

# QUESTIONING THE EMBARGO ON ABKHAZIA: TURKEY'S ROLE IN INTEGRATING INTO THE BLACK SEA REGION

*There is a pressing need for engagement policies towards Abkhazia andl for pragmatic approaches to open up channels of communication for people and trade. Georgia has a stake in a policy of pro-active engagement with Abkhazia. Past efforts at isolating Abkhazia politically and economically had not gotten Georgia any further in negotiations. Turkey can play a major role in overcoming the isolation of Abkhazia. However it is unthinkable that Turkey unilaterally decide to resume direct transportation links with Abkhazia. The connection has to be legalized, or at least formalized. Pragmatism and willingness to cooperate should guide Georgian and Turkish efforts to resume communications to and across Abkhazia.*

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**T**he break-up of the Soviet Union had far-reaching consequences on Turkey's close neighborhood. The business minded population of the Turkish Black Sea cities, supported by their geographical and cultural proximity, started penetrating into their rediscovered neighborhood.

In the 1990s, Abkhazia rose as a major destination for people and commodities originating from the Turkish Black Sea coast. A bus connection was established between Trabzon and Sukhumi. Some 3,000 Turkish businessmen, most of them of ethnic Abkhazian origin, left in the early 1990s for Sukhumi. Abkhazia provides access to the markets of South Russia. The hotel "Samshytovaja Roscha" in Pitsunda, still the most luxurious hotel in Abkhazia, was built by a Turkish company: the project, among the first Turkish construction projects in the USSR, started at the end of 1980s and the hotel was inaugurated before the start of the Georgian-Abkhazian war (14 August 1992 - 30 September 1993). Diaspora links are beyond any doubt a major driving force behind the development of relations between Turkey and Abkhazia.

### *The Abkhazian Diaspora in Turkey*

It is estimated that some two million northwest Caucasians had left their homelands in the late 19th century. The first Abkhazian immigrants to Anatolia settled in 150-160 villages. Today their grandchildren are thought to be numbering between 700,000-1,000,000 whereas the figures for the wider north Caucasian Diaspora range from between two to seven million – 90 percent of which is made up by Adyghe. In the period of the Georgian-Abkhazian war, the political activism of the Diaspora in the form of lobbying and public relations efforts became considerably more ambitious and unified. At the wider community level, Adyghe and Abkhazian neighborhoods and villages are often closely located and inter-group social relations are intensive.

The establishment of a direct maritime connection between Sukhumi and Trabzon in 1994 sustained a continuous flow of passengers. A ferry called Ritza operated twice a week between Trabzon and Sukhumi, usually fully booked until 1996, which is the date of the CIS decision of an embargo against Abkhazia. Turkish businessmen of the Black Sea coast and members of the Diaspora recall that the journeys were comfortable and enjoyable.

However, Turkey responded positively to CIS's call for imposing economic

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sanctions on Abkhazia and canceled direct cruises between the ports of Trabzon and Sukhumi in 1996. As a result, the unrecognized republic was virtually cut off from the outside world.

### *The CIS Embargo and the Isolation of Abkhazia*

On 19 January 1996 the Council of CIS Heads (CSH) adopted the resolution on “Measures for the settlement of Conflict in Abkhazia/Georgia” which imposed economic sanctions on Abkhazia, eventually leading to its political isolation. In the first paragraph, the resolution condemns “the destructive position of Abkhaz sides that creates obstacles to the political settlement of the issue and secure returning of refugees and IDPs” and in paragraph six states that the member states of CIS, without agreement of the Government of Georgia, “will not have economic, financial or transport transactions with Abkhazian Authority... [and] ...will not have official contacts with Abkhazian Authority.”<sup>1</sup>

On 19 September 2003, the CIS heads of state adopted a statement reaffirming their commitment not to support secessionist regimes or engage in economic operations and in official contacts with the Abkhaz side without the consent of the Georgian authorities as set out in the resolution adopted by the Council of CIS Heads of State in 1995-1996. It is important to note that there has never been an international embargo imposed on Abkhazia: the CIS decision has never been endorsed by a United Nations Security Council Resolution.

As a result of the CIS embargo decision of 1996, Abkhazia has been cut from the outside world by the Russian-Georgian land and maritime blockade and the airport was closed to external flights and the railway functioned only within Abkhazia’s borders. Seaports were closed for passenger boats. Special regulations were introduced on the Abkhaz-Russian border heavily restricting the cross-border movement of Abkhaz citizens. With many dependent on petty trade across the border, this move cut the population off from their main source of economic survival. Men of military age, between 16-65 years, were not allowed to cross into the Russian Federation. This, on the other hand, forced women into economic life. Many started transporting goods across the Psou River and opening shops. The Union of Businesswomen of Abkhazia was established during these gloomy years of the total embargo.

