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Engagement without Recognition: A New Strategy toward Abkhazia and Eurasia's Unrecognized States

The Russia–Georgia war of August 2008 had repercussions well beyond the South Caucasus. The war was the culmination of Western tensions with Russia over its influence in the post–Soviet space, while the fallout exposed divisions within the transatlantic community over how aggressively to confront Moscow after its invasion of undisputed Georgian territory and its permanent stationing of troops in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.¹ The conflict also called into question Georgia's relationship with the United States, as well as U.S. credibility as a regional security partner in light of Washington's apparent inability either to restrain Tbilisi from launching an attack against Tskhinvali in August 2008 or to help its ally once the war began.² Since the war, both the United States and Europe have provided significant financial support to help rebuild Georgia and have denounced the continued presence of Russian forces in the breakaway territories. The transatlantic community, however, has failed to develop a forward-looking strategy toward those territories.

The West's adamant refusal to accept Russia's recognition of the declared independence of these two territories in August 2008 is legally correct, but just

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pledging enduring support for Georgia's territorial integrity is impractical and somewhat meaningless now that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are even further out of Georgian sovereignty than they were before the war. These territories almost certainly are lost to Georgia for the short and medium terms—possibly for a period of decades—and Russian influence has substantially increased in both regions. Russia has formally recognized their independence, and perhaps ironically, the territories have gone from enjoying *de facto* independence as unrecognized states and parties to frozen conflicts, before August 2008, to becoming almost *de facto* parts of the Russian Federation in their new status as “independent states.”

Further, Russia has sought international support (particularly from Latin American countries) for the policy, offering economic incentives to secure recognition from third parties such as Nicaragua and Venezuela. Russia's “sovereign diplomatic” offensive, therefore, has further eroded the very international regime of sovereignty which Moscow professed to uphold when it criticized Kosovo's 2008 unilateral declaration of independence as a “dangerous precedent.”³

The war's troubling consequences for the region's territorial disputes do not seem to have resulted in any updated Western policy initiatives or active measures to rollback Russia's accelerating absorption of Abkhazia and South

Eurasia's unrecognized states remain isolated and dependent on regional patrons.

Ossetia. Nearly 20 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Eurasia's unrecognized states remain isolated and dependent on regional patrons, removed from international governance structures, rules, and norms. Instead of a region pursuing greater global integration, the unrecognized states continue to act as islands of isolation while regional powers seek to monopolize their interactions.

With these pressing factors in mind, we propose a basic outline of a new approach called “engagement without recognition” for Western policy toward at least Abkhazia, a policy that could serve as a model for crafting more robust engagement with Eurasia's other unrecognized states. According to this strategy, Abkhazia would be given the opportunity to engage with the West on a number of political, economic, social, and cultural issues for the purpose of lessening Russia's influence. While undertaking this strategy, the West must make it clear that Abkhazia's status as an independent state will never be accepted by either the United States or the EU. By separating the international legal dimensions of sovereignty (the question of non-recognition) from its governance aspects, the West can attempt to gain some needed strategic leverage over Abkhazia, which it currently lacks.

Abkhazia's Unique Status

The Abkhaz and South Ossetian conflicts did not emerge full-blown in the summer of 2008; they had been festering since the early 1990s when both territories engaged in wars of secession. For most of the mid-1990s and 2000s, the Western, particularly U.S., position on these issues supported and echoed Tbilisi's stance: Abkhazia and South Ossetia were integral parts of Georgia. Policies were therefore oriented toward restoring Georgia's territorial integrity under some type of federalist formula, rather than focusing on resolving the conflicts and devising some type of special sovereign status to grant the breakaway territories.⁴

While Georgia has a clear, internationally recognized legal right to sovereignty over the territories, post-Soviet Georgia has never really exercised actual local control over Abkhazia, except for a few months in the early 1990s. Thus, while Georgia may see itself as the rightful ruler of Abkhazia, the view in Sukhumi has always been quite different. Similarly, even before the conflict of 2008, the notion of Georgia's control over South Ossetia was largely aspirational for the Georgian government and public. Yet, despite the facts that both territories were described as frozen conflict areas for many of the past fifteen years and both were recognized simultaneously and unilaterally as independent states by Russia in August 2008, Abkhazia and South Ossetia do not raise identical political challenges.

