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**The Intricacies of International Assistance
to De Facto States
Human Security and International
Engagement in Abkhazia**

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Table of Contents

Introduction.....	3
Theoretical Framework and Methodology.....	4
Definitions and Basic Concepts	4
The Foundations of International Assistance	6
General Issues of International Assistance	7
International Assistance in De Facto States.....	8
Methodology	10
Human Security in Abkhazia.....	10
Historical Context.....	10
Abkhaz-Georgian Relations and Personal Security	12
The Domestic Political Situation & Political Security	13
The Socio-Economic Situation and Economic Security.....	15
Multiethnic Society and Minority Rights.....	17
International Assistance in Abkhazia	18
Russian Assistance.....	18
Abkhaz-Georgian Relations and Personal Security.....	18
The Domestic Political Situation & Political Security.....	22
The Socio-Economic Situation and Economic Security	23
Problems and Shortcomings of the Russian Assistance	25
European Assistance	27
Abkhaz-Georgian Relations, Personal, and Political Security	27
Socio-Economic Security.....	29
Multiethnic Society.....	31
Problems and Shortcomings of the European Assistance.....	31
Conclusion.....	37
References	39
Acronyms.....	48

Introduction

The year 2008 marked a significant step forward for the Abkhazian struggle for independence from Georgia¹. The latter's attack on Tskhinval/i, the capital of the country's second breakaway region South Ossetia, triggered by a Russian "peace enforcement operation" or "aggression" (the Russian vs. the Georgian view) was followed by a 'Five-Day-War' between Russia and Georgia (Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, 2009, p. 22). After a ceasefire agreement was concluded, Russia recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states. Since then, Russia has repeatedly declared its goal to support the peace- and statebuilding processes of the breakaway regions (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2013b).

Nevertheless, life for the Abkhazians is far from easy – they often claim to have been "forgotten" by the international community. Compared to Georgia, which has become an EU association country and receives huge amounts of Western assistance, Abkhazia is isolated. The vast majority of states do not recognize Abkhazia as an independent state, which has led to fierce international debates. Abkhazian and Russian officials have been highly critical of the West's insistence on Georgia's territorial integrity, claiming that it is "based on outdated geopolitical and regional schemes and obsolete political approaches" (Khintba, 2012). Recently, the Council of Europe noted that the "the preoccupation on all sides with status issues, access across the administrative boundary line (ABL) and terminology issues poisons the possibility of progress on the humanitarian front" (Council of Europe, 2013). Nevertheless, most research on de facto states has centered on issues of status and international law. While the paper at hand clearly shows that current conditions in Abkhazia would be unthinkable without Russian support, from a human security perspective it is necessary to look at issues beyond issues of the legitimacy of the Abkhazian's claim for independence. As interviewee 14 lamented:

"Human rights conventions seem to apply only to countries that are recognized – what about us? We also want a good life, I have kids...If you don't have a passport, and you are not recognized, you are not a human being?"

Therefore, the paper at hand poses the following research question: how have international actors contributed to human security in Abkhazia since the end of the Georgian-Abkhazian war in 1993, and which difficulties and problems have they encountered or even created? While relevant theory and empirical studies were thoroughly examined in advance, this study pursues a mixed inductive-deductive approach. The paper mainly makes use of qualitative data, which was collected during 16 semi-structured interviews conducted in June/July 2015: nine in Sukhum/i, two in Gal/i², and five in Tbilisi. Evaluating the impact

¹ The linguistic juxtaposition of Georgia and Abkhazia in this paper is made for practical reasons and does not imply any judgment of the author regarding the status of Abkhazia under international law.

² As the spelling of places is contested, this paper adopts the compromise approach of Gal/i and Sukhum/i.

of external engagement is always difficult, and the findings of this study are certainly not absolute. Especially for answering the first research question, reliable quantitative data would be useful; unfortunately, hardly any is available. Nevertheless, given the careful selection of interviewed experts, qualitative data could provide useful insights into international engagement and human security in Abkhazia.

This study is academically as well as socially and politically relevant. Although its conclusions are based on insights regarding assistance provision in Abkhazia, they add to middle-range theory on the implementation of international assistance, particularly in the context of geopolitics. Moreover, this study can contribute to more informed policy-making regarding assistance in Abkhazia and other de facto states. According to Lehnert, Miller, and Wonka, research is socially relevant when people are already or potentially affected by the phenomenon under scrutiny, and when the phenomenon “makes a difference with regard to an evaluative standard; in other words, one possible outcome or state of a social phenomenon is better - or worse - than another” (Lehnert et al., 2011, p. 29). Due to the fragile nature of de facto states, it can be argued that international assistance is often crucial for human security on the ground. Moreover, according to Voller, “de facto states have become increasingly important for understanding regional geopolitics, and decisions taken in such states have implications far greater than their real size” (Voller, 2012, p. 290). Lastly, the rising powers’ increasing engagement in international assistance creates a necessity for exchange and/or cooperation between “old” and “new” donors, which necessitates more studies on situations where these come together (cf. Müller & Ziai, 2015, p. 13).

The paper at hand is structured as follows: firstly, I develop a theoretical framework, review existing literature, and reflect on the employed methodology. Secondly, I briefly summarize Abkhazia’s post-Soviet history and describe the current socio-political situation on the ground. Thirdly, I present my empirical findings with regard to international assistance in Abkhazia. Before concluding this paper, I fourthly provide implications for theory and policy that can be drawn from my study.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Definitions and Basic Concepts

As stated above, almost no state has recognized Abkhazia’s declaration of independence – except Russia. Thus, it remains a de facto state: a state that “receives no international recognition and has weak institutions, but where power is exercised and enforced. This state is constructed on the basis of power, not institutions”³ (Ottaway, 2002, p. 1003). The de facto state stands in contrast to the de jure state, which “enjoys international recognition and

³ Whether Abkhazia is a true de facto state can also be disputed. Does it actually wield its own power, or is it only able to survive because of the Russian support? Unfortunately it is beyond the framework of this paper to give a final answer to this question.

exercises control over people and territory through formal and strong, preferably democratic, institutions” (Ottaway, 2002, p. 1003). However, de facto states commonly strive for international recognition. As Hoch and Rudincova argue,

“there is a relatively substantial wall of isolation separating the lives of de facto states’ citizens from the rest of the world. And thus, it is no wonder that the vision of international recognition is one of the crucial issues for the foreign policy in de facto states, which is closely linked with their economic and social development.” (Hoch & Rudincova, 2015, p. 39).

The focus of this paper is the contribution of international actors to human security in Abkhazia. Human security refers to the protection,

“of all human lives in ways that enhance human freedoms and human . Human security means protecting fundamental freedoms – freedoms that are the essence of life. It means protecting people from critical (severe) and pervasive (widespread) threats and situations. It means using processes that build on people’s strengths and aspirations. It means creating political, social, environmental, economic, military and cultural systems that together give people the building blocks of survival, livelihood and dignity.” (CHS, 2003, p. 4, in United Nations, 2009, p. 5).

Human security thus highlights “the interface between security, development and human rights” and “entails a broadened understanding of threats and includes causes of insecurity relating for instance to economic, food, health, environmental, personal, community and political security” (United Nations, 2009, p. 6). It can be achieved by means of top-down protection measures through the state as well as by bottom-up empowerment (United Nations, 2009, p. 7).