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<sup>1</sup> In a separate presidential decree adopted on 31 January 1996, the Georgian government declared: “Sukhumi, seaport, port points, sea border and Georgian-Russian border in the territory of Abkhazia will be closed for any kind of international transport except the transportation of humanitarian cargoes carried out according to this decree.”

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The dire situation of the war-ruined economy was further exacerbated by the Russian-Georgian maritime and land blockade which caused total economic and social disruption. A small clandestine and seasonal economy of selling mandarins and hazelnuts along the officially closed border provided for a few the bare minimum to survive. 15 years after the ceasefire agreement, lush nature cannot conceal burned and destroyed houses, schools and kindergartens, looted factories, blown-up bridges, roads and tunnels. According to official data, the total amount of the overall material damage caused by the war is about 11.3 billion dollars.

### *The Effect of the Embargo*

The economic sanctions against Abkhazia are punitive –for they denounce the “destructive position of the Abkhaz side”– and purposeful since they aim at settling the conflict, securing the return of refugees and IDPs and restoring the territorial integrity of Georgia. Conforming to the embargo decision has become a gesture of solidarity with the Georgian government and a sign of attachment to the principle of its territorial integrity.

Cooperation is a key factor in ensuring the efficiency of economic sanctions. Maximum harm was inflicted on the population of Abkhazia when Russia fully cooperated with the embargo decision. However, even during this period, sanctions did not lead to any tangible policy outcome. Observers described the regime’s sanctions as counter-productive for the settlement of the conflict. The United Nations Needs Assessment Mission to Abkhazia in February 1998 critically assessed the blockade.<sup>2</sup> The analyst Jonathan Cohen noted in a paper published in 1999 that “trade restrictions cause much hardship in Abkhazia but instead of forcing the Abkhaz to make political concessions, isolation generates a siege mentality that reduces the propensity to compromise.” It also contributes to the development of a criminal and national resistance economy that undermines prospects for the entrenchment of the rule of law.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> As noted by the Mission, the embargo restrictions “tend to solidify political positions without encouraging political compromise or facilitating economic integration.” The Mission suggested that these restrictions be eased in the interest of promoting reconciliation and creating a better negotiating climate.

<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Cohen, “Economic Dimensions,” *Accord*, 1999.

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## *The Russian Federation's Unilateral Lifting of Sanctions, 2000-2008*

At the beginning of the Putin administration in early 2000 Russia began to put an end to the regime of sanctions against Abkhazia. The progressive lifting of the economic sanctions by Russia improved economic and social conditions. Emerging slowly from isolation, Abkhazia has started integrating into Russian Federation's economic zone.

Starting in September 2003, administrative units of the Russian Federation started signing cooperation agreements with the Abkhazian authorities. Legal entities of Russian Federation were authorized to cooperate with appropriate bodies and businesses in Abkhazia. The Russian approach became less ambiguous with its official withdrawal from the sanctions regime in March 2008, which was followed by the recognition of the independence of Abkhazia. The Russian authorities decided only in March 2008 to give an international visibility to their unilateral lifting of the sanctions.<sup>4</sup> The Russian Federation started leaving this regime of sanctions in 2001 by easing its regulations on the Abkhaz border. The prohibition for Abkhazian men of military age to cross into Russia the border was lifted in 2000. The Russian Federation authorities started allowing CIS citizens to travel the territory of Abkhazia, after April 2006 the regulation has been extended to non-CIS citizens with a double entry Russian visa to cross into Abkhazia.

Abkhazians have been carrying Soviet-era passports long after the rest of the former Soviet countries brought in new citizenship documents. After the war, applying for a Georgian passport could hardly be considered an option. This made Russia the only "outside world" with which Abkhazia could communicate, as the old internal passports remained valid for a while after the collapse of the USSR. Some Abkhazian officials and civil society activists prospect ed the possibility that the UN issue temporary international travel documents for Abkhazians until the settlement of the conflict, but to no avail. That would have required Georgia's consent. These requests were turned down. The leadership of the Russian Federation leadership decided to grant Russian Federation citizenship to people of Abkhaz origin after 2000, the process accelerated after the passage of the new Law on Citizenship by the Russian Duma in April 2002. By end June 2002, an estimated 150,000 people in Abkhazia had acquired the new

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<sup>4</sup> The Russian Foreign Ministry issued a statement on 6 March 2008 announcing the country's withdrawal from the 1996 CIS treaty imposing sanctions on Georgia's breakaway region of Abkhazia, citing "changed circumstances."