Abkhazia (roughly 220,000 people) has a much larger population than South Ossetia (40,000–60,000) and displays at least some viability as an independent, or even autonomous, polity. Independent statehood for South Ossetia, with its tiny population, isolated geographic location, and lack of any economic base is *prima facie* absurd. The specific challenges facing South Ossetia—including the heavy, concentrated presence of Russian military forces and the very real security dilemma caused by its proximity to Tbilisi—make crafting a policy toward the region a particularly confounding task.⁵ South Ossetians have evinced some interest in exploring arrangements with North Ossetia, which is located just across the border in the Russian Federation, or even a union with Russia along the lines of the Russia–Belarus Union State. For all practical purposes, Russia controls South Ossetia's leadership and all strategically sensitive appointments in its cabinet and security services.

The idea of an independent Abkhazia, however, is plausible, and reflects the desire of most current residents of the territory.⁶ Abkhazia has a port on the Black Sea and some natural resources. Moreover, its more developed political institutions—including semi-competitive elections, multiple political parties, civil society groups, and some nominally independent media outlets—suggest that Abkhazia has the capacity for self-governance, or at least political autonomy.⁷

Isolation has threatened to turn the South Caucasus into a proxy conflict.

At the same time, the issue of Georgian internally displaced persons (IDPs) still substantially weakens the Abkhaz argument for independence. Approximately 250,000 ethnic Georgians, well over half of the ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia at the time, were expelled from Abkhazia in 1992–1993 during the first war with Georgia.⁸ These people remain displaced

nearly 20 years after the conflict, despite receiving promises in recent years from Tbilisi that they would be able to return to their homes imminently. Today, the territory remains a multi-ethnic area with sizeable Abkhaz, Armenian, and Ukrainian communities, as well as small numbers of Jews, Greeks, and representatives of ethnic groups from the North Caucasus, but far fewer Georgians than during the Soviet period or before.

The expulsion of ethnic Georgians from Abkhazia means that to recognize Abkhaz independence without resolving the IDPs issue would, in some respects, be rewarding ethnic cleansing. Abkhaz officials still do not have a coherent strategy or policy to facilitate repatriation or otherwise resolve the problem of IDPs, mainly because accepting the return of hundreds of thousands of people would compromise the demographic make-up—and by extension, the political viability—of the nascent Abkhaz state.⁹ Any future referendum on the legal status of Abkhazia that does not involve the participation of at least a significant percentage of expelled residents cannot be accepted as valid or legitimate. For this reason, the West should not waver from its refusal to recognize Abkhaz independence.

After the War

Since the conclusion of the war, the West has been firm in its refusal to recognize the independence of Abkhazia. In total, four countries—Nauru, Nicaragua, Russia, and Venezuela—have recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. For Nauru, Nicaragua, and Venezuela, recognitions seem to have resulted from Russian lobbying and bilateral deals promising Russian aid or broader investment in their respective energy sectors. Moscow appears determined to secure recognition for Abkhazia and South Ossetia from additional Latin American states, especially Bolivia and Ecuador, while Belarus, under competing pressure from Brussels and Moscow, seems to be deferring its decision for as long as possible.¹⁰ Although refusing to recognize Abkhaz independence and challenging Russia's new "recognition diplomacy" represents a good starting point for Western policy toward Abkhazia, it is far from a strategic vision.

U.S. and EU policy toward Abkhazia, while not fully developed, also includes a commitment to Georgia's territorial integrity, which is usually described as supporting, respecting, or even protecting this principle. In a September 2009 meeting with President Mikheil Saakashvili of Georgia, U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said that the "United States supports [you] both in terms of your [Georgia's] territorial integrity and sovereignty."¹¹ Similarly, following the December 2009 Abkhaz presidential elections, an official EU statement declared "the European Union continues to support Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty, as recognised by international law."¹²

But western policymakers rarely consider that the phrase "territorial integrity" has a very specific meaning: that all of the territory which was part of Georgia at the end of the Soviet period should be governed and secured by Tbilisi. Constantly speaking of "territorial integrity" risks suggesting to both Tbilisi and Sukhumi that the United States and the EU are open to proactive, or even military, efforts to bring Abkhazia and South Ossetia back under Georgian control. This rhetoric clearly contributed to the belief among some quarters in Tbilisi in 2008 that, in spite of official warnings, the United States would support Georgia in the August war.¹³

While unlikely to occur now, another war between Russia and Georgia would come at a far greater cost for all parties, including the United States, which is still viewed as Georgia's ally and patron, compared to the previous conflict. But there are other drawbacks short of war associated with consistently issuing public commitments in support of Georgia's "territorial integrity." The Abkhaz leadership and public interpret such proclamations as the United States and the EU not having any interest in promoting cooperation or mutual understanding, which in turn only drives Abkhazia even further into the arms of Russia. This is exactly the outcome that needs to be avoided if Georgia is to ever restore its territorial sovereignty.