Table I: Possible Types of Human Security Threats ³

Type of Security	Examples of Main Threats
Economic security	Persistent poverty, unemployment
Food security	Hunger, famine
Health security	Deadly infectious diseases, unsafe food, malnutrition, lack of access to basic health care
Environmental security	Environmental degradation, resource depletion, natural disasters, pollution
Personal security	Physical violence, crime, terrorism, domestic violence, child labor
Community security	Inter-ethnic, religious and other identity based tensions
Political security	Political repression, human rights abuses

Source: (United Nations, 2009, p. 6)

As Paris states, human security is a very broad concept, which might be desired by a coalition of “middle power’ states, development agencies, and NGOs—all of which seek to shift attention and resources away from conventional security issues and toward goals that have traditionally fallen

under the rubric of international development” (Paris, 2001, p. 88). Despite its breadth, the concept is still highly useful for an investigation of international assistance provided to Abkhazia, given that the latter is a small entity with a manageable number of assistance projects, which, however, differ widely according to the respective external actor involved.

In the context of state fragility and conflicts, human security is closely related to peace- and state-building. Peace-building is understood as “an endeavor aiming to create sustainable peace by addressing the “root causes” of violent conflict and eliciting indigenous capacities for peaceful management and resolution of conflict” (HPCR International, 2013). Statebuilding, in turn, can be defined as “purposeful action to develop the capacity, institutions and legitimacy of the state in relation to an effective political process for negotiating the mutual demands between state and societal groups” (OECD, 2008, p. 14).

The Foundations of International Assistance

Scholars have discussed a variety of motivations for international aid provision. Especially in political philosophy it is argued that foreign aid has moral foundations: “obligations of humanity”, which “rest on concern for the welfare of individuals, or on respect for them as moral agents, irrespective of their proximity, ethnicity, nationality or citizenship”; as well as “obligations of justice”, resting on the “rectification of past wrongs, or on the just distribution of global resources according to need or some other criterion” (Opeskin, 1996, p. 38). In contrast to these, Tamang develops four theoretical approaches that examine the motivations of donors more critically.

“The *power-political hypothesis* explains how aid is given to gain support from the recipients. Alternatively, the *political stability and democracy hypothesis* suggests how aid should be viewed within the context of human rights. The *development and performance hypothesis* explains how aid should be approached from the perspective of future prospects of development. Finally, the *strategic-defensive or Cold War hypothesis* explains how differences in the provision of aid reflect the competition between the West and the Soviet Union in asserting influences over Third World countries.” (Tamang, 2009, p. 45)

Almost all these approaches seem highly relevant for Abkhazia, where aid is provided in a particularly delicate political context.

Many scholars have discussed the geopolitical foundations of international assistance. As Voller argues, “ideas do not emerge in an empty void and are not just picked up by actors randomly. Rather, ideas are developed, contained and then conveyed by actors committed to such ideas.” (Voller, 2012, p. 52). He gives the example of Iraqi Kurdistan, where international engagement conveyed “international norms and practices of good statehood” (Voller, 2012, 241). Especially during the Cold War, the two dominant systems, liberal democracy and socialism, tried to reproduce themselves by means of

providing development assistance to other states (Milner & Tingley, 2013, p. 2). As Klingebiel outlines, West Germany even had the policy of terminating assistance for any state that started official relations with East Germany (Klingebiel, 2015). This prevented potentially useful development projects and prioritized foreign policy interests instead of humanitarian motives (Schmidt, 2015, p. 31 f.).

Many scholars seem to agree that the end of the Cold War also meant the end of the “friend or foe” principle in development assistance (Klingebiel, 2015, p. 17; Tamang, 2009). Nevertheless, according to Tamang, “development aid is politically motivated and often used as a tool to promote donor countries’ interests, and that it thus contradicts the humanitarian aspect of aid itself” (p.44). Often it is argued that aid and assistance are now based on security interests, implying that it is not the countries most in need which receive aid, and that some poorer countries are simply bypassed (Tamang, 2009, p. 46 f.).

General Issues of International Assistance

Independent of the foundations of assistance, providing aid is not an easy undertaking. Many articles have dealt with the (lack of) *effectiveness* or *impact* of aid provision. While many states signed the *Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness* (2005), it remains insufficiently implemented (Klingebiel, 2015). According to Tamang, “most often, donors fail to address the basic needs of the people that they intend to help” (Tamang, 2009, p. 51). Why is that? Often, it is claimed that foreign assistance does not achieve the desired effects because of a lack of local ownership, “widely understood as a division of labour where foreign donors offer resources and expertise for reconstruction while allowing ‘domestic actors [to] control both the design and implementation of political processes’ or assistance programs more generally (Donais, 2009, p. 3 in Krogstad, 2015, p. 106).

Ownership is related to several issues, for example, how responsive certain programs are to the situation on the ground, how much local actors are consulted or even participate in the programs, how international or local actors can be held accountable or controlled by the respective other, and whether local actors are sovereign, that is, whether they can decide to “demand the departure of international staff” (Chesterman, 2007, p. 9 f.). According to Ottaway, “what the international community considers best practice is not necessarily perceived by local actors as the answer to their problems” (Ottaway, 2002, p. 1005). Interestingly, in his investigation of British assistance in Sierra Leone, Krogstad found out that to a certain extent, nostalgia for colonial times played a role when Sierra Leoneans wholeheartedly welcomed British leadership of their police (Krogstad, 2015, p. 115). It will be interesting to examine whether a similar phenomenon can be detected in Abkhazia, with regard to the Russian/Soviet past.

Another common issue in development assistance is donor coordination, which involves “concerted action and deliberate harmonization in order to bring together the activities of various actors” (Hensell, 2015, p. 107 f.). As Hensell argues, “the principle of coordination has become an institutionalized rule or rationalized ‘myth’”, often mentioned in official statements or even institutionalized, but eventually, “political conflicts continue to impede coordination (Hensell, 2015). Thus, a typical and common practice is that the principle of coordination is adopted only ritually by organizations but remains decoupled from their actual everyday activities” (Hensell, 2015, p. 90 f.). A lack of coordination then leads to a variety of problems, such as policy incoherence, inefficiencies, and administrative burdens for the host countries (Hensell, 2015, p. 95). According to Rauch, there even is a “negative relationship between aid fragmentation and economic growth” (Rauch, 2015, p. 27). However, he also argues that there is a “shift away from local projects towards supporting national policies and programs”, which promises to increase the effectiveness of aid (Rauch, 2015, p. 38).

International Assistance in De Facto States

Naturally, assistance provision in unrecognized states is even more difficult than in “ordinary” circumstances; there are particular administrative as well as political problems for both donors as well as target states. As Hoch and Rudincova argue, de facto states often use democratization as a legitimization strategy, that is, to increase the likelihood of formal international recognition (Hoch & Rudincova, 2015, p. 39). Consequently, it seems that “international aid towards unrecognized states has been scarce, as international organisations have been reluctant to provide development support out of fear of being seen as defenders of separatism (Laoutides, 2014, p. 83). For example, Somaliland has been significantly inhibited from reaching out for foreign assistance, which limited its possibilities for socioeconomic development (Hoch & Rudincova, 2015, p. 43). Despite a necessity for assistance in de facto states, international actors are often reluctant to anger the “sovereign state on whose territory the de facto leadership operates” (Pegg, 1998, p. 8). In addition, while foreign direct investments have become an increasingly important external source of finance for developing countries (Betz, 2015, p. 26), this does not apply to de facto states, since investors are discouraged by a lack of legal certainty.

