



UNITED STATES AGENCY FOR STRATEGIC COMMON SENSE

**ACTION MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton  
Secretary of Defense Robert Gates

**FROM:** Alexander Cooley & Lincoln Mitchell

**DATE:** May 1, 2010

**SUBJECT:** Georgia's Territorial Integrity

Since the Russo-Georgian War of August 2008, the United States and the European Union have adamantly, and justifiably, refused to accept Russia's post-war recognition of the declared independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, Washington and Brussels have failed, together and separately, to develop a realistic strategy toward the breakaway territories that takes changed political dynamics into account. Indeed, we do not have a workable policy at all; we have platitudes stuck in amber that ignore reality. The core realities we must acknowledge are, first, that **these territories are almost certainly lost to Georgia**, possibly for decades, and second, that **Russian influence in both places has increased rapidly and substantially.** Unless the United States changes its approach, the Russian Federation will soon completely absorb Abkhazia and South Ossetia. To prevent that outcome, we, together with the European Union, need urgently to end the current policy of isolation with respect to these territories and replace it with one of **"engagement without recognition."**

**ABKHAZIA FIRST**

Abkhazia and South Ossetia are almost always joined together in the minds of policymakers and observers, but there are major differences between the two. An independent Abkhazia is at least theoretically plausible, and reflects the desire of most current residents. Although its population is only about 180,000, the territory possesses a long Black Sea coastline that could facilitate contacts with countries other than Russia; there are some natural resource endowments and a set of governing institutions. Recently characterized as "partly free" by

---

*Alexander Cooley is associate professor of political science at Barnard College, Columbia University and an Open Society Global Fellow. Lincoln Mitchell is an associate at Columbia University's Harriman Institute and author of the book *Uncertain Democracy: U.S. Foreign Policy and Georgia's Rose Revolution* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).*

Freedom House, Abkhazia already has some attributes of statehood. South Ossetia, with a population of less than 50,000 people, is by contrast landlocked between Georgia and Russia, and the population's resentment of local Georgians has led it to imagine not independence, but rather a protective autonomy within Russia. Thus, for practical reasons, we need to focus our efforts on Abkhazia.

Since the conclusion of the summer 2008 Georgia War, the West has been firm in its refusal to recognize Abkhaz independence, which is supported by only three states besides Russia (Nicaragua, Venezuela and Nauru). The United States and the European Union have also articulated support for Georgia's territorial integrity. But "territorial integrity" when used with regard to Georgia has a specific meaning: respecting all the territory that was part of Georgia at the end of the Soviet period. Currently, Georgia's territorial integrity by this definition cannot be respected or protected because it simply does not exist.

While restoring Georgian territorial integrity may be the ideal way to resolve the conflicts in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, it is at best a long-term project. To speak of it as though it were practical and imminent, however, and to make it the lead, so to speak, of Western diplomacy is counterproductive. Doing so risks signaling to hardliners in Tbilisi that the United States and the European Union are open to active, and even military, efforts to bring Abkhazia and South Ossetia back into Georgia. The prospect of a U.S.-backed military solution to the conflict naturally raises fears in Abkhazia that push it closer toward Russia.

It also raises the fear there of what may be called reverse ethnic cleansing. During the war in Abkhazia in the early 1990s, approximately 250,000 ethnic Georgians living in Abkhazia (that is, more Georgians than there are Abkhaz) fled their homes to seek refuge elsewhere in Georgia. More than 15 years after the conflict these people remain displaced. This means that Abkhaz aspirations for independence rest substantially on an episode of ethnic cleansing that turned them from a minority into a majority in their territory. Many Abkhaz reason that the Georgian strategy to undermine Abkhaz aspirations must involve repatriating internally displaced ethnic Georgians to Abkhazia in order to re-establish the demographic *status quo ante*. Fear of such an eventuality will also further drive Abkhazia into the arms of Russia.

To the extent the United States has an Abkhazia policy beyond the rhetoric of "territorial integrity", it is one of "strategic patience", or stratpat. Stratpat suggests that, essentially, Abkhazia would willingly rejoin Georgia once the latter demonstrates that it can provide a better, more prosperous and democratic home for the Abkhaz than they could find in a heavily Russia-influenced future. Yet stratpat did not work even in the years immediately following the Rose Revolution, when Georgia reasonably could have been described as becoming more prosperous and democratic.