Ironically, if the international community is serious about restoring Georgia's territorial integrity, one of the first things that it should do is to stop talking about it so much. At a minimum, changing what is said about Georgia's territorial integrity is an easy way to further reduce the chance of another conflict.¹⁴ Specifically, supporting Georgian "sovereignty" rather than "territorial integrity" would justify and uphold Georgia's valid international legal claims, while also acknowledging the cold truth that the country's territorial integrity remains fractured.¹⁵

Abkhazia's Growing Russian Dilemma

Western policy toward Abkhazia should also consider the profound changes in the Russian-Abkhaz relationship since the war. The Abkhaz leadership greeted

Medvedev's August 2008 recognition of the independence of Abkhazia as a defining moment of statehood. Though we in the West generally assume that Russia was committed to supporting Abkhazia in its proxy conflict against the Saakashvili regime prior to the August 2008 war, Sukhumi itself remained uncertain about the degree of Moscow's commitment to defend and support Abkhazia under the old Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) peacekeeping regime. Since Moscow's recognition of Abkhazia's independence, Russia's commitment has been affirmed and demonstrated along a broad range of issues. Over the last two years, Moscow and Sukhumi have been negotiating over 30 so-called bilateral agreements.¹⁶

Yet, Abkhazia's overwhelming dependence on Russia as its principal security and economic partner has raised concerns about excessive dependence among Abkhaz politicians, media commentators, and civil society.¹⁷ In the security realm, first and foremost, Abkhazia has become completely dependent on Russia and has codified this domination through a number of lopsided security accords. These accords have provided Sukhumi with a renewed sense of security, but have also raised questions about Russia's intentions in the territory. In May 2009, Moscow and Sukhumi signed a border protection agreement through which the

Pledging enduring support for Georgia's territorial integrity is somewhat meaningless.

Abkhaz side agreed to have 800 Russian troops exclusively guard its border. The substance of the agreement was expected by Sukhumi, though its sudden adoption created some political rumblings outside the Abkhaz administration. The treaty was signed without warning by the Abkhaz authorities and the Russian Ministry of Defense, and was not submitted to the Abkhaz parliament for ratification or deliberation, leading to vocal criticisms by Abkhaz parliamentarians and

journalists.¹⁸ Indeed, during an interview in April 2010, one opposition member of the Abkhaz parliament recounted how he was accused of being "anti-Russian" when he pointed out that, in the implementation of the joint defense agreement, Russian troops seemed to have completely taken over functions meant to be jointly carried out with Abkhaz counterparts.¹⁹

Russia's military role in Abkhazia was further enshrined in September 2009 by the signing of a treaty of military cooperation, which granted Russia access to military facilities and bases in Abkhazia (including the airbase at Gudauta and naval facilities at Ochamchire) for a period of 49 years.²⁰ Under the treaty, Russian troops will retain the right of unrestricted mobility throughout Abkhazia and will remain immune from Abkhazian criminal law as well as exempt from taxation. Though reports indicate that Moscow is now only maintaining about half of its announced commitment of 7,500 Russian troops, the Russian military

presence is estimated to cost \$500 million, and is much more visible throughout Abkhazia than were the previous CIS peacekeepers.

Beyond the security realm, the Abkhaz leadership has also agreed to transfer various strategic economic and transportation assets to Russia and to adopt several Russian technical and commercial standards. The Russian ruble remains Abkhazia's official currency; in October 2009 the territory accepted Russian telephone prefixes (with the code +7) to replace its Georgian ones (+995).²¹ In fact, Russian-Abkhaz tensions were stoked in October 2008 when the Russian company Inter RAO UES announced its intentions to privatize its stake in the jointly-operated (with Georgia) Inguri Valley hydroelectric generator. De facto president of Abkhazia, Sergei Bagapsh, angrily reacted to not being consulted by the company, and proclaimed that the Inguri project "has always been and will remain ours, and we will dictate terms in any negotiations."²² The Russian company backed down from its original plans and subsequently reached a compromise deal with the Ministry of Energy of Georgia to operate the plant for the next ten years.