Nevertheless, there have been cases where the international community provided significant assistance, for example in Iraqi Kurdistan, where an increasing influx of aid “created a relatively stable environment that permitted economic recovery, rehabilitation, and institution-building” (Betz, 2015, p. 26). Despite, or maybe because of, the strengthening of the de facto authorities, international assistance “was a crucial factor for the alleviation of poverty and human suffering in this region, and solidification of regional stability, such that Iraqi Kurdistan became the safest and most prosperous autonomous region of Iraq” (Betz, 2015, p. 85). Moreover, given that Palestine is one of the largest per capita recipients of foreign aid, it seems that certain strategic goals like preventing terrorism and shaping political outcomes (peaceful coexistence of

Israel and Palestine) sometimes lead to an ignoring of formal international law (Zanotti, 2014). According to Laoutides, in the post-Cold War era it has been a general trend that “international aid progressively departed from a strict interpretation of state sovereignty and focused on protecting local populations based on human rights principles and demands for a post-conflict recovery (Laoutides, 2014, p. 83).

Another phenomenon that influences the provision of development aid is the emergence of new donors. As Milner and Tingley state, “many emerging market countries—such as Brazil, India and China—are now providing aid rather than receiving it” (Milner & Tingley, 2013, p. 5). This aid often provides an alternative to traditional “Western” aid, which usually comes with some kind of political conditionality, and thus potentially undermines the effectiveness of “Western” aid in contributing to democratic transformations. However, scholars are divided on the impact of “non-Western” aid. Müller and Ziai, for instance, argue that new donors are coined by a desire for horizontal cooperation, mutual exchange, and solidarity; and that they do not strive for a normative impact in the target countries (Müller & Ziai, 2015, p. 11).

Given their usually isolated position, the citizens of de facto states often depend on the support of a patron states, which “provide vital assistance for the survival of the unrecognized entity” (Laoutides, 2014, p. 73). For example, the latter provide support to residents of de facto states for engaging in international trade, and most of all, for travelling, which is not possible without internationally recognized passports. Relying on patron states, however, also bears dangers, as it can lead to “a nexus of dependence in which the patron state can determine to a large extent its relations with the unrecognized entity” (Laoutides, 2014, p. 75). Often, this dependence actually increases the vulnerability and fragility of de facto states (Laoutides, 2014, p. 85).

To recapitulate, this section has elaborated on the concepts and theories that are relevant for analyzing international engagement in Abkhazia. These mainly relate to the motivations for engaging in assistance provision and to causal mechanisms that impact on the effectiveness of aid provision (lack of ownership and coordination, political hesitations, the emergence of new donors, patron states etc.). While we can hypothesize that all these mechanisms might be at work in Abkhazia, and decrease the extent to which international engagement contributes to human security, this study does not merely want to engage in hypothesis testing. As Gerring argues,

“theoretical development could not occur, or would occur only very slowly and haltingly, if researchers kept their Popperian blinders on – limiting themselves to pre-formed hypotheses and yes/no empirical tests. A constructive methodology should enable researchers to think about problems in new ways; it should not focus narrowly and obsessively on testing.” (Gerring, 2012, p. 33)

Methodology

As mentioned in the introduction, this paper examines both the impact of international engagement on human security in Abkhazia and the issues and difficulties of this engagement. Thus, it will take into account factors which make international engagement challenging or even less effective. Two kinds of inferences will be made: first, descriptive inference, since I, to a certain extent, generalize from my observations to the case as a whole, and second, causal inference, since I make statements on the factors that impact on international assistance provision in Abkhazia although these factors can, of course, technically not be observed.

The analysis of this study is based on data collected during 16 semi-structured interviews that took place in June/July 2015: nine in Sukhum/i, two in Gal/i, and five in Tbilisi. The interviews were conducted with local and international NGO professionals, active members of civil society, journalists, and national and international officials. Unfortunately, no Russians were available for interviews. Insights on the Russian engagement are thus based on the assessment of Abkhazians and other experts and thus have to be treated with particular caution. While the questions asked were based on assumptions from theoretical insights and previous research, the interviews were sufficiently open for the interviewees to speak about issues they considered more relevant, which they did. As international engagement in Abkhazia is highly contentious and delicate, most notably in Abkhazia and Georgia, the interviews had to be anonymized.

Human Security in Abkhazia

Historical Context

Before analyzing the state of human security in different respects, such as political, socio-economic, and regarding minority rights, a brief historical overview since the end of the Georgian-Abkhazian war in 1993 seems in order. To begin with, it needs to be mentioned that there is a very strong narrative of a legitimate Abkhaz national struggle for independence within Abkhazian society. For instance, according to Inal-Ipa, “uniquely, among the entities that made up the Soviet Union, Abkhazia struggled for many years under authoritarian conditions to leave the Georgian SSR and raise its political status from that of an autonomous republic” (Inal-Ipa, 2013, p. 7). According to Akaba and Khintba, two other Abkhaz experts,

“international mediators have failed to understand why the Abkhaz rejected the possibility of remaining part of the Georgian state. The answer is simple: their entire historical experience has convinced them that they face inevitable cultural and linguistic assimilation under Georgian jurisdiction...every time Georgia has acquired national independence or relative freedom of manoeuvre, its policies towards the Abkhaz (and South

Ossetians) has immediately turned to aggression or demographic expansion. This happened in 1918-21, at the end of the 1930s and at the beginning of the 1990s.” (Akaba & Khintba, 2011, p. 15).

While many interviewees stated that Georgians and Abkhazians have “much to unite” them, they complained about having never been recognized as equals (e.g. interview 2). Importantly, however, most Georgian observers would portray the situation very differently. It is not the aim of this paper to make any claim regarding the recognition of Abkhazia as an independent state.

The current situation of rather stable de facto independence from Georgia was created during the Georgian-Abkhazian War in 1993 and the Georgian-Russian War in 2008. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Georgia fell into war. With the help of unofficial Russian fighters from the North Caucasus, Abkhazia and South Ossetia won and became de facto independent; a ceasefire agreement foreseeing Russian peacekeeping under a Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) mandate and United Nations (UN) monitoring (UN Observer Mission to Georgia – UNOMIG) was brokered (Popescu, 2006b, p. 3). According to the Abkhaz scholars Akaba and Khintba, Georgians usually view the war “as orchestrated by the ‘long arm’ of Moscow, provoking the Georgian-Abkhaz war in order to keep Tbilisi in its sphere of influence, while the Abkhaz unanimously view the same tragic events as a culmination of the[ir] national liberation struggle” (Akaba & Khintba, 2011, p. 5).

As interviewees 7 and 13 said, during the 1990s, Abkhazia was very much destroyed and underdeveloped, and Abkhaz children had “absolutely nothing”. In addition to the loss of human lives on both sides, according to Inal-Ipa, the war led to a destruction of infrastructure, a rise in criminal armed gangs, unauthorised seizures of the property left behind by Georgian refugees and members of other ethnic groups, the unlawful privatisation of state and commercial facilities, and a psychologically traumatised population (Inal-Ipa, 2013, p. 7). In 1996, after Abkhazia officially declared independence, an economic embargo was imposed by the Commonwealth of Independent States, which further increased economic difficulties (Wolff, n.d.). In addition, the security situation was “extremely poor – due to both the danger of a renewed outbreak of fighting and the existence of a [domestic] security vacuum” (German, 2012, p. 1658).

