballot papers remained, and the chairman said that more had been ordered from the district election commission – he admitted the possibility that soon a situation would arise when a voter would be unable to vote. Observers from the Bagapsh and Khadjimba campaigns were present. Both said there were no problems with the poll.
- Gagida No. 7, Dist. 35, was a small polling station with six armed, uniformed guards in one room, sitting or standing a few feet away from the commission chairwoman. A Bagapsh poster was attached to the door (the only campaign poster visible), and BHHRG was told that only Bagapsh had observers present, “at least three” (by law, the maximum number any candidate could deploy was three). As BHHRG questioned the chairwoman about the formalities, she suddenly announced she had become “nervous” and was unable to answer. BHHRG asked the woman whether her nervousness had anything to do with her proximity to several uniformed men brandishing automatic rifles, and she answered: “No, I’m glad they’re here.” Nevertheless, she appeared to be frightened and when a journalist from “Gal” newspaper in Gali asked the soldiers the reason for their presence, they became enraged and shouted at him, saying that he did not know what was “happening here” and had “no right” to ask questions. A fierce argument then started in which the soldiers grabbed the journalist by the arm as he left.



A militia man photographed in a Gali polling station in front of posters for the presidential election candidates

- The situation with regard to the ubiquitous paramilitaries occasionally reached absurd proportions. At Otobaia-2, Dist. 33, BHHRG was welcomed by young uniformed men with Kalashnikovs. The most outspoken of the group introduced himself as the “most senior” person at

the polling station, and when asked to clarify whether he meant he was the most senior military official, he answered: "No, I'm the most senior *person* here." This may have been intended as a joke, but in a sense the armed, uniformed men did exercise control and added to the chaotic and tense atmosphere on polling day. They had a habit of casually waving their shoulder-slung weapons in the direction of anyone who happened to be standing next to them. Furthermore, the "leader" of this particular detachment appeared inebriated, creating the obvious worry that his firearm might discharge accidentally. He displayed no rank on his standard camouflage fatigues, saying only that he was a first lieutenant with the "Special Military Fire Brigade." Ironically, in contrast to most polling stations visited, there were no campaign posters in or around the building. When asked why, the commission members answered that this would be a violation of electoral law!

The Count

BHHRG observed the count at Gali No. 1, Dist. 34. 3 minutes before 8 o'clock the lights in the polling station suddenly went out and stayed off for 20 minutes. People were using their cell phones for illumination, but the timing of the blackout seemed more than coincidence. Some of those BHHRG spoke with in Sukhumi the next day pointed to Bagapsh's directorship of the electricity-producing Chernomorenergo energy company as indicative of responsibility for the power cut. BHHRG heard allegations that blackouts had occurred in several polling stations in the region at the same time.

The count went quickly, and results in this polling station were:

Bagapsh:	257
Khadjimba:	47
Shamba:	15
Jergenia:	11
Lakoba:	2
Against all:	6
Invalid:	90

Total turnout: 62%

Results

On Tuesday, 5th October, CEC Chairman Sergei Smyr announced the preliminary results and asked the journalists present (many of them Russian) not to report these figures as "official," (as they had been doing) but only "preliminary." Initial returns indicated Khadjimba had taken both the city of Sukhumi and the districts of Sukhumi and Gulripshi, while Bagapsh had triumphed in the district where he had served as Communist Party boss, Ochamchir. He had also won the districts of Gagra and Gudauta. But results for the Gali district were still unavailable.

Smyr displayed supplementary lists from Otabaia and other precincts which exhibited strange features, such as names written in the Georgian script while the rest of the information had been filled out in Russian. Mr. Khadjimba pointed out that this was illegal because the state language of Abkhazia is Abkhaz and the language of official record-keeping is Russian. The ballots were printed in Abkhaz and Russian, and the CEC, he said, could not legally accept official documents written in Georgian. Quite apart from this, there were supposed to be only 3,000 ethnic Georgians in the Gali district legally entitled to vote in Abkhaz elections, and the number of 8,900 having voted in the district indicated the participation of non-citizens of Abkhazia.

A voting list from Chumburkhinji No. 1, Dist. 33, revealed that some voters had simply signed with a caveman-like cross in lieu of their name. In the column where voters indicated what kind of document they were using to vote (i.e., passport, Form 9), no serial numbers had been entered for the document in question as required by law. BHHRG examined this list closely after the press conference, and it

appeared that a register of several hundred may have been signed by a total of not more than twenty people.