Soon after casting himself as a defender of Abkhazia's strategic assets, however, Bagapsh came under intense criticism for another series of commercial transfers to Russia. In May 2009, he announced a plan to transfer the management of Abkhazia's railways and Sukhumi airport to Russia for ten years in exchange for investment and loans.²³ In October 2009, the two sides readied a formal transportation agreement that would also transfer responsibility for Abkhazia's air-traffic control and navigation to Russia.²⁴ Furthermore, in a high-profile announcement in May 2009, the Abkhazia de facto Ministry of Economy signed an agreement with the Russian state-owned oil company Rosneft that ceded the rights to explore the Abkhaz continental shelf for five years, as well as to sell Rosneft's products in Abkhazia. Most controversially of all, Bagapsh has hinted over the course of the year that Sukhumi is considering allowing Russian citizens and economic entities the limited right to purchase land in Abkhazia, which if enacted, would lead to an almost instantaneous transfer of Abkhazia's coveted coastline to wealthy Russian buyers. Other Abkhaz officials, in private, express concerns that if such a measure were to be adopted, all Abkhaz real estate would be owned by Moscow in a matter of weeks.²⁵

The Abkhaz dilemma regarding Russian control of its security and economy grows more acute by the day. Economically, Russia is responsible for up to 95 percent of Abkhazia's trade, and directly subsidizes more than 50 percent of Sukhumi's central budget, so it will inevitably play a dominant role in the territory.²⁶ A senior Abkhaz official said in an interview that Russia will provide a total of \$120 million in budget support to Sukhumi in 2010, and has committed a similar amount for 2011 and 2012.²⁷ An increasing number of

Abkhaz opposition figures and media commentators are uncomfortable with their leadership's transfer of key strategic assets to Russia. Abkhaz presidential candidate in 2009 and prominent businessman, Beslan Butba of the Economic Development Party, strongly criticized the Abkhaz authorities, warning that Abkhazia's transfer of natural resources will erode the territory's future capacity for political independence.²⁸ Similarly, another opposition presidential candidate Raul Khadzhimba, a former vice president who resigned in May 2009, accused the Abkhaz leadership of selling Abkhazia's sovereignty for its own economic gain. Speaking at an opposition forum on July 24, 2009, Khadzhimba warned that "the authorities have taken the new realities, not as a basis for strengthening our statehood, but as a signal for realizing their own material interests. Such an approach strips our people, which bought its independence at great cost, of any chance of free development."²⁹

The vast majority of Abkhaz are grateful to Russia for providing it with security forces to deter Georgian aggression. Abkhazia no longer fears for its security and is no longer concerned about the intentions of the Saakashvili government. But the one-sided terms of the Russian presence serve as a daily reminder that Sukhumi has delegated some very basic state functions to Moscow, even if they are couched as "interstate agreements." This is, however, a trade-off that the current Abkhaz leadership seems perfectly willing to accept in return for its security.

Engagement without Recognition

With these considerations in mind, now is the time for the United States to increase its political engagement with Abkhazia. The West should continue to make clear that it will never recognize the independence of Sukhumi, though it can and should carve out a number of openings through which Abkhazia's political elites, business community, and civil society can build ties to people in Europe, the broader Black Sea region, and North America. The alternative is to continue to force Abkhazia to choose between either partnering with Russia or returning to Georgia, an easy choice for Abkhazia that only further accelerates Sukhumi's absorption by Moscow. The availability of pursuing a new international path will strengthen the hand of Abkhaz political leaders, media commentators, and civil society leaders interested in crafting a "multivector" foreign policy, and offer Abkhaz decisionmakers credible alternatives when negotiating with Russia on the management and governance of critical sovereign issues.³⁰