In the early 2000s, Russian engagement in Abkhazia became more assertive. According to Popescu, this can be ascribed to the relative stabilization of the Northern Caucasus, implying that Russia no longer had to fear “supporting secessionism in other states” (Popescu, 2006b, p. 6). Russia no longer enforced the embargo (Wolff, n.d.) and started to refer to the Abkhaz and South Ossetian leaders as “presidents” (Popescu, 2006b, p. 7f.). Russia also handed out Russian passports to most residents of the breakaway republics, according to Popescu in order to “secure a legitimate right ... to claim to represent the interests of the secessionist entities because they consist of Russian citizens” and to thereby create “a political and even legal basis for intervention” (Popescu, 2006b, p. 7f.).

As some observers claim, the eventual outbreak of the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia are, however, not only to be sought in Russia's provocations, but also in Georgia's "penchant for overplaying its hand and acting in the heat of the moment without careful consideration" (Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, 2009, p. 31). Neither the Georgian attack on the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali during the night of 7/8 August 2008, nor the use of force against official Russian peacekeepers were justifiable under international law (Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, 2009, p. 22 f.). Nevertheless, the Fact Finding Mission also judged that, while Russia's self-defense was in principle justified, "much of the Russian military action went far beyond the reasonable limits of defense" (Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, 2009, p. 23). After five days of fighting, on August 12, 2008, the then Russian President Medvedev and the then French President Sarkozy developed the Six-Point-Plan to solve the conflicts between Georgia, Russia, Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Amongst others, the plan laid down the desire to begin "international discussions on the future status of South Ossetia and Abkhazia and on ways to ensure their security" (RIA Novosti, 2008) which led to the establishment of the Geneva Talks between the OSCE, UN and the EU (co-chairs), Russia, Georgia, Abkhazia, South Ossetia and the US (RIA Novosti, 2008). Russian troops withdrew from most parts of Georgian territory – except Abkhazia and South Ossetia. On August 26, 2008 Russia officially recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states.

Abkhaz-Georgian Relations and Personal Security

As the Abkhaz and South Ossetian de facto independence are now guarded by a large Russian military presence, most Georgians call these regions 'occupied territories' and conclude that they are "only an obedient executor of Russia's will" (Akaba & Khintba, 2011, p. 12). However, the fact that the Abkhaz desire for independence is heavily supported by Russia does not imply the conflict would be solved if Russia withdrew from the territory, as the strong narrative of an Abkhaz nation, outlined briefly above, already hints at. According to interviewee 13, the Abkhaz people

"don't want to live neither with Georgia, nor with Russia, we want to live in Abkhazia, which should be an independent state. This is the opinion of the majority. Of course there are some people who think that we're small, weak, we have to unite with Russia...people are different. But the majority of Abkhaz is for independence."

After the 2008 war, the "Geneva Talks" were launched, with the aim of making Georgia, Abkhazia, and Russia come together and negotiate an agreement on the non-use of force, as well as discuss practical issues related to the situation on the ground. According to UN Representative Antti Turunen, "the major achievement of the Discussions so far has been the 2009 agreement on the establishment of two Joint Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms" which provides for enhanced exchange between the security officers of all

parties (Turunen, 2011). However, as one interviewee (4) said, the Geneva process is “more or less going nowhere”, even though certain humanitarian issues have been discussed. A constant deadlock is created by the fact that Russia claims not to be part of the conflict, while Georgia does not recognize Abkhazia as an official participant of the talks, which makes it unclear who should negotiate with whom and over what.

In 2008 and 2009, Georgia passed the *Law* and the *State Strategy on Occupied Territories*. The Law’s main effect is that entering Abkhazia from its border with Russia, which is not controlled by Georgia, is legally punishable. However, it also specifies that any economic activity in Abkhazia is illegal “unless it is authorized within the Georgian legal system” (Akaba & Khintba, 2011, p. 33). The State Strategy, in turn, even according to Abkhaz observers “contains a series of ostensibly sensible ideas: de-isolation of Abkhaz citizens, their involvement in economic cooperation programmes, opening up of education opportunities, and commitment to the peaceful resolution of the conflicts” (Akaba & Khintba, 2011, p. 33 f.); however, their implementation is somewhat problematic, as will be shown below. Moreover, the question is, whether the concrete ideas are actually interesting for the Abkhaz side, which argues that “interaction could only take place where the format, scale and conditions exclude any threat to Abkhazia’s military and political security. In this sense, economic incentives are of limited value in persuading Abkhazia to make compromises over its political status” (Kvarchelia, 2011, p. 32). Thus far, there is no progress on Abkhazia’s formal status. As interviewee 16 stated, there is no “end of history” – every conflict can potentially be solved at some point, but it can also always get worse.

The Domestic Political Situation & Political Security

As the United Nations states, “everyone has the right to human security” – which is, arguably, valid independently of the formal statuses of the place of residence (United Nations, 2012, p. 4). As mentioned above, one aspect of human security is political security, that is, the absence of political repression and human rights abuses. Thus, the following section will elaborate on the domestic political situation in Abkhazia. Kolstø and Blakkisrud called Abkhazia a “reasonably smoothly” functioning democracy with good freedom of the press and a fairly developed civil society (Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2012, p. 500).

At the same time, many Abkhazians are themselves critical of domestic political conditions. For example, Inal-Ipa argues that Abkhazia’s transition to democracy was subordinated to creating and preserving independence, and bare survival in the context and aftermath of the Georgian-Abkhaz war (Inal-Ipa, 2013, p. 7). As she claims, “in many respects, the development of an independent Abkhazia is directed by the threat from Georgia and problems of the past rather than its own forward-looking agenda based on careful consideration and analysis of present-day needs and challenges” (Inal-Ipa, 2013, p. 8). While there are (de facto) state institutions and laws, reform capacity is limited due the inexperience and lack of training of the local

authorities and a lack of resources (interview 9). This makes Abkhazia suffer from diverse political problems, such as the predominance of the executive over the legislative, excessive centralization, an ineffectiveness of the judicial system, and societal fragmentation along ethnic lines (Inal-Ipa, 2013, p. 11). Despite a certain degree of political order where “laws are approved and amended, and new state and civic institutions are created and expanded, the “complex interaction between the authorities and the public that has at times descended into a domestic political crisis” (Inal-Ipa, 2013, p. 9).

In 2014, such a political crisis evolved - called a “mini coup” by one interviewee (7), during which former President Ankvab was forced to resign. Previously, he had been criticized for a “high-handed and secretive leadership style” and the “lack of a clear-cut programme of economic development” (Fuller, 2015a). The elections that followed happened in a “very tense” political atmosphere (interview 2) and made Raul Khajimba President. Interestingly, the whole coup was accompanied by negotiations for a new Abkhaz-Russian Treaty, as will be discussed below.

