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nationalist profile. Some Azeri youth of the post-Soviet era have also come under Turkish influence through religious movements and *Ülkü Ocakları*.

The governments of Azerbaijan have been intent on preventing Turkish hegemony in the country during the reign of both Aliyevs, yet they were interested in establishing the discourse of “one nation, two states” instead of what they believed to be the framework of the “big and

younger brother” discourse inherited from the period of the Popular Front and the presidency of Elçibey. As a result, although there is a “one nation, two states” discourse shared between the two countries, Azerbaijan is attempting to restrict Turkish political actors, while Baku is working through associations and businesses to exert its own influence in Turkey.

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Turkey’s Abkhaz Diaspora as an Intermediary Between Turkish and Abkhaz Societies

By Yana Zabanova, Berlin

Abstract

Although Turkey does not recognize Abkhazia and maintains a trade and transportation embargo on the de-facto republic, Turkey’s large historical Abkhaz diaspora has consistently challenged its government’s policies. Defying legal restrictions, the diaspora has been the chief driver behind Turkish investment and trade in Abkhazia. In the absence of official contacts between Abkhazia and Turkey, the leading diaspora organization, called Abhazfed, has become the main Turkish institutional counterpart for the Abkhaz authorities, combining the role of an “embassy” with that of a lobbying firm. In Abkhazia, a community of returnees from Turkey has been active in promoting business and grassroots ties between the two societies, assuming the position of intermediaries. Ties between Abkhazia and its diaspora in Turkey proved resilient even during the tensest period in Russian–Turkish relations (November 2015–June 2016).

Introduction

The small coastal town of Ochamchire/a in southern Abkhazia still bears the traces of the 1992–93 war with Georgia: abandoned family homes and public buildings, disused railway tracks overgrown with weeds, and a population that is less than one-third of its 1989 size. It also has a port, where one can see the brand new boats of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) coast guard, a large Turkish ship, several fishing vessels, and piles of coal. Each of these observations tells us something about Abkhazia. The Russian FSB is controlling Abkhazia’s borders based on a 2009 bilateral agreement. Coal and fish products are among Abkhazia’s main exports

to Turkey, its second-largest trading partner after Russia. And the key actor driving this trade—which Georgia seeks to stop and Russia and Turkey tolerate—is Turkey’s Abkhaz diaspora.

In the absence of official data¹, the Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey places its own size at approximately 500,000, which makes it the largest population of Abkhaz worldwide. The number of ethnic Abkhaz in Abkhazia, by contrast, is only 122,000 according to the 2011 census;

¹ Turkish national censuses do not ask questions on ethnicity, and minority status is only accorded to non-Muslim population groups.

in reality, it is likely to be even less.² Under Abkhaz laws, all Abkhaz and Abazins worldwide are automatically considered Abkhaz citizens. According to unofficial estimates, some 7,000 Turkish Abkhaz have made use of this provision, obtaining Abkhaz passports. This includes ca. 3,000 who have actually resettled to Abkhazia.

The Abkhaz leadership has always been aware of the diaspora's importance, viewing it as an important resource for addressing the republic's demographic problems, as a friendly actor able to challenge and subvert Turkey's policy of non-recognition and the Turkish embargo, and as a source of economic investment. Already in 1992, shortly before the outbreak of the war with Georgia, the republic's first de-facto President, Vladislav Ardzinba, travelled to Turkey to develop ties with the diaspora community. The following year, the Abkhaz authorities established the State Committee for Repatriation with the assistance of diaspora activists from Turkey. As for the diaspora itself, through its engagement with Abkhazia, it has transformed into a transnational actor with its own institutional identity. Abkhazia's unrecognized status has led the diaspora to take on a range of functions that are usually reserved for other actors and institutions, such as embassies or lobbying and PR agencies. The diaspora's evolution as a transnational actor, and the challenges associated with this role, are analysed in the following sections.