First, it is essential that Abkhaz be issued visas to travel within the EU and the United States, and participate in study tours and organized visits. Travel on Abkhaz passports, which beginning in June 2010 are being issued by Sukhumi to Abkhaz residents, remains an especially sensitive topic as it directly involves an

actual symbol and practical aspect of sovereignty. To this end, the Georgian government has proposed that the Abkhaz accept a travel document, known as a gray passport, which would be issued by the Georgian government but would not commit the holder to affirm his or her Georgian citizenship. Though Georgian concerns about the Abkhaz issuing travel documents are perfectly understandable and Tbilisi's position remains consistent with international law, in this case on balance we believe that the international community should not rule out allowing some limited Abkhaz to travel on their new self-styled passports, at least for an initial period for an engagement without recognition strategy. There is some recent precedent for such a policy. The United Kingdom and the United States allow residents of the Turkish Northern Republic of Cyprus (TRNC) to apply for visas and travel on their TRNC passports, even though the TRNC's sovereignty remains recognized only by Turkey itself.

The EU is better positioned to take the lead in such efforts because of its closer proximity to Abkhazia and its active involvement in brokering and now monitoring the Georgia–Russia ceasefire. Accordingly, Abkhaz officials, media, and civil society could be offered study tours of Brussels to better understand the institutions and values of the EU. The EU should also consider opening an information office in Sukhumi that could liaise with Brussels and provide information about such engagement opportunities and application procedures. At the same time, such tours could include a visit to NATO headquarters where alliance representatives could explain the organization's regional priorities and reassure the Abkhaz that NATO harbors no belligerent designs on Abkhaz territory.

As far as the United States is concerned, Abkhaz political figures and civil society representatives should be allowed to participate in regional conferences and seminars in the Washington think tank community, where contacts with U.S. officials could be made informally but constructively. It is particularly important that Abkhaz be allowed to participate in fora in the United States that address regional concerns and common challenges.

Much more should also be done to diversify Abkhazia's economic links. Certainly, Abkhazia's tourism sector will be a natural target for Russian investment. But creating economic links with the entire Black Sea region will give Abkhazia greater economic options and opportunities. Georgia has prevented these links, however, by putting an embargo on Abkhaz trade with Turkey. This policy of isolating Abkhazia reached a high-profile climax in August 2009 when

The strategy separates the international legal dimensions of sovereignty from governance.

the Georgian coast guard intercepted and detained a Turkish fuel tanker bound for Abkhazia. Georgian courts subsequently tried and convicted the ship's captain under the Georgian "law on occupation," sentencing him to a 24-year prison sentence and sparking an outcry from the Foreign Ministry of Turkey.³¹ After some shuttle diplomacy, Georgian officials agreed to release the captain, but the episode underscores the practical difficulties that Abkhazia faces in cultivating its economic relations with Turkey.

Accordingly, establishing procedures by which Turkish vessels can routinely visit Abkhazia should be a regional economic priority, one that Georgian officials privately acknowledge needs to be ironed out to provide alternative commercial routes to Abkhazia.³² Opening a regular ferry link between Sukhumi and Trabzon, Turkey, is an important step toward enhancing the Abkhaz diaspora's link with the territory and further increasing commerce. Both Georgia and Turkey should encourage day-trip tourism to Abkhazia from specific, regulated points of access for third-party nationals, as is the case in Northern

Cyprus. Perhaps most controversially, the international community should also consider appealing to the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) to approve an equal number of weekly flights between Sukhumi airport and Istanbul, as between Sukhumi and Moscow. Ultimately, upgrading Abkhazia's transportation links with Turkey and the greater Black Sea region should be a Western priority.

Now is the time for the United States to increase its political engagement with Abkhazia.

In addition, international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, should be encouraged to identify and develop projects that will forge links between Abkhazia and other countries in the Black Sea region, including Georgia. As the Abkhaz economy develops, there are a number of economic technical and legal areas (e.g., capital market formation, accounting standards, and regulatory harmonization) where Abkhazia will require capacity building and where Western actors could help. For example, Abkhazian officials have expressed interest in upgrading and developing the North-South rail corridor through Georgia, which would also potentially allow travel and commerce between Abkhazia and Armenia.

On the civil society side, Abkhaz nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) should be connected with broader international networks on issues of common concern. Previously, the international NGO presence in Abkhazia has been limited to those working on humanitarian issues, as well as a few that were facilitating conflict resolution between the Abkhazian and Georgian

communities. Yet, there are a number of urgent advocacy issues that Abkhaz civil society could flag for the broader transnational community and, through this engagement, benefit from international expertise.