Regarding general changes in governance after the change in power, it has been argued that a “genuine mechanism of checks and balances between the legislature and the executive branches” has still not been created, and events have shown that “Abkhaz politics has been dominated for the past two decades by individuals and their personal ambitions” (Fuller, 2015a). In a recent survey, 53% of the Abkhazian population regard corruption problems as very or rather big (Bakke et al., 2014, p. 606). There are also issues regarding press freedom, and critical journalists are at times intimidated; however, they still publish oppositional articles, “which the authorities do not always like” (interview 8).

As already mentioned briefly, Abkhaz civil society is rather strong given the small size of the territory. As interviewee 15 stated, “there are a lot of NGOs in Abkhazia, but they all have financial problems, because there are almost no international organizations”. However, “a lot” is, apparently, a matter of perception, and according to interviewee 3, “there are *several* good local NGOs but there are *not many*, and they are certainly struggling with lack of capacities” [emphasis added]. Most of the local NGOs seem to have emerged right after the Georgian-Abkhaz war in order to work with traumatized children, support civic education, provide legal assistance to particularly vulnerable residents, contribute to the empowerment of women, give policy advice and so on and so forth. As interviewee 2 described the emergence of her organization:

“we conducted trainings for women, helped them to better understand the role of women in society; we have a traditional society and patriarchal structures are rather strong. So we wanted women to believe in themselves. For example, when you ask a woman if a woman could become president, she would say “women are not ready for that yet”. And when I then ask: “do you think that our men who become presidents, that they are ready?”, they start thinking. Our women just lack self-confidence. And we wanted to increase it.”

Interestingly, in 2007 a civic chamber was founded, which is composed out of 35 NGO members and business representatives from all of Abkhazia. Its main functions are to initiate discussions and to pass declarations on pressing political issues; it is supposed to be politically neutral and represent the interests of society. It has only consultative powers, but convenes frequently and does seem to be an important player at times. For instance, according to interviewee 2, it played a role in ensuring that the change in power in 2014 occurred peacefully.

The Abkhaz population is small and most people active in civil society know each other, and organizations seem to collaborate well (interviewee 13). Interviewee 5 mentioned that he was “definitely...very impressed by working with our colleagues in Abkhazia. There are some very active people there who are very respected, have a long history of being active, have built very good relations with the government and other actors...so it’s not the case that this is a marginalized group, they’re very much part of society”.

However, the political environment in which civil society operates seems to have become tenser recently. According to interviewee 1, there were cases of pressuring of Abkhazian participants in Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue programs. As interviewee 2 stated, one problem of Abkhaz civil society is the lack of outreach and good communication; “we don’t have good websites, nothing. They think we just go to London, Paris etc. all the time but that is not true, we work for the people here in Abkhazia”. Interviewee 12 stated that the de facto government was grateful for the work of NGOs as long as they did not interfere with politics; however, as soon as they did, they were harassed by “people judging everything in black and white...they portrayed us as pro-European, which would be equal to being pro-Georgian”. According to her, this is due to three reasons: Abkhazia “lagging behind in many processes”, such as usage of the internet; isolation; and the lack of significant engagement for many years. There are also concerns that the tightening of state control of civil society in Russia might spill over to Abkhazia, as will be discussed below.

The Socio-Economic Situation and Economic Security

Other threats to human security are grounded in the socio-economic situation of Abkhazia. In a representative survey, 56.9% of Abkhazian citizens conceive the lack of economic development and unemployment a “very big” problem, 27.9% as “rather big” (Bakke et al., 2014, p. 606). According to Ardzinba, Abkhazia suffers from

“...an unattractive investment climate; a poor legal culture; low levels of research and innovation; the insignificant role of the human factor in the economy; an underdeveloped financial system; a divergence in incomes across society; geographical disparities in economic development; significant market concentration; and negligible domestic demand. Of course, this list is not exhaustive.” (Ardzinba, 2011, p. 48)

Mainly due to its status as a popular destination for Russian tourists, Abkhazia is a net exporter of services (Ardzinba, 2011, p. 51). However, in terms of commodities it is (increasingly) dependent on external supplies (Ardzinba, 2011, p. 51). According to an Abkhaz parliamentarian, in 2008 “that approximately 40% of the population are living on incomes beneath the official subsistence level p.494” (Kolstø & Blakkisrud, 2008, p. 494). As interviewee 7 summarized, “Abkhazia is small, there are almost no local companies, agriculture lies fallow...the territory is small, they don’t have many specialists, and among these, many leave for Russia or further away; the little money they earn comes from tourism...the biggest employer is the state, and one hand washes the other”. Apparently, unemployment stands at close to 70% (Fuller, 2015c). According to interviewee 9, the bad state of the economy can be attributed to governance failures:

“they had renovated a big milk processing factory which has not worked a single day and stands there unused; they wanted to create big bread companies but they were not needed because there is enough providers and competition in the bread market; then they still constructed one and no one bought the bread, so they concluded an agreement with the Russian soldier base who then started buying the bread. But after two months said they couldn’t buy it any longer because the quality was so bad.”

Nevertheless, in line with what interviewees 7 and 4 claimed, drastic changes are not possible due to the international status of Abkhazia, which prevents investments. While Abkhazia has some trade relations with Turkey – “only because Georgia closes its eyes on that, although there were some incidents” (interviewee 4) – its main trading partner is, by far, Russia.

Another big problem with regard to human security is public health provision, evaluated as a “very big” problem by 46.2% of the Abkhaz and as a “rather big” problem by 27.9% (Bakke et al., 2014, p. 606). The socio-economic situation of women is particularly difficult, which is little surprising, given that only 1 out of 35 deputies in the Abkhaz parliament is a woman (interviewee 2). According to interviewee 2,

“a lot of the problems in Abkhazia are related to the fact that women don’t have a voice in decision-making; among ministers there are women, but I would not say that they are gender-aware; they behave according to male rules; because they were appointed by men, and they do what men tell them to do – that is the situation.”

Nevertheless, in order to put the situation into perspective; as interviewee 3 stated, “there is a lot of poverty...but people are kind of making their lives somehow. Compared to some other conflicts and poverty with no access to food or water, Abkhazia is of course better off.”

Multiethnic Society and Minority Rights

A further threat to human security in Abkhazia is the discrimination of non-Abkhaz residents. Abkhazia has an extremely diverse population. According to the 2011 census, it has 240,705 inhabitants out of which only approximately just over 50% are Abkhaz, roughly 18% each are Georgian and Armenian, and almost 10% are Russian (Akaba, 2011, p. 19). However, the present ethnic balance is a result of the 1992-1993 Georgian-Abkhaz War, during which approximately 200,000 ethnic Georgians were displaced to Georgian-controlled territory. A major problem in Abkhazia relates to the question of how to deal with IDP property (Zhemukhov, 2012). The UN General Assembly recognized the rights of the IDPs to return to their homes in Abkhazia many times (United Nations in Georgia, 2013). However, it seems that not many steps have been taken. According to interviewee 2, the different ethnic groups in society are isolated from each other, and there is almost no communication between them. Some IDPs returned, mainly to the Gal/i area bordering Georgia-controlled territory, but their status is still undetermined. While many of them had received Abkhaz passports initially, their Abkhaz citizenship was taken away recently, allegedly for constitutional issues. According to Conciliation Resources, Gal/i residents feel they're in a state of "legal vacuum" (Conciliation Resources, 2014, p. 11).