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passports, joining 50,000 who already possess Russian citizenship, 70 percent of the population became citizens of the Russian Federation and can travel freely.

The currency used in Abkhazia is the Russian ruble. The significant depreciation of the Russian ruble after the financial and economic crisis in 1998 and the progressive easing of the isolation regime boosted the Abkhazian economy. The majority of those retired started receiving pensions from Russia. Annual payments of the Pension Fund of the Russian Federation to Abkhazia exceeded 20 million dollars per year, amounting to more than half of the state budget.

Since the beginning of 2000, Abkhazia is integrating at high speed into the Russian economic zone, reaching the outside world through Russia. It seems hard to imagine how sanctions could have any more efficiency now than the already little efficiency they had in the period when the Russian Federation was fully supportive of the CIS embargo decision. Tbilisi keeps on insisting on retaining the sanctions as a bargaining chip for progress on the return of refugees' and internally displaced persons' (IDP) and is completely ousting Abkhazia from Georgian economic and social spheres. The maritime blockade becomes a symbolic way of defending its territorial integrity which leaves Abkhazia with only one vector of movement, towards Russia.

### ***Tourism***

Due to the depreciation of the Russian ruble, international touristic destinations have become less affordable for middle class Russian tourists. This has led to renewed interest in many of the Soviet time seaside resorts of the Black Sea. Abkhazia remained the cheapest destination, well ahead of Crimea. As a matter of fact, Russian tourists who could not afford trips to Turkey or Egypt –and are willing to sunbathe amid war ruins– have started to choose Abkhazia as a tourist destination. In 2008 the total number of tourists visiting Abkhazia reached two million which is seven times the Abkhazian population.

### ***Wine Exports to Russian Federation***

The Russian embargo on Georgian and Moldovan wine imposed in March 2006 also impacted Abkhaz products. Abkhaz wine bottles, which were imported to the Russian Federation, carried Georgian barcodes. In 2005, before the ban came into effect, 50 million bottles of Georgian and one million bottles of Abkhaz

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wine were sold on the Russian market. After Moldovan wines, in October 2007, Abkhazian wine and water, which were state monopolized products were allowed by the Russian Agency for Health and Consumer Rights (*Rospotrebnadzor*) to enter the Russian market. Ten sorts of wine<sup>5</sup> and one brandy are currently imported into Russia under a Russian barcode. The company, Yups-shara, established in 2005 is the distributor in the Russian Federation of the wines produced by the Wines and Water of Abkhazia.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Russian Investments***

On 9 July 2007, the mayor of Moscow, Yuri Luzhkov signed an agreement on economic cooperation between the municipality of Moscow and Abkhazia. According to preliminary calculations, in 2009 the total package of Russian Federation investments will exceed 200 million dollars. Since the August Georgia-Russia war, the Kremlin has signaled that investing in Abkhazia is a “patriotic” thing to do. Companies in many constituent territories of the Russian Federation took interest in doing business in Abkhazia. A dozen memorandums of economic cooperation have been signed between Russian regions and Abkhazia so far. The official decision to lift the economic sanctions against Abkhazia was a green light to the Russian Federation businesses to go to Abkhazia and was interpreted as a guarantee that Russia would defend the interests of the investors.

### ***The Effect of the Sochi 2014 Olympics***

In 2014, Russian Federation will host the 22nd Olympic Winter Games in Sochi, a town located just a few miles from the border with Abkhazia. The massive effort required to prepare the city for the Games will be another factor boosting Abkhazia’s economy, creating thousands of jobs just across the border in construction and service sectors. With the legal agreements in place, Abkhazians will have the right to work in Sochi.

A Russian construction company has started renovating one of Gagra’s, the border city with Russia, high-rises, Abkhazia Hotel. Abkhazia’s real estate market is already beginning to gain momentum thanks to the investment projects in preparation for the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi s sellers take their property

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<sup>5</sup> Among other “Psou, “Anacopia, “Amra”, “Apsni”, “Radedda”, “Dioskuria”, “Esheran “Lihni wines are sold in many supermarkets in Russia together with Russian and CIS wines.