Stratpat emphasizes what happens in Georgia, while viewing what happens in Abkhazia as largely peripheral. Stratpat also encompasses support for Georgia's attempts to isolate the territories, which has played counterproductively into Russia's

hands. The new Georgian government strategy, however, emphasizes engagement with Abkhazia through a series of initiatives that would bring together current and former residents for joint projects and joint participation in international programs. The United States should support Georgia's efforts while pursuing our own parallel strategy of engagement. Failing to engage with Abkhazia will only solidify its growing security and economic ties to Russia. Stratpat will ameliorate nascent Russian-Abkhaz tension at a time when U.S. policy should seek to exploit it.

### ENGAGEMENT WITHOUT RECOGNITION

The United States and the European Union have an alternative. They must engage with Abkhazia while making it clear that they will not recognize its independence. Such an approach offers the only realistic opportunity for the West to drive a wedge between Moscow and Sukhumi. Of what, specifically, should this alternate policy consist?

First, Abkhaz officials should be issued visas to travel within the European Union and the United States, even on their Abkhaz passports. They should be actively encouraged to participate in study tours and organized visits. Because of its closer proximity to Abkhazia and its active involvement in brokering and monitoring the Georgia-Russia ceasefire, the European Union is better positioned to take the lead in this direction. But Abkhaz political figures should be encouraged to participate in the Washington, DC think-tank community's conferences and seminars, too, especially those that address regional concerns and common challenges. Precedent for such a policy can be found in U.S. policy toward the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (TRNC). Even though Washington does not recognize the TRNC as a sovereign state, it recognizes TRNC passports for the purpose of travel and visa applications.

Second, more should be done to diversify Abkhazia's economic links. Creating economic ties with the entire Black Sea region would give Abkhazia greater economic opportunities than trading nearly exclusively with Moscow, which currently accounts for 95 percent of the territory's external trade and over two-thirds of its budgetary support. The Abkhaz diaspora, particularly in Turkey, and its regional economic networks offer perhaps the best alternative to Russia's economic monopoly. International financial institutions should be encouraged to identify projects that would forge links between Abkhazia and other countries in the Black Sea region, including Georgia. As the Abkhaz economy thus develops, Abkhazia would require capacity-building assistance in which Western actors could play important consultative roles.

Third, Abkhaz non-governmental organizations (NGOs) should be connected with broader international advocacy networks on issues of common concern. There are several urgent issues from which Abkhazian civil society could benefit by engaging the expertise of the broader transnational community. For example, the rapid development of Sochi and the Abkhaz Black Sea coast—including the opening of a massive new cement plant in Tkvarcheli in preparation for the 2014 Olympic Games—would enable Abkhaz environmental organizations to



present their concerns to a broader international audience.

Likewise, questions about corruption stemming from recent Russian investments in the region would make an ideal entry point for NGOs working on governance issues. They should consult with local groups and even consider opening local chapters. Human rights and democracy NGOs should consider generating separate country reports, as Freedom House now does, on the state of political freedoms and human rights in Abkhazia. This will start to create a web of international accountability surrounding Abkhazia's governance practices.

Finally, Abkhazia's media and journalists, under severe pressure from the leadership in Sukhumi because of recent critical stories about domestic corruption and governance, would greatly benefit from international journalist-exchange programs and consultations with Reporters without Borders or the Committee to Protect Journalists. All of these international connections should be encouraged, and they can be forged without broaching the question of Abkhazia's political status.

Initially, the sequencing of these projects should not be tied to progress in the Geneva talks or any other status negotiations. Rather, the aim of EU and U.S. policymakers should be to establish a wide variety of contacts through which the Abkhaz can better understand the political values of the West and recognize them as a real alternative to dependence on Russia. Over the medium term, however, the nature and degree of these contacts could be tied to status negotiations or made conditional upon 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 negotiations than it does now.

### THE PERSPECTIVE FROM GEORGIA

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 on Abkhazia and South Ossetia, stressing that they are occupied parts of Georgia and, until very recently, seeking to isolate them from the rest of the world. The main reason for this approach lies in domestic politics. Holding the line on territorial integrity is essential for the survival of the Saakashvili regime; actually solving the problem, which nobody genuinely expects the regime to do, is not.

If the recent history of U.S. policy in the region teaches anything, though, it is that allowing Tbilisi to determine U.S. positions on Abkhazia, or anything else in the area, is not necessarily in either country's best long-term interests. Our aim should not be unperturbed relations with the current Georgian political elite, but the maximum feasible reduction of Abkhaz dependence on Russia. Engagement without recognition is the only policy realistically able to prevent Abkhazia's full absorption into the Russian Federation, thus preserving a chance for the territory to be restored to Georgian sovereignty. The more coordinated that policy is between the United States and the European Union, the more efficacious it will be. 🌐