In addition to not being granted Abkhaz passports and thus not being able to participate in political life, they often do not enjoy legal equality before the law, while "ethnic Abkhazians, who tend to have the strongest networks and personal links with the ruling elite... appear to enjoy privileged treatment" (Conciliation Resources, 2014, p. 6). Moreover, the de facto government is increasingly trying to ensure the use of the Abkhaz language in public and political life, although knowledge of Abkhazian is very limited among the 50% non-Abkhaz residents of the territory. Gal/i residents were also disproportionately affected by crime and robbery, but the situation seems to have improved during the last years (interviewee 5). A further problem for Gal/i residents is that many of them have to cross the administrative boundary line frequently to visit relatives or attend Georgian-language schooling, but they are under the constant fear that this could be prohibited at any moment (interviewee 10). According to interviewee 10, Gal/i residents lack any kind of protection, because the de facto government does not have the power to protect them, Russian officials do not care, and the Georgian officials have no access. This vacuum impacts heavily on the quality of life, most notably the education and health, of Gal/i residents. In any case, it is clear that for the majority of ethnic Georgians that were displaced after the war and are still living as refugees on Georgia-controlled territory, human security in their "home" is nothing they can even think of.

International Assistance in Abkhazia

Although comparable numbers are not available for Abkhazia, in order to put assistance in the de facto state into perspective it seems useful to briefly look at official development assistance (ODA) per capita (in USD) in Georgia. Some of the non-Russian assistance, which is used for projects in Abkhazia, is counted as part of the ODA that flows to Georgia. Georgia is ranked among the countries with the highest ODA per capita and receives the largest amount in all of the post-Soviet states. Between 2010 and 2013, ODA ranged between 131 (2011) and 147 (2012) USD per capita (The World Bank Group, 2015). In comparison, in 2013, Afghanistan received 172, Armenia 98, and Tunisia 66 USD per capita. This is understood well in Abkhazia and to some extent begrudged; as interviewee 14 said: “life in Tbilisi is changing for the better, not because of internal resources but because of international assistance”.

Russian Assistance

Nonetheless, while official ODA amounts to Abkhazia might be lower, it is clear that assistance to Abkhazia differs from that to Georgia proper in a highly important regard: the role of Russia. According to Chirikba, in 2014, 84 intergovernmental agreements were in place between Russia and Abkhazia, and another 20 were in the pipeline (Chirikba, 2014). Russia has a significant impact on the personal, political, and economic security of the Abkhazians, as will be discussed in the following sections.

Abkhaz-Georgian Relations and Personal Security

In a representative survey conducted in Abkhazia, 55% of respondents stated a menace of renewed war with Georgia poses no problem at all at all, while 24% stated it is not a big problem (Bakke et al., 2014, p. 607). Given that not even ten years have passed since the 2008 war, this is highly significant. A rather straightforward perspective on this issue was given by interviewee 2 in Sukhum/i, describing the situation in this way:

“we asked women in Abkhazia what their biggest concerns are, which problems they have, fears etc; and it turns out it is not war, but problems with the health system, education, road safety; but that’s not because we became friends with the Georgians again, unfortunately not, but because there is a Russian military base on Abkhaz territory and we feel defended better.”

Immediately after the end of the Georgian-Russian War, Foreign Minister Lavrov declared Russia’s aim to provide security guarantees to Abkhazia and to provide it with aid, “in accordance with article 51 of the UN Charter” (Solovyev, 2008)⁴. The Agreement on Friendship, Cooperation and Mutual Assistance

⁴ Whether the Russian security guarantee is in line with Article 51 of the UN Charter is highly questionable,

between Russia and Abkhazia, signed on September 17, 2008, states that Russia and Abkhazia want to contribute to world peace, safety and stability in the Caucasus - in accordance with UN provisions (President of Russia, 2008). The Agreement on Strategic Partnership, ratified in January 2015,

“calls for the ‘coordination of foreign policy’ and ‘creation of a common defence and security space. It also provides for ‘the creation of a united force of the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation and the Armed Forces of the Republic of Abkhazia.’” (Tekushev, 2015)

Russia and Abkhazia have also been negotiating an agreement for a joint Abkhaz–Russian Information and Coordination Centre “for sharing information between Russia’s and Abkhazia’s Ministries of Internal Affairs and for establishing a joint command over Russian and Abkhazian military forces patrolling borders and territorial boundaries” (Cagara, 2015). Russia has been active with regards to personal security in Abkhazia in two ways: in the official peace negotiations and by providing military and border management assistance.

Peace Negotiations and the Geneva Talks

The Non-Use of Force

The principle of non-use of force has been one of the issues that sparked most controversies during the Talks. While it had already been included in the Six-Point-Plan, President Medvedev on August 14, 2008 called “for a legally binding treaty abjuring the use of force, to be signed by all parties and whose implementation will be guaranteed by Russia, the EU and the OSCE” (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2008a). In August 2010, the then Georgian President Saakashvili declared in front of the European Parliament that “Georgia will never use force to restore its territorial integrity” (European Parliament, 2010). This position was confirmed by the Georgian Parliament in 2013 (Civil.ge, 2013a). As a response to Georgia’s concession, the Presidents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia on December 6, 2010 equally declared that they “would not use force or threat of force against Georgia in accordance with the norms of international law” (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2010). Russia, on the other hand, has not been willing to make any declarations regarding the non-use of force, declaring that “it is not a party to the conflict”, and is instead calling for binding treaties between Tbilisi and the breakaway territories, which has frequently blocked progress during the Geneva Talks (Civil.ge, 2013b).

however. The Article provides the following: “Nothing in the present Charter shall impair the inherent right of individual or collective self-defense if an armed attack occurs against a Member of the United Nations, until the Security Council has taken measures necessary to maintain international peace and security” (United Nations, (n.d.). Since Abkhazia is neither a member of the UN, nor a part of Russia, it is doubtful that Article 51 can be invoked.

International Monitoring

The issue of international monitoring has been another stumbling block. In 2008, the OSCE and CIS missions, which had been in Georgia for 16, and 14 years respectively, were terminated. The UN peacekeepers (UNOMIG), which had been stationed in Georgia since 1993, closed their mission in 2009. In September 2008, based on the Six-Point-Plan, the EU sent a monitoring mission (EUMM), which is still present on the ground. However, the fact that it is not admitted to Abkhazia and South Ossetia clearly limits its powers significantly (European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia, 2014b).

Allegedly, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) was “sincerely interested in seeing UN observers continue their work there” (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2009a). According to Lavrov, the OSCE and UNOMIG missions “were wound up this past summer because of the politicized approach to continuation of their activities in Transcaucasia by a number of Western countries” (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2009b). However, Russia would only have agreed to a UN mission on conditions “acceptable to Sukhum” (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2008d). In fact, the Russian side did not agree to any arrangement which sustained Georgia’s claims towards territorial integrity (Peuch, 2009). Arguably, it can be argued that Russia, by making the peacebuilding missions conditional, tried to coerce other states into recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; or that Russia actually intended a discontinuation of the missions and thus “deliberately sought to dismantle existing conflict resolution mechanisms in the region, refusing to back a continuation of either the OSCE or UNOMIG missions, despite this contravening the terms of the Sarkozy-Medvedev six-point peace plan” (German, 2012, p. 1659).