On the environmental front, the rapid development of Sochi and the Abkhaz Black Sea coast, including opening a massive new cement plant in Tkvarcheli in preparation for the 2014 Olympic Games, provide an opportunity for concerned Abkhaz environmental organizations to present their campaign to a broader international audience. Questions about corruption and good governance stemming from recent Russian investments in the region would make an ideal entry point for governance-oriented NGOs to consult with local groups and even consider opening a local chapter. Human rights and democracy NGOs should consider generating separate reports on the state of political freedoms and human rights in Abkhazia, as Freedom House did for the first time in 2009. Finally, Abkhazia's media and journalists, recently under severe pressure from the leadership in Sukhumi because of their critical stories about domestic corruption and governance problems, would greatly benefit from the opportunity to participate in exchange programs and join international journalist networks. All of these international linkages with Abkhazian civil society and media should be encouraged and can be forged without broaching the question of Abkhazia's political status.

Initially, the sequencing of these projects should not be tied to progress or benchmarks in the Geneva talks between Abkhazia, Georgia, Russia, South Ossetia, and the United States regarding security in the region, or any other status negotiations. Rather, the aim of EU and North American policymakers should be to encourage establishing a wide variety of contacts through which the Abkhaz can better understand Western priorities and political values while offering a real alternative to dependence on Russia. Over the medium term, however, the nature and degree of these contacts could be adjusted or even explicitly tied to an actual status process or certain reconciliation initiatives with Georgia. Once an array of international links has been created, the West will have considerably more leverage over Abkhaz actors in future status negotiations than they do now.

Avoiding Competitive Clientelism in the Caucasus

A policy of engagement without recognition, while probably the only way to preserve hope for a reunified Georgia, will likely be met with sharp disapproval from Tbilisi. Since the war, Tbilisi has maintained a hard-line position on Abkhazia and South Ossetia, stressing that they are occupied parts of Georgia, and has sought to isolate Abkhazia and South Ossetia from the rest of the world. Currently, the Georgian government has begun to circulate a new strategy of promoting cooperation with Abkhazia, but as yet, it remains to be seen how the

Risks are worth pursuing to help these areas break their extreme dependence on Moscow.

strategy will be implemented and how far it will go in allowing Abkhazia contacts with the international community, which are not mediated by Tbilisi. But the long-term interests of Georgia and the region need to be untangled from the short-term political interests of the current Georgian government.

It is not yet clear how Russia would respond to greater Western engagement in Abkhazia. It is likely that the Russian

reaction would lean in one of two directions. First, Moscow might pressure Sukhumi not to respond to Western overtures calling for more engagement fearing—not inaccurately—that this engagement would lead to reduced Russian influence in the region. If Russia took this approach, it would lead to greater tension in the Russian–Abkhaz relationship as Russia would be stopping Abkhazia from pursuing a policy that would look very appealing to the Abkhaz. This outcome would be helpful for the West because it would contribute to the goal of breaking down Russian dominance in Abkhazia.

It is also possible that Russia will determine that it is not worth it to try to prevent Abkhazia from establishing ties with the West because they want to avoid conflict with Abkhazia over the issue. Having gone to great lengths to campaign for Abkhazia’s independence in the international sphere, Moscow may not want to be viewed as vetoing Abkhazia’s diversification of international ties. If this happens, engagement without recognition will not meet any obstacles from Moscow. Either reaction from Russia would make the strategy worth pursuing from the perspective of the United States.

In recent years, the international politics in the South Caucasus has descended into competitive clientelism, with the United States strongly backing Georgia, and Moscow guaranteeing the security of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Isolating Abkhazia and the other unrecognized and partially recognized states no longer serves the interests of the West. Isolating Abkhazia, as with Eurasia’s other unrecognized states, has only served to strengthen the hand of the political patrons of these territories and further fragmented the Eurasian political space. It has also accelerated the region’s remilitarization and escalated regional tensions to the point of conflict. In the Georgian cases specifically, isolation has threatened to turn the South Caucasus into a proxy conflict between Russia and the West. Moreover, open speculation over whether post–Soviet countries, such as Belarus and Ukraine, will recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia’s independence threatens to open a Pandora’s box of sovereign

claims and counterclaims across Eurasia that may spiral out of international control.³³

If we are to address the problems of clientelism, isolation, and dependency which surround the governance of territories such as Abkhazia, Nagorno Karabakh, and Transdniestria, while preventing their sovereign recognitions from being used as instruments of geopolitical statecraft by regional powers, we must find new and creative ways to integrate these territories with the actors, institutions, and norms of the international community. All of these goals should be sought without formally recognizing the independence of these territories. These regions need greater international and regional integration, not continued isolation. The strategy of engagement without recognition certainly is not guaranteed to succeed, and carries with it some political risks. Yet, those risks are worth pursuing to help these areas break their extreme dependence on Moscow. After 20 years of living with frozen conflicts, and witnessing just how quickly they can thaw, it is now time to consider a bold, new approach.