<sup>6</sup> Kommersant, 17 October 2007.

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off the market with the expectation of potentially higher prices towards 2014, house prices have doubled. Russian companies, meanwhile, are buying land for development not only in Gagra, but also in the nearby seaside resort town of Pitsunda. Temporary villages for some 20,000 Sochi Olympics workers are also on the drawing board for outside Gagra.

### ***The Border Crossing of Adler/Psou on the Border with Russia Has Become the Main Gate to Abkhazia***

Georgia does not prevent travel to Abkhazia since the territory is officially within national borders. Entering Abkhazia from the Russian Federation by crossing the Psou River is considered illegal, since Georgian border guards do not control the Adler/Psou border post. The administrative border at Inguri had been officially open until the 2008 August War. However, the administrative border is a ceasefire line, militarized with a number of checkpoints, where occasional shooting occurs.

However, the Adler/Psou has become the main gate for ordinary travelers to Abkhazia, such as tourists, petty traders and Abkhazians from the Diaspora. In April 2006, Russia authorized non-CIS citizens with a double entry Russian visa to cross into Abkhazia.<sup>7</sup> This measure facilitated human to human contacts between Abkhaz and Turks tremendously. Before April 2006, Turkish citizens were either traveling on ships, taking the risk of violating the blockade or were trying their chances to cross into Abkhazia by bribing Russian border guards at Adler. The integration process with the Russian Federation has transformed the Adler/Psou post into a relatively friendly one and the renovation of the road to Sukhumi facilitated transportation. In contrast, the administrative border, the road crossing the Gali region and connecting to Sukhumi, remains a ceasefire line of poor conditions.

### ***Turkey and the Issue of the Embargo on Abkhazia***

Today, despite the embargo, Turkey is a main trade partner for Abkhazia. About 60 percent of imports come from Turkey, while 45 percent of Abkhazian exports are destined for Turkey, compared to 54 percent to the Russian Federation.<sup>8</sup> Abkhazia's leading export products are tea, citrus, tobacco, scrap metal, timber

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<sup>7</sup> Russian government resolution, No. 154, April 2006.

<sup>8</sup> Reports written by the Abkhaz economist Beslan Baratelia.

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and hazelnut. Grain, flour, sugar, butter, potatoes and fuel top the imports chart. In recent years, timber exports to Turkey have dominated total exports by value. Grain and flour are imported from the Russian Federation and Turkey. As of 2007, the money received from trade between Abkhazia and Turkey makes up 30 percent of Abkhazia's budget. Bud, scrap metal and fish are the main export commodities.

Officially, the maritime link between Turkey and Abkhazia is closed. Turkey justifies its compliance with the isolation regime by respect for the territorial integrity of Georgia. Attempts of Turkish businessmen from the Black Sea coast to infringe the sanctions, either guided by profit or moral concerns, could bring a relative degree of relief to the Abkhaz population

Lack of sufficient communication and transportation facilities with Turkey is the worst problem for those living in Abkhazia: during the period before the embargo, two cruise ships per week used to connect Abkhazia and Turkey and people were traveling abroad with Soviet passports. The Georgian coastguard regularly detains ships which enter Abkhaz waters or seaports without Tbilisi's permission for "illegal crossing of Georgian territorial waters" and requires the payment of fines for illegally shipping goods to Abkhazia.<sup>9</sup> As evident from the trade flow, most of the ships are connecting the Abkhaz ports of Sukhumi and Ochamchira with the Turkish ships. Georgian authorities detected that Abkhazia had maritime connections with mainly Turkey, Russian Federation, Ukraine but also more occasionally with Romania, Moldova, Italy and Spain.

Between 1999 and 2003, the coastguard of Georgia's Border Protection Department detained over 40 ships. In 2002 alone, 11 ships were detained. In 2003, the Georgian coastguard detained seven ships and a further eight ships' captains were given official warnings. On 31 July 2003, the Turkish ship Selim 1 was officially auctioned in Tbilisi after the expiry of the legal period for appeal or the payment of fines for illegally shipping goods to Abkhazia. The Turkish liner Shakir Baba 3 was auctioned in June 2003 on the same grounds. It was purchased by residents of Poti for 66,700 dollars. In July 2004 Georgia fired on a cargo ship approaching Sukhumi and threatened to sink any ships, including those carrying Russian tourists entering its waters without permission.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> This leads the Abkhaz authorities to denounce the Georgian government for acts of piracy. As highlighted in the article of in IA book for 2003 "In the first half of 2003, such arrests brought 274,000 dollars to the state coffers and a further 250,000 dollars is expected by the end of the year."