The Abkhaz in Turkey: Historical Background

Ethnic Abkhaz in Turkey are the descendants of the so-called *muhajirs* who fled the Russian Empire in the aftermath of the Caucasus War (1817–1864), which saw Russia cement its control over the region. The Abkhaz share a history of forced exile to the Ottoman Empire with several other Northwest Caucasian ethnic groups, the most numerous being the Adyghe. In Turkey, these groups are collectively referred to as *Çerkesler* (Circassians). They number several million and have maintained close ties with one another. The Abkhaz, like the Circassians, are well integrated and now increasingly urbanized. They take pride in having contributed to the establishment of the Turkish Republic. Areas of Abkhaz settlement in Turkey include Bilecik, Bolu, Bursa, Düzce, Eskişehir, Inegöl, Kocaeli, Sakarya, and Yozgat, as well as Istanbul and Ankara.

In the Soviet period, the diaspora's contacts to Abkhazia were virtually absent, with many Turkish-Abkhaz growing up unaware of Abkhazia's existence. The repres-

sive political atmosphere in Turkey at the time meant that non-Turkish allegiances were discouraged. Minorities had to adopt Turkish surnames, although Abkhaz families informally continued using their original names. There were Abkhaz diaspora organizations called "cultural associations" (*kültür dernekleri*) but their activities focussed primarily on folk music and dance, and the ideological climate was marked by domestic political divisions. Legal restrictions in Turkey made it impossible for these centres to unite under a common umbrella.

Things began to change in the 1970s, when more information about Abkhazia reached Turkey. In 1975, the first delegation of Turkish-Abkhaz intellectuals travelled to Abkhazia on a trip organized through the Soviet Ministry of Culture. Yet, contacts remained very limited until the late 1980s, when a new political openness allowed increasing numbers of young diaspora activists to travel to Abkhazia—first as part of cultural exchange and folk ensembles and, from 1991, to study at the Abkhaz State University.

Becoming a Transnational Actor

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Turkey found itself face-to-face with the Caucasus, a region it had largely ignored throughout the Cold War period. Under President Turgut Özal (1989–1993), Turkey enthusiastically sought to gain influence in its new neighbourhood, with the Turkish public following developments in the region with newfound interest.

In August 1992, war broke out between Georgia and Abkhazia. This event galvanized the broader masses of the Circassian diaspora in Turkey (including the Abkhaz), speeding up its transformation into a transnational actor. Within days, diaspora representatives from 42 North Caucasian associations gathered in Istanbul to create the Caucasus-Abkhazia Solidarity Committee, which collected food, medicine, and money for the war effort.³ They also sent volunteers to fight in Abkhazia, launched a public campaign in Turkey to advocate for the Abkhaz cause, and successfully pushed for special hearings on the conflict in the Turkish parliament in 1992.

Although the diaspora did not succeed in bringing the Turkish government to recognize Abkhazia, it continued to support the unrecognized republic. In 1996, under pressure from Georgia, the Commonwealth of Independent States imposed a comprehensive trade and transportation embargo on Abkhazia. Turkey soon followed suit. The resulting isolation had disastrous con-

2 The 2011 census data on ethnic Abkhaz population are widely believed to be inflated to present the Abkhaz as a majority within the republic's population.

3 Çelikpala, Mitat. 2006. "From Immigrants to Diaspora: Influence of the North Caucasian Diaspora in Turkey." *Middle Eastern Studies* 42 (3): 432.

sequences for the embattled Abkhaz economy. In this situation, the humanitarian aid shipments that diaspora organizations managed to deliver to Abkhazia became a lifeline for the beleaguered republic. The diaspora also began lobbying for the restoration of a direct transport link between Turkey and Abkhazia (there had been a direct ferry between the Turkish Black Sea port of Trabzon and Sukhum/i from 1994 until late 1995). Throughout this period, Abkhazia remained a top policy priority of major Circassian groups in Turkey and subsequently of the Federation of Caucasus Associations, or KAFFED (*Kafkas Dernekleri Federasyonu*), the largest Circassian umbrella organisation established in 2003.

Circassian vs. Abkhaz?