Notes

1. For an analysis of the background causes and a timeline of the lead-up to the conflict, see "The Independent Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia," September 2009, <http://www.ceiig.ch/>. For further analyses of Russia's intentions and the causes of the conflict, see Charles King, "The Five-Way War: Managing Moscow After the Georgia Crisis," *Foreign Affairs* 87, no. 6 (November/December 2008): 2–11. ; Svante Cornell and Frederick Starr, eds. *The Guns of August 2008: Russia's War in Georgia* (Armonk, NY: ME Sharpe, 2009); Ronald Asmus, *A Little War that Shook the World: Georgia, Russia, and the Future of the West* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
2. On how the U.S.–Georgian relationship evolved before the war, see Alexander Cooley and Lincoln A. Mitchell, "No Way to Treat Our Friends: Recasting Recent U.S.–Georgian Relations," *The Washington Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (January 2009): 27–41.
3. See "Putin Urges Consensus on Kosovo," BBC News, January 17, 2008, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7193225.stm>.
4. For an exceptional study that advanced proposals for various alternative sovereign arrangements, see Bruno Coppieters, David Darchiashvili, and Natella Akaba, eds., *Federal Practice: Exploring Alternatives for Georgia and Abkhazia* (Brussels: VUB University Press, 2000).
5. On the particularities of South Ossetia, see International Crisis Group (ICG), "Georgia's South Ossetia Conflict: Make Haste Slowly," *Europe Report*, no. 183 (June 7, 2007), http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/183_georgia_s_south_ossetia_conflict_make_haste_slowly.ashx.
6. In 2010 alone, 42 percent of ethnic Armenians, 58 percent of ethnic Russians, 78 percent of ethnic Abkhaz, and even 47 percent of ethnic Georgians view independent statehood as the best political outcome for Abkhazia. See John O'Loughlin, Vladimir Kolosov, and Gerard Toal, "Contemporary Attitudes and Beliefs in Transdniestria, Abkhazia and South Ossetia: A Preliminary Analysis of

- Survey Data,” presentation at the Kennan Institute, Washington, D.C., April 26, 2010, http://www.wilsoncenter.org/events/docs/Toal_OLoughlin_Kolossov1.pdf.
7. See Freedom House’s 2009 assessment of Abkhazia’s political institutions, which it characterizes as “partly free.” See Freedom House, “Freedom in the World—Abkhazia (2009),” http://freedomhouse.org/inc/content/pubs/fw/inc_country_detail.cfm?year=2009&country=7744&pf.
 8. See ICG, “Abkhazia: Ways Forward,” *Europe Report*, no. 179 (January 18, 2007), http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/179_abkhazia___ways_forward.ashx.
 9. Reactions from Abkhaz officials on the status of internally displaced persons (IDPs) range from defensive, noting that Abkhazia did accept the return of 30,000 residents of Gali, to simply admitting that the return of IDPs is an impossibility as it would threaten the demography and Abkhazia’s aspirations to statehood. Interviews by authors, Sukhumi, Georgia, April 15–16, 2010.
 10. Belarus sent fact-finding delegations to Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and undisputed Georgia to investigate the issue and make recommendations to President Alexander Lukashenko. Some have suggested that Lukashenko accepted an emergency economic aid package from Moscow in 2009 on the condition that he recognizes the breakaway territories, but such a decision has not been forthcoming. See, for instance, “Belarus Seeks \$3b Loan from Moscow,” Associated Press, December 22, 2008, <http://www.cbc.ca/world/story/2008/12/22/belarus-russia.html>.
 11. Hillary Rodham Clinton, “Remarks with Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili at Camera Spray Before Their Meeting,” New York, September 21, 2009, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2009a/09/129442.htm>.
 12. “EU, U.S. Reject Abkhaz Elections,” Civil.Ge, December 15, 2009, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=21782>.
 13. See Cooley and Mitchell, “Recasting Recent U.S.–Georgian Relations.”
 14. On Georgia’s strategic use of historical narratives to gain U.S. support, see Lincoln A. Mitchell, “Georgia’s Story: Competing Narratives Since the War,” *Survival* 51, no. 4 (August–September 2009): 87–100.
 15. For important distinctions among different elements of sovereignty, see Stephen Krasner, *Sovereignty: Organized Hypocrisy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999).
 16. See ICG, “Abkhazia: Deepening Dependence,” *Europe Report*, no. 202, February 26, 2010, http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/europe/202_abkhazia___deepening_dependence.ashx.
 17. Authors’ interviews with Abkhazian media representatives confirmed that this internal debate about growing dependence on Russia is now the primary foreign policy concern in Abkhazia. Interviews by authors, Sukhumi, Georgia, April 14, 2010.
 18. See “Bozbuždayoushaya Druzhba” [Excitatory Friendship], *Kommersant*, June 6, 2009, <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?fromsearch=4b6cfe8f-0847-4245-808a-54b658638948&docid=1173036> (in Russian).
 19. Abkhaz parliamentarian, interview by authors, Sukhumi, April 15, 2010.
 20. “Moscow Signs Agreement to Station Military Bases in Abkhazia,” *MosNews.com*, March 10, 2010, <http://www.mosnews.com/military/2009/03/06/abbases/>.
 21. See Samantha Shields, “Russian Presence Grows in Abkhazia,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 14, 2009.
 22. “Inguri Hydroelectric Plant: Compromise Reached?” *Georgia Times*, January 12, 2009, <http://www.georgiatimes.info/en/articles/5887.html>.