<sup>10</sup> David Chkahartishvili, Roman Gotsiridze, Bessarion Kitsmarishvili, "Georgia: conflict regions and economies", *From War Economies to Peace Economies in the South Caucasus*, (International Alert, London, St Petersburg, 2004)

Georgian authorities reportedly detained 22 vessels in 2004-2006. On 30 October 2006 the coast guard detained a Bulgarian ship whose owner was fined 448,000 dollars. Two fishing vessels, Russian and Ukrainian were detained on 10 January 2007. The captains were sentenced to two months' pre-trial detention. More recently, two other Turkish ships were detained: the ship "Denfa Demet" on 5 April 2009 and the "New Star" on 29 April. The latter is still being kept at the port of Poti. On 17 August 2009, "Buket", which is owned by DENSA Tanker, was detained outside the Georgian territorial waters and brought to the port of Poti. It was later taken to the port of Batumi to be sold. The captain was sentenced to 24 years in prison on 31 August 2009 and set free on 4 September following the visit of the Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs, Ahmet Davutoğlu, to Tbilisi. The attention of the Turkish authorities to the security of its citizens travelling to Abkhazia has increased since these latest incidents.<sup>11</sup>

The Russian Foreign Ministry issued a statement on 3 September 2009 warning Georgia against 'further seizure of cargo ships en-route to Abkhazia', saying this "may cause serious armed incidents".<sup>12</sup> Russia's state-owned Vesti television station reported on 21 September 2009 that Russia deployed *Novorossiysk*, a coast guard vessel, to Abkhazia to protect its "territorial waters."<sup>13</sup>

Abkhazian Diaspora organizations in Turkey and the business community of the Black Sea have been actively advocating the reopening of the maritime link between Trabzon and Sukhumi. More recently, demand for a flight connection between Istanbul and Sukhumi to the requests for the resumption of the ferry connection. As voiced by the signature campaign "for Trabzon-Sukhumi marine and Istanbul-Sukhumi flight transports, lift the transportation embargo on Abkhazia!" launched in November 2008, with family, friendship and business links bridging Turkey to Abkhazia justify the need for direct transportation connections.

The number of requests addressed to the Turkish Parliament by the intermediary of members of Parliament from the main opposition of the Republican People's Party (CHP) has increased since the recognition of Abkhazia by Russia.

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<sup>11</sup> [http://www.kafkasfederasyonu.org/haber/federasyon/2009/300909\\_disisleri.htm](http://www.kafkasfederasyonu.org/haber/federasyon/2009/300909_disisleri.htm)

<sup>12</sup> Civil Georgia, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=21423&search=>, 3 September 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Civil Georgia, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=21482&search=>, 21 September 2009.

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The Abkhazian diaspora is generally critical of the officially pro-Georgian attitude of Turkey. As a result of the efforts of the diaspora organizations, especially the “Kafkas–Abhazya Dayanışma Komitesi” – KADK [the Caucasus–Abkhazia Solidarity Committee], Turkey has started accepting the Abkhazian diaspora as a legitimate interested party in Turkey’s relations with Abkhazia and Georgia. Official Abkhazian policy discourse also makes direct and regular references to the “diaspora factor”. Turkish recognition of Abkhazian independence is an undisputed priority for the Abkhazian diaspora, but given the political realities and patterns of Turkish foreign policy and international diplomacy, the diaspora follows a realistic stance by not ignoring secondary goals such as the facilitation of transport and business contacts between Turkey and Abkhazia. These efforts can yield results if a more constructive and less “political” stance is adopted by Turkey in its relations with Abkhazia and Georgia.<sup>14</sup> The Federation of Caucasian Associations (KAFFED), the major Diaspora organization in Turkey, raised the issue of the opening of maritime and air connections to Sukhumi in a meeting with the President Abdullah Gül on 5 January 2009.<sup>15</sup>

### ***Pragmatism Over Formalism - Integration Over Isolation***

Ending the isolation, opening up Abkhazia and integrating the Black Sea region should be the priority of the Turkish government. Linkage with political issues blurs the overall positive impact of opening communications links. Georgia has a stake in a policy of pro-active engagement with Abkhazia. Past efforts at isolating Abkhazia politically and economically did not get Georgia any further in negotiations. Moreover, even during the period characterized by the cooperative stance of Russian Federation and the administration of high damage, the sanctions did not bring any tangible policy outcome. At the time, observers described the regime of sanctions as counter-productive for the settlement of the conflict.