On 4th and 5th October crowds assembled on the street outside the CEC. By Monday afternoon, the Khadjimba, Shamba, Jergenia and Lakoba campaigns were already accusing the Bagapsh camp of fraud at a meeting held in a local auditorium. On 6th October the Bagapsh campaign opened a can of worms when it announced it had agreed to a re-run of the vote with the Khadjimba camp, but only in the Gali district. It became clear subsequently that no such agreement had been reached and Khadjimba declared he would take the matter to the Supreme Court. As already noted, according to the law in Abkhazia, repeat elections can only be held republic-wide, not in a single constituency.

Before the election, Bagapsh campaign chief Tencholia had told BHHRG that they did “not exclude the possibility of a second round,” but he added that they were “more wary” of this eventuality than the “regime” because of the latter’s “administrative resources.” On election day, BHHRG saw two polls published in the pro-Bagapsh “Gal” newspaper, one dated 13-14th September and a second 21st September. The first poll showed Bagapsh with 61% and Khadjimba with 27%; the second 47% and 40%, respectively – a clear admission that a second round was likely. In the days after the poll, it became apparent that the Bagapsh camp’s greatest fear was a republic-wide Round 2. Yet, even they only claimed to have won 51.1% of the vote, implying (perhaps) that they knew their victory was less than solid. Ankvab’s Revival party reported on 4th October that the total number of people who had voted, according to its own information, was 90,606, meaning that Bagapsh had won by 997 votes! The Bagapsh campaign looked particularly desperate when, on the night of 10th October, a bomb exploded at its Sukhumi headquarters and Sergei Bagapsh declared: “This is a signal to us. Guys, calm down, or you will be worse off.” Conveniently, the bomb caused no casualties or damage to the Bagapsh campaign HQ, only blowing out the windows of the building next door.

After a delay of almost a week, on 11th October, the CEC voted by 11-4 to declare Bagapsh the outright winner in the first round. If the Bagapsh camp did fear a second round, the post-election CEC vote of 11-4, on 11th October to declare Bagapsh the outright winner in the first round by 50.08% (43,336 out of 86,525 votes cast, or 147 votes) must have come as a welcome relief. However, Raul Khadjimba’s immediate response to the CEC’s vote was to go to the Supreme Court – in a “Florida 2000” scenario – to have the CEC declaration declared illegal. CEC Chairman Sergei Smyr resigned from his post, complaining that the Bagapsh camp had coerced commission members. Soon, President Ardzinba added his voice to the dispute, calling the CEC’s decision to declare Bagapsh the winner “unlawful and absurd.”

THE ADJARAN CARD

Allegations from the Khadjimba side that Bagapsh’s people were attempting an “Adjaran scenario” in Abkhazia may not be far-fetched. After the election, a Khadjimba campaign staffer, Aida Khonelia, told BHHRG that the head of their observer team in the Gali district had been secretly working for Bagapsh all along. Of course, such allegations are impossible for an outsider to verify, but BHHRG did find it strange that a poster of none other than Sergei Bagapsh was plastered on the front door of the Khadjimba campaign headquarters in Gali. More immediate evidence that an “Adjaran scenario” might be taking place came on polling day when BHHRG saw locals walking freely back and forth over a footbridge across the Inguri River which acts as the administrative border between Georgia and Abkhazia without anyone checking documents. A polling station was located immediately over on the Abkhaz side.

Also, although all 5 candidates claimed publicly to be staunchly opposed to reunification with Georgia, the Khadjimba camp’s accusations of disloyalty have some justification. Both Sergei Bagapsh and Stanislav Lakoba have Georgian wives. These aspiring First and Second Ladies might have pointed out that Georgians in Abkhazia enjoy higher living standards than Georgians in Georgia proper (obvious to BHHRG on visits to places where Georgians lived inside Abkhazia). This would have reassured Abkhazia’s electorate concerning doubts about Bagapsh and Lakoba’s commitment to resisting reunification with Georgia. In an era when candidates’ wives regularly stump for their husbands, such statements would seem natural, especially when drives to Zugdidi or Poti on the other side of the Abkhaz-

Georgian border reveal lifeless economies and communities disturbingly depopulated compared to Sukhumi, even with its many bombed-out and deserted buildings.