23. "Georgia: Abkhazia Hands Airport, Railway Over to Russian Management," Eurasianet.org, May 17, 2009, <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/news/articles/eav051809b.shtml>.
24. "Russia's Ministry of Transport Prepares a Whole Range of Intergovernmental Russian-Abkhaz Agreements Covering the Entire Cooperation Spectrum," Official Website President of the Republic of Abkhazia, July 10, 2009, <http://www.abkhaziagov.org/en/news/detail.php?ID=23701>.
25. Abkhazian officials, interviews by authors, Sukhumi, April 15–16, 2010
26. These are estimates quoted to the authors by multiple Russian journalists in April 2010 who had covered the breakaway territories in October 2009. Abkhaz officials themselves estimate that the customs venues they collect from the Russian border constitute about 40 percent of their budget. Thus, Russia remains Abkhazia's almost exclusive economic partner, be it for investment, commerce, or as a source of customs duties.
27. Senior Abkhaz official, interview by authors, Sukhumi, April 16, 2010.
28. See Butba's comments in "Abkhazia: Russia's Headache," *Northern Caucasus*, no. 23, June 2009, <http://en.sknews.ru/main/print:page,1,1795-abkhazia-russias-headache.html>.
29. Quoted in Inal Khashig, "Abkhaz Opposition Fear Growing Russian Influence," Institute for War & Peace Reporting, August 7, 2009, <http://www.iwpr.net/report-news/abkhaz-opposition-fear-growing-russian-influence>.
30. Both Abkhazian de facto President Sergei Bagapsh and de facto Foreign Minister Sergei Shamba have consistently affirmed their commitment to pursue a "multivector" foreign policy. See "Abkhazia: Optimism and Tension," *International Relations and Security Network*, August 27, 2009, <http://www.isn.ethz.ch/isn/Current-Affairs/Security-Watch/Detail/?lng=en&id=105219>.
31. Charles Recknagel, "Smuggling Dispute Between Sukhumi, Tbilisi Enters Uncharted Waters, Legally," *Radio Free Europe*, September 4, 2009, http://www.rferl.org/content/Smuggling_Dispute_Between_Sukhumi_Tbilisi_Is_In_Uncharted_Waters_Legally/1814822.html.
32. Georgian officials have affirmed that they are committed to finding a mutually beneficial procedure through which Turkish vessels could visit Abkhazia, but subject to a customs inspection stop by Georgian officials beforehand.
33. See "Ukraine Refuses to Recognize," *RIA Novosti*, May 14, 2010, <http://en.rian.ru/exsoviet/20100514/159015981.html>.