

Abkhazia

Abkhazia, autonomous republic in northwestern Georgia that formally declared independence in 1999. Only a few countries—most notably Russia, which maintains a military presence in Abkhazia—recognize its independence. Bordering the eastern shores of the Black Sea, Abkhazia consists of a narrow coastal lowland broken by mountain spurs, followed by a hilly foreland zone of eroded marine and river terraces that merge into the steep slopes of the Caucasus Mountains located to the north. Area 3,336 square miles (8,640 square km). Pop. (2014) 240,705; (2017 est.) 243,564.

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Geography

The sharp relief in close proximity to the sea gives Abkhazia a wet climate. Near-subtropical conditions prevail in the lowland, where the average January temperature remains above the freezing point and annual rainfall is 47 to 55 inches (1,200 to 1,400 mm). On the mountain slopes, climatic conditions are more severe and precipitation is heavier. Wide areas of the lowland and foreland zones have been cleared of the forests of oak, beech, and hornbeam that once covered Abkhazia.

The majority of the population is concentrated in the coastal lowland, where the larger settlements are located—the capital, Sokhumi, Och'amch'ire, and the resort centres of Gagra and Novy Afon. Prior to a separatist rebellion in the early 1990s led by ethnic Abkhaz, ethnic Georgians had made up almost half of Abkhazia's population, while ethnic Abkhaz had accounted for less than one-fifth; Armenians and Russians made up the remainder. In 1993, however, most Georgians and some Russians and Armenians fled Abkhazia for other parts of Georgia.

Although the amount of arable land is small, agriculture constitutes the predominant economic activity in Abkhazia. In the foreland zone an excellent tobacco is grown. The coastal zone is noted for its tea, silk, and fruits. Oil is extracted from the nut of the tung tree, which is widely grown together with

eucalyptus and bamboo. Grapes have been cultivated in the area since ancient times. Inland, on the higher slopes, timber production is the major occupation. Coal mining centres on Tqvarch'eli, the largest inland city. Power is supplied by several hydroelectric plants. The coastal resorts and Lake Ritsa are popular holiday and convalescent centres. The main line of communication in Abkhazia is the electrified railway along the coast, with a branch to Tqvarch'eli. Roads also parallel the coast and lead inland.

History

The Abkhaz were vassals of the Byzantine Empire when they became Christian under Justinian I (c. 550). In the 8th century the independent kingdom of Abkhazia was formed. Later a part of Georgia, it secured its independence in 1463 only to come under the rule of the Ottoman Empire in the 16th century. Islam subsequently replaced Christianity in parts of the region. In 1810 a treaty with Russia was signed acknowledging a protectorate. Russia annexed Abkhazia in 1864, and the Soviet authorities proclaimed its autonomy as a region in 1919 and raised it to the status of a republic in 1921. It became an autonomous republic within the Georgian republic in 1930, and it remained part of Georgia when the latter attained independence in 1991.

In 1992, secessionists in Abkhazia staged an armed revolt against the Georgian central government in a bid to obtain Abkhazian independence. The rebels defeated Georgian forces and established control over Abkhazia in 1993, and in May 1994 a cease-fire was arranged. Despite the cease-fire and the subsequent deployment of a largely Russian peacekeeping force in the region, hostilities continued, and in 1999 the region formally declared its independence, a move that was not recognized by the international community. Georgian accusations of Russian support for separatist ambitions in the region, as well as criticism of the ease with which Abkhazian residents were able to obtain Russian passports (by 2002 more than one-half of the population of Abkhazia had acquired them), served to strain relations between the two countries. The conflict was further aggravated following the 2004 election in Georgia of Pres. Mikheil Saakashvili, who made Georgian territorial unity and control of the country's separatist regions—Abkhazia among them—a political priority. In 2006 Georgia was able to take control of a

portion of Abkhazia's Kodori Gorge, although the rest of Abkhazia remained outside Georgian control.

In the years that followed, Russia became increasingly influential in Abkhazia. Hostilities erupted in August 2008 in another Georgian separatist region, South Ossetia, as Georgian forces engaged with local separatist fighters as well as with Russian troops who had crossed the border there. Violence spread rapidly to other parts of Georgia, including Abkhazia, where Russia massed additional forces in the days following the initial outbreak of warfare in South Ossetia. Though a French-brokered cease-fire called for the withdrawal of Russian forces, Abkhazia later allowed Russia to take control of its border, railways, and airport and to control and build military bases in the region.

Domestically, the region's de facto government struggled to maintain a stable representative government. Though about half the population was Georgian, Armenian, or Russian, those ethnic groups remained largely absent from the Abkhaz-dominated government. Georgians in particular remained disenfranchised and were pressured to take on Abkhaz names and identities. Abkhazian Pres. Sergei Bagapsh, an ethnic Abkhaz who married into a Georgian family, sought unsuccessfully to extend citizenship to Georgians in Abkhazia and to come to a settlement with Georgia on an independent Abkhazia. After the hostilities between Georgia and Russia in 2008, he was criticized for handing too many Abkhazian assets to Russia. He remained a focus of much opposition until he died in office from heart failure in 2011.



Aleksandr Ankvab

Aleksandr Ankvab posing with a portrait of himself on August 27, 2011, the day after his election as president, Sokhumi, Abkhazia.

Bagapsh's vice president and elected successor, Aleksandr Ankvab, attempted to strengthen the already powerful presidency in light of persistent opposition—and six assassination attempts (before and during his presidency). He resigned in June 2014, days after protesters stormed the presidential palace and forced him to seek refuge in a Russian base.

Raul Khajimba, a former vice president who had led the opposition against Ankvab, was narrowly elected president months later and likewise faced organized efforts to force his resignation. He survived those efforts, however, and sought a second term in an election set originally for July 2019. That election was postponed to August after a key opposition candidate, Aslan Bzhania, fell suddenly ill, allegedly from poisoning. After a close runoff election held on September 8, Khajimba won a plurality of votes and was declared the winner, though neither candidate received 50 percent of the vote. In January 2020 the election was nullified, and Khajimba resigned two days later. When a new election was held in March, Bzhania won a commanding majority of the votes.

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