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<sup>14</sup> For the details of political and social dynamics of the Abkhazian diaspora in Turkey see Mitat Çelikpala, “From Immigrants to Diaspora: Influence of the North Caucasian Diaspora in Turkey,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 3, 2006, pp. 423-446; Ayhan Kaya, “Political Participation Strategies of the Circassian Diaspora in Turkey,” *Mediterranean Politics*, Vol. 9, No. 2, 2004, pp. 221-239; Viacheslav A. Chirikba, “Абхазская община за границей [Abkhazian Community Abroad],” Apsny Information Agency, [http://www.apsny.ru/community/community.php?page=content/community\\_a/community\\_a.htm](http://www.apsny.ru/community/community.php?page=content/community_a/community_a.htm), 26 March 2007; Caucasus–Abkhazia Solidarity Committee in Turkey, <http://www.abhazya.org>. International (i.e. [www.iwpr.net](http://www.iwpr.net), [www.jamestown.org](http://www.jamestown.org), [www.eurasianet.org](http://www.eurasianet.org)), Russian (i.e. [www.regnum.ru](http://www.regnum.ru), [www.regions.ru](http://www.regions.ru)) and Georgian media and analysis sources ([www.civil.ge](http://www.civil.ge), [www.interpressnews.ge](http://www.interpressnews.ge)) provide news and commentaries on the Abkhazian diaspora in Turkey, U.S. and Europe. It is possible to find additional information in the academic titles on Caucasus and Turkish foreign policy. See for example, Andrew Mango, “Reflections on the Atatürkist Origins of Turkish Foreign Policy and Domestic Linkages” in Alan Makovsky and Sabri Sayarı (eds.), *Turkey’s New World: Changing Dynamics in Turkish Foreign Policy*, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, (Washington, DC, USA, 2000), pp. 9-19.

<sup>15</sup> [http://www.kafkasfederasyonu.org/haber/federasyon/2009/050109\\_talep\\_dilekcesi.htm](http://www.kafkasfederasyonu.org/haber/federasyon/2009/050109_talep_dilekcesi.htm)

The insistence on retaining the sanctions as a bargaining chip for progress for refugee and IDP return is ousting Abkhazia completely from the Georgian economic and social sphere. The maritime blockade has become a symbolic way of defending Georgia's territorial integrity, which leaves Abkhazia only to option to look towards Russia. Turkey can play a major role in overcoming the isolation of Abkhazia. However, it is unthinkable that Turkey would unilaterally decide to resume direct transportation links with Abkhazia while the Georgian coastguard detains Turkish ships. The connection has to be legalized, or at least formalized.

Turkey has generally been on the receptive side of the developments. Turkish diplomats have been working on the issue of reopening the ferry link between Trabzon and Sukhumi for a few years with Georgian authorities. It seems untenable to expect Turkey to unilaterally use the ferry link while the Georgian Coast Guard continues to detain Turkish ships. Georgian and Turkish authorities have been considering the possibility that the ferry make a stopover in Batumi for the customs procedures before heading to Sukhumi. Turkey is now presenting the idea of the opening of the ferry link as a confidence building measure for the settlement of the conflict to the Georgian authorities.

This would indeed be a confidence-building measure since through this step, Abkhazians can start looking southward, especially towards Turkey, rather than to Russia. The Turkish-Georgian border is fully open to movement of people and goods. The Sarp village, once divided by the security fence of the Cold War, is being re-integrated through intense cross-border cooperation. Adjara is integrating with the Turkish Black Sea coast. Dinners are hosted in the closed village of Gogno of the Soviet times between Turkish and Georgian business partners. Inspired by the European experience, Turkish and Georgian authorities have been working on transcending the border dividing them. Turks and Georgians can visit each other without a visa and Georgia is currently the only former Soviet country that has waived the visa requirement for Turkish citizens. The Batumi airport, which was built and managed by the Turkish company TAV, is also used for domestic flight connections for Turkish Airlines between Istanbul and Hopa, Artvin. Turkish citizens can board the Istanbul-Batumi flight without passports. In a sense, the practices at the Geneva airport have been implemented in Batumi. The Sarp border crossing will also start functioning under Swiss standards with a unique customs point. The pragmatism and willingness to cooperate behind the move aiming at transcending the common border should guide Georgian and Turkish efforts to resume the ferry link between Trabzon and Sukhumi.