Military Assistance and Border Management

Already before the 2008 war, Russia had enjoyed a heavy troop presence of 3000 soldiers in Abkhazia, albeit under a CIS peacekeeping mandate (Lavrov, 2010). After the war, Russian military presence was “greatly enhanced” (International Crisis Group, 2013). While the general Agreement on Friendship already provided for Russian security guarantees, another agreement stipulated that Russia and Abkhazia grant each other “the right to build, use and improve military infrastructure and military facilities on its territory” (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2008b). While Western and Georgian representatives claim that the Russian presence on the ground violates Georgian territorial integrity and the Six-Point-Plan, Russia argues that it merely fulfills the tasks that Abkhazia, “an independent country”, delegated to it under bilateral agreements (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2009c, 2013a; Turunen, 2011). Official statements indicate that the number of troops has risen by ‘only’ 500, but analyst Anton Lavrov proclaims that the combat capabilities of the Russian troops in the region “have increased dramatically ... due to the deployment of a large number of heavy weapons which the peacekeeping mandate did not allow” (Lavrov, 2010).

Regarding military infrastructure, Abkhazia has agreed to provide Russia with land for the establishment of military bases free of charge – with a duration of 49 years (Lavrov, 2010). Russia also maintains an extensive and heavily armed naval presence on the coast (Lavrov, 2010). According to the International Crisis Group, there are estimations that “the Russian military infrastructure in Abkhazia could support up to 10,000 troops” (International Crisis Group, 2013, p. 3). Moreover, Russia took over the responsibility for the protection of the Abkhaz-Georgian ‘Administrative Boundary Line’, which is now guarded by 1500 Federal Security Service (FSB) officers (International Crisis Group, 2013; German, 2012). Russian officials continue setting up additional “fences and other obstacles” along the ABL, a process often termed “borderization”; which has a negative impact on the daily lives of Georgians, Abkhazians and South Ossetians (NATO, 2013).

Obviously, the Georgian government is extremely critical towards the Russian military engagement in Abkhazia. Interviewee 11 in Tbilisi stated that “we call it an occupation because there is full control and the FSB is standing there without the consent of Georgians...from military standpoint the Russian federation is exercising effective control over the Abkhaz territory”. According to the International Crisis Group, “there are clear signs Moscow plans to stay in Abkhazia indefinitely” (International Crisis Group, 2013, p. 4). As Liana Kvarchelia states,

“relations between Abkhazia and Russia are based on formal legal equivalence but are in practice asymmetrical. This asymmetry results not just from the disparities in the economic and political weight of the two parties, but also from the fact that Abkhazia has no viable alternative to these relations given the lack of widespread international recognition.” (Kvarchelia, 2011, p. 34).

Nevertheless, the de facto government constantly reminds its citizens that Abkhazia is an independent state and that no powerful political actors would support a formalization of Russian control over Abkhazia (Khintba, 2014).

According to the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia, although the conflict is not solved, a resumption of hostilities is unlikely (European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia, 2014a). Probably, it is no exaggeration that “the Georgian leadership understands that an attempt to carry out even a limited military operation against Abkhazia or South Ossetia may trigger a full-scale and very quick response from the Russian troops stationed in the republics” (Lavrov, 2010). In that respect, cynically as it seems, the heavy Russian military presence has indeed contributed to human security in Abkhazia. As Georgian interviewee 1 stated,

“If one day Russia leaves I’m not sure that Georgia won’t go in there...you know, some militia groups might start some really bad things. I’m not sure. So now the status quo is kind of good on the security side. For Abkhazians especially, of course.”

The Domestic Political Situation & Political Security

As briefly stated above, relations with Russia have highly impacted on the domestic political situation and also the political security of the Abkhaz. The first draft of the Abkhaz-Russian Treaty that was eventually signed in November 2014 was entitled “On Union Relations and *Integration*”, which “triggered outraged protest in Sukhum, where politicians across the political spectrum saw it as a threat to Abkhaz independence” (Fuller, 2015a). According to Tekushev there was “continuous government pressure on activists and bloggers who opposed the ratification of the agreement” (Tekushev, 2015). In the end, a slightly less intrusive version of the Treaty, eventually called “Strategic Partnership”, was signed. According to interviewee 2, “it is possible that already under former president Ankvab Russia pushed for the signing of a new agreement, but apparently he said it is not necessary because we already have the old agreement, and its possible that this affected his destiny”.

Nobody can accurately forecast the difference the Treaty will make to Russian-Abkhaz relations, which were already very deep before its conclusion. As interviewee 7 said, even though nobody would admit it, the Treaty will give the Russians the opportunity to “slowly creep in, we will see that in 4, 5, 6 years, not blow on blow, otherwise the Abkhaz would protest; the Russians are trying very hard not to catch negative attention”. According to Georgian interviewee 11, the Treaty will nevertheless “prepare Abkhazia for annexation” even though it will be informal, because “if you have full de facto control you don’t need formal annexation”.

The Abkhaz civil society has felt increasing pressure during recent years, and interviewee 2 claimed “there are tendencies in our society that are very skeptical of NGO work. They think that if in Russia they are restricting NGO work and international engagement then there must be some reason to it”. In the view of Inal-Ipa, “Civil society is becoming fragmented – as reflected, for example, by the marginalisation in public discourse of local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) that cooperate with foreign organisations” (Inal-Ipa, 2013, p. 11). Inal-Ipa stated in 2013 that “Abkhazia does not have the level of state intervention in the activities of civil society, or the excessive regulation of the activities of civil society organisations that occurs for example in Russia” (Inal-Ipa, 2013, p. 12). Nevertheless, many civil society activists seem afraid that the restrictive NGO legislation in Russia will spill over to Abkhazia (interviewee 2). One interviewee also mentioned the new large office of Sputnik Abkhazia, a Russian state-controlled news outlet, which “could play a big role in public opinion formation in cases of disagreement between Russia and Abkhazia”.

The Socio-Economic Situation and Economic Security

Financial Assistance

A third sphere in which Russia is heavily engaged relates to the socio-economic situation in Abkhazia. According to interview 8, even during the embargo, Russia provided humanitarian assistance. While official economic relations were not possible, particular Russian businessmen and enterprises invested and conducted business in Abkhazia (interviewee 8). In March 2008, Russia decided to leave the CIS embargo (Closson, 2010, p. 193). Already since 2005 there has been budgetary assistance from Russia (interviewee 8). Immediately after the 2008 War, Foreign Minister Lavrov stated that “big work is provided in the economic area...ensuring the normal functioning” of the Abkhaz economy and “raising the living standards of the population” (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2008c). In an official comment, the Russian MFA underlined that “the priority line of the co-operation is recovery and development of [the] economy and social sphere of the young state, [the] creation of preconditions for self-reliance” (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2012).