Another decisive development for the Turkish-Abkhaz diaspora was Russia's recognition of Abkhazia's independence in 2008. This change in Abkhazia's status led many within the diaspora to call for a new format of engagement with the homeland, moving away from a broader Circassian platform to concentrate on a distinct Abkhaz agenda. This sentiment was strengthened by mounting disagreements with various Circassian groups over the latter's increasingly critical stance towards Russia on such issues as the recognition of the 1864 Circassian genocide or plans to hold the 2014 Olympic Games in Sochi, a historical Circassian land. In 2010, five Abkhaz cultural centres split off from KAFFED to establish the Federation of Abkhaz Associations, or Abhazfed (*Abhaz Dernekleri Federasyonu*).

At present, Abhazfed has 13 members and functions as the main Turkish institutional counterpart for the Abkhaz authorities. It is an official partner of several Abkhaz state bodies, including the de-facto Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Based on an agreement with the State Committee for Repatriation, Abhazfed screens the applications of potential repatriates to confirm their Abkhaz descent (Turkish-issued documents do not indicate ethnicity and contain Turkish last names instead of ancestral Abkhaz ones). It also conducts informal background checks, sharing this security information with the authorities. In 2014, Abhazfed, much like an embassy, cooperated with the Abkhaz Central Election Commission to organize voting in Istanbul in Abkhazia's de-facto presidential elections. However, this status also comes with some limitations. As an official counterpart of the authorities, Abhazfed largely adopts their political agenda and refrains from engaging with broader sections of Abkhaz civil society or from taking a stance on internal political struggles within the republic.

In Turkey, Abhazfed maintains strong contacts with the business community, MPs and municipal officials in areas with large Abkhaz communities, and informal ties

with Turkish government officials (e.g., heads of departments in some ministries). Abhazfed has relied on this network to facilitate several visits by high-level Abkhaz delegations to Turkey, as well as to bring groups of Turkish entrepreneurs, MPs, municipal officials, and journalists to Abkhazia. Finally, Abhazfed also helps fund some cultural projects and student exchanges.

Despite some tensions with Abhazfed, KAFFED continues to support Abkhazia as well. Several prominent diaspora representatives active within KAFFED have a professional background in public relations and have organized Abkhaz-themed academic and cultural events, such as a 2009 international conference on Abkhazia's independence at Istanbul's Bilgi University, Abkhazian Culture Days in Istanbul's Kartal Municipality, or annual celebrations of the *Ayaayra* (Abkhaz Victory Day) in several localities in Turkey.

Returnees as Societal Intermediaries

The institutional format is, naturally, only one aspect of the diaspora's interaction with Abkhazia. The community of some 3,000 returnees (repatriates) from Turkey living in Abkhazia play a more prominent role in maintaining grassroots and business relationships. They maintain close ties to the diaspora in Turkey, travel frequently, and sometimes reside in both locations. The first group of returnees, largely spurred by ideological motives, arrived in Abkhazia in 1991, before the conflict with Georgia began, or came as volunteers during the war. A second group followed in the mid-1990s, until the 1996 CIS blockade effectively closed Abkhazia's borders. Finally, the most recent wave of returnees followed starting in the mid-2000s, accelerating after 2008.⁴ A number of returnees, especially among the early arrivals, have become prominent businessmen and public figures, with a few serving in the parliament or holding official positions. In 2015, Soner Gogua, a businessman and former MP, created the Apsny International Foundation that operates a number of projects in Abkhazia, ranging from financial assistance to disadvantaged families and disabled children to improving the teaching of Abkhaz in Mingrelian-populated areas. There are also several returnee writers, historians, translators, and journalists. For the most part, however, returnees tend to be employed in the SME sector and are not politically active. The sectors in which returnees are widely represented include greenhouse agriculture, fishing, and construction; they also operate cafes, restaurants, hotels and small shops. Good contacts with the returnee community remain essential for potential investors from Turkey.