There were other factors which made credible suspicions that Bagapsh and Lakoba were actually the covert candidates of Georgian reunification. Most notably, reports from the Georgian media that blamed Khadjimba's people for acts of provocation and electoral falsification against Bagapsh. On 2nd October Imedi TV reported the chairman of the Tbilisi-based Council of Ministers of Abkhazia, Irakli Alasania, as saying: "We are concerned because certain acts of provocation are being planned in the Gali District electoral precincts against the rival presidential candidate [i.e., Bagapsh]." Also, although the Georgian government consistently branded the elections in Abkhazia as illegitimate and claimed it did not matter who won, Georgian Minister of State Giorgi Khaindrava boldly announced on Imedi TV on 4th October that "Bagapsh has won" the election, and that "[Russian] FSB [Federal Security Service] employee" Raul Khadjimba had tried to falsify the results. The Georgian government clearly perceived an interest in who won, and it showed its preference for Bagapsh after election day. Furthermore, the Georgian television channel [Rustavi-2](#), long a propaganda mouthpiece for Mr. Saakashvili, broadcast a report on the same day interviewing Georgian residents of the Gali district of Abkhazia, who said they had voted for Bagapsh. The message: Georgians prefer Bagapsh. On 14th October, Mikheil Saakashvili was quoted by Kavkasia-Press as saying (during a visit to Tallinn, Estonia) that the defeat of Khadjimba meant that "attempts to play the imperialist card in Abkhazia have failed."^{viii}

CONCLUSION

From BHHRG's observations, illegal methods were used on polling day in Abkhazia to influence the result while the presence of armed guards was intimidating and unacceptable. As Mr. Khadjimba rightly (and belatedly) told a press conference after the election: "People were afraid." This calls the validity of the first round of voting into question.

BHHRG gained the strong impression that the Khadjimba campaign, far from using "administrative resources" or undue electoral methods, actually played the game in good faith relative to their chief opponents in the Bagapsh bloc. Perhaps, eleven years after gaining de facto independence from Georgia through war and sacrifice, many decent Abkhaz had become complacent, assuming that all Abkhaz would pull together like good citizens to observe the rules and compete by the book. Yet, after preliminary results started coming into the CEC, it was the Khadjimba camp that came off looking wet behind the ears. In a case of the end justifying the means, the Bagapsh bloc had used its "administrative resources" to end-run Mr. Khadjimba.

As this report is written, it appears that former Prime Minister Khadjimba has prevailing law on his side on the issue of repeat elections: re-run elections cannot be held in only one district, but only nationwide. The reasonable course to respect the rule of law would be annulment of the first round, since the results from Gali District are fundamentally flawed and clearly hold the outcome in the balance. However, as the world saw in Georgia during the "Rose Revolution" of November 2003, the "rule of law" is increasingly only an abstraction, largely irrelevant to anything but academic debate or idle chit-chat. However the current Abkhaz crisis resolves itself, it should be a matter of record that the ordinary citizens of Abkhazia were cheated out of good-faith democratic elections on 3rd October.

ⁱ See "U.S. Supports U.N., OSCE Efforts to End Abkhazia Conflict in Georgia" (<http://japan.usembassy.gov/e/p/tp-20040213-04.html>).

ⁱⁱ See "Gali, Abkhazia, Georgia - UN mission in Georgia looks at Kosovo for policing solutions" (http://www.unomig.org/photo_gallery/event_gali_kosovo/event_gali_kosovo.asp).

ⁱⁱⁱ «На кого служил товарищ Хаджимба Р.Д.?» (Anonymous) *Выбор Жизни* (29 Sept. 2004).

^{iv} "Opposition candidate 'well ahead' in Georgia's Abkhaz presidential election," *ITAR-TASS* (5 Oct. 2004).

^v "Opposition candidate in Georgia's Abkhazia confident of victory," *NTV* (6 Oct. 2004), and "Georgian breakaway region to hold repeat election in one district," *ITAR-TASS* (6 Oct. 2004).

^{vi} “Analyst says Russia stepping back from Georgia’s Abkhaz elections,” *Russian Radio* (19 Oct. 2004).

^{vii} See Яна Амелина, «России все равно, кто победит в Абхазии,» *Проект Института Национальной Стратегии* (23 Sept. 2004).

^{viii} “Georgian president says ‘imperialist card’ beaten in breakaway Abkhazia,” *Kavkasia-Press* (13 Oct. 2004).