According to interviewee 8, “the amount of Russian financial assistance is not a secret, it’s publicly available”. However, numbers vary and it is hard to understand which programs are subsumed under the budgetary assistance and which are additional. In 2009, Russia announced that from 2010-2012 it would make 10.9 billion RUB available to support Abkhazia’s socioeconomic development (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2009b). As Fuller (2015a) states, on the day the recent Abkhaz-Russian Treaty was signed, Putin announced that “Russia will make available to Abkhazia in 2015 5 billion rubles (\$111.5 million) to cover the cost of implementation of the treaty’s provisions, in addition to the 4 billion rubles already envisaged under a new investment program for 2015-2017”. In another article, she states that

“Russia has allocated a total of 9 billion rubles (about \$180 million) over the three-year period 2015-17, of which Abkhazia will receive 3.6 billion rubles this year. That represents a 50 percent increase over 2014 and is more than Abkhazia’s total budget of a little over 3 billion rubles. Those funds are reportedly ring-fenced and will not be cut even in the event that the Russian budget is sequestered by 10 percent.” (Fuller, 2015b).

Numerous joint institutions have been created since 2008, such as the Russian-Abkhaz intergovernmental commissions on trade and economic cooperation and the Russian-Abkhaz business forum (interview 8). Furthermore, the Russian state-owned Vnesheconombank and the Abkhaz Universal-bank entered an agreement, intending to “work out programs of trade financing, for the most part, pre-export financing to expand trade and economic cooperation between Russia and Abkhazia” (Vnesheconombank, 2010). Abkhazia also received a loan of 7 mln RUB to develop its banking system, which evolved into the resources of the Abkhaz National Bank and technically has to be paid back (interviewee 8). Russia and Abkhazia also ratified a free trade agreement (Snytkova, 2013).

Surprisingly, some observers have claimed that until July of 2015 no “massive money” had been transferred from Russia for the same year (interviewee 6). Interviewee 5 claimed that “more specific documents need to be signed to complement the Russian-Abkhaz treaty; and some of the funding might be conditional on signing, but I don’t know if that’s an official policy”. Apparently, the Abkhazian side expected more assistance than was eventually delivered (interviewee 3). It is, however, obvious that the largest part of the Abkhaz budget is based on Russian financial assistance; according to the International Crisis Group, at least 70% (International Crisis Group, 2013, p. 6; cf. interviewee 9).

Implementation of the Financial Assistance

According to Irakli Khintba, an Abkhaz expert who later became the Deputy Foreign Minister of the de facto state, “with intense financial support from Moscow...and deepening economic ties with the Russian market, Abkhazia has a chance to be reborn...the roads have been rebuilt and the buildings renovated all over Abkhazia” (Khintba, 2010). Since 2012, the Russian assistance has been implemented under the so-called “Complex Plan” (interview 8). According to interviewee 8, “the biggest part of Russian assistance went to the social sphere and infrastructure”. As Russia before the war provided many Abkhazians with Russian citizenship, approximately 30,000 of them became entitled to receive Russian pensions, making up another two billion RUB in indirect assistance (International Crisis Group, 2013; Nemtsova, 2014). Russian financial assistance was also used to build and renovate the philharmonic hall, the Abkhaz and Russian Theatres, schools, kindergartens, and the Republican Library (interviews 5, 6, 15). According to Lomsadze, over 25 million USD of the promised Russian assistance will be invested in the resort town of Gagra (Lomsadze, 2015). Seemingly, Russia would have liked to invest more in tourism infrastructure before, but faced “legal obstacles and public discontent” as it was seemingly looking for business opportunities for its citizens and not so much to support Abkhaz economic development (International Crisis Group, 2013, p. i).

Apparently, there is now a program for the development of small and medium businesses, but as of mid-2015 it had not been implemented yet (interviewees 8 & 4). According to several interviewees, the Russian authorities do not directly support any local non-governmental projects or organizations (interviewees 2, 3, 5, 13). Nonetheless, the International Crisis Group reports that “many residents of Abkhazia say living standards have risen as Russian money has come in” (International Crisis Group, 2013, p. 7). Well-known Caucasus observer Thomas De Waal found Abkhazia looking “tidy” with newly repaired roads and construction work going on everywhere, and packed with Russian tourists (de Waal, 2013).

Passportization

As already mentioned, Russia engaged in a process often called “passportization”, that is, it equipped many Abkhazians with Russian passports – while the exact number is not clear, interviewee 15 mentioned that “all Abkhaz have double Russian-Abkhaz citizenship”. Apparently, it had previously been discussed to issue status-neutral documents for the Abkhaz, similar to those issued by the United Nations in Kosovo between 2000-2008. However, the Georgian government was opposed (interviewees 9, 14, 16) and offered producing status-neutral documents which do not specify citizenship, but were issued by the Georgian authorities (interviewee 11), which was not acceptable for the Abkhazians. Russia stepped in, and thus gave the Abkhaz at least some possibility of travelling, for which many Abkhaz are thankful (interview 15). Nevertheless, it remains difficult for the Abkhaz to travel or even receive visas for studying or educational trips. Russian passports issued in the Russian Embassy in Sukhum/i are often not accepted, which is, according to several observers, a result of Georgian diplomacy (interviewees 4 & 15). As one Georgian expert (interviewee 1) stated:

“In Georgia apparently perceive that “if you make their life harder, it’s going to be better for you. What’s wrong with Abkhazians travelling to Europe? You know, when they realize it’s good over there, then...the Georgians try to even inhibit Abkhaz athletes from traveling. But isolation doesn’t work.”

The Abkhaz are trying to overcome this problem by registering in Russia and applying for visas at international consulates in Russian cities; thus, interviewee 15 from Sukhum/i asks:

“if I have a registration in Rostov, I will get the visa there, and it’s no problem at all...But please – would it be better for the international community if all residents of Abkhazia were registered in Russia? Why?...I am so jealous of the whole world, where the youth studies in different countries, but here, you can’t go anywhere...they can only go to Russia; we can’t even send someone somewhere for a two-months internship”.

Arguably, the issue of the passportization underlines why it is crucial to examine *de facto* and separatist states from the point of view of human security and to try to understand individual rationality, not only larger geopolitical aspects. While Russia certainly had its own interests behind the passportization, for an Abkhaz taking a Russian passport is only a political signal in so far that it is not a Georgian one; it does not imply at all that he or she thinks Abkhazia should be controlled by, or even part of, Russia.

Problems and Shortcomings of the Russian Assistance

To begin with, in the field of Georgian-Abkhaz relations and personal security, it is clear that the asymmetry in Abkhaz-Russian relations, the lack of ownership of the Abkhaz, the ongoing borderization and Russia’s claims to not be a party to the conflict, create big doubts as to whether its engagement contributes to

long-term human security in the region, not to mention sustainable peace. As stated by the Council of Europe, “what is needed to restore security and long-term trust is not armies facing each other along the ABL, but a strong, non-partisan international peacekeeping and monitoring presence on both sides of the line.” (Council of Europe, 2013)

Despite the apparent positive impact the Russian assistance has on the socio-economic situation of the residents of Abkhazia, it also suffers from major shortcomings. First of all, it has been asserted by both Abkhaz and Russian officials that the enormous amounts of money have fuelled corruption and misappropriation (Clayton, 2014; International Crisis Group, 2013; Krivenyuk, 2011, interviewees 4 and 6). According to interviewee 9, “the Russians never really controlled where their money went”. However, some measures were taken to improve the situation, such as the creation of an Abkhaz court of auditors. There seems to be an increasing will on the Russian side to monitor the use of funds (interview 7).

Apparently, a large part of the Russian assistance was used in an ad hoc and unsustainable way; for example, interviewee 6 called the construction of a big stadium in Sukhum/i a “total waste of money” and, the construction of a “massive hospital” in Gudauta, where