4 E-mail interview with Jade Cemre Erciyes, Sukhum(i), January 2015.

The Diaspora and the 2015–2016 Russian–Turkish Crisis

Given Abkhazia's overwhelming dependence on Russia, its relations to the diaspora in Turkey are contingent on Russia's non-interference. Turkey's downing of a Russian military jet at the Turkish-Syrian border in November 2015 dealt a harsh blow to bilateral relations, with Russia retaliating by imposing two rounds of harsh sanctions. (The two countries have recently begun to normalize ties after President Erdogan apologized for the incident in June 2016). Under Russian pressure and formally bound by the terms of the 2014 Strategic Partnership Treaty, Abkhazia adopted its own (admittedly much less comprehensive) sanctions, which came into force in March 2016. The sanctions, among other things, ban the import of several categories of foodstuffs from Turkey (none of which are particularly important for Abkhaz-Turkish trade), as well as the leasing of Turkish fishing vessels, which was common practice in Abkhazia due to the lack of its own fleet. While the sanctions may have served as a political signal, they are not applied in practice for several reasons. Nearly all Turkish investment in Abkhazia is diaspora-driven, and diaspora entrepreneurs who hold Abkhaz passports are exempt from sanctions. Abkhazia also continues to use Turkish fishing vessels for the simple reason that Russia has been unable to provide enough vessels to replace them. However, the sanctions do generate an atmosphere of uncertainty, new obstacles and higher transaction costs for business and societal interchange. Due to Russia's unilateral suspension of the visa-free regime with Turkey, diaspora representatives travelling to Abkhazia through Sochi now need to obtain a Russian visa and may be subjected to rigorous questioning and additional checks by the Russian FSB when crossing the border. However, it has recently become possible to enter Russia and Abkhazia visa-free with an Abkhaz passport, which many of diaspora representatives possess.

The Abkhaz diaspora has been intent on keeping channels of communication with Russia open. Soon

after the downing of the jet, both Abkhazfed and KAFFED visited the Russian Ambassador in Turkey to discuss the situation. While Abkhazfed has made a public statement expressing its loyalty to the Turkish state, it has also refrained from directly criticizing Russia; as for returnees, many of them condemned Turkey's actions but stressed the need for cooperation and dialogue. In fact, the Turkish-Abkhaz diaspora showed the potential to wield soft power instruments to bring Russia and Turkey closer together. In April 2016, a tripartite roundtable on Russian–Turkish relations was held in Sukhum(i), attended by a high-level official Abkhaz delegation, diaspora representatives and think tank analysts from Turkey, and, from the Russian side, representatives of the Russian Duma, the business community and think tanks close to the Russian government.⁵ The roundtable participants agreed on the need to work towards resolving the crisis in Russian–Turkish relations. With the normalization of ties currently underway, the outlook for Abkhazia's relations with its diaspora in Turkey is positive.

Conclusion

Although the Abkhaz diaspora in Turkey has been unable to secure Turkish government recognition of Abkhazia, it has successfully undermined official restrictions on trade and relies on its contacts in the Turkish government, parliament, business community, media and society at large to advocate for Abkhaz interests. Over the past 25 years, the diaspora has developed into a truly transnational actor with an identity that is increasingly distinct from the rest of the wider Circassian community in Turkey. Positioning itself as an intermediary between Abkhazia and Turkey, the diaspora, including the returnee community in Abkhazia, contributes to the development of inter-societal ties, which have persisted despite the 2015–2016 crisis in Russian–Turkish relations.

About the Author

Yana Zabanova is a research fellow at the German Institute for International and Security Affairs (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik, SWP) in Berlin. At SWP, she conducts research within the framework of the EC-funded project "Inter- and Intrasocietal Sources of Instability in the Caucasus and EU Opportunities to Respond", focussing on the role and influence of Turkey and Iran in the South Caucasus.

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5 Valerii Yakovlev, "Rossiya, Turtsiya i Abkhaziya. 'Myagkaya sila' v rossiisko-turetskikh otnosheniyakh" (Russia, Turkey and Abkhazia. "Soft power" in Russian–Turkish relations), *Kont*, 28 April 2016 <<https://cont.ws/post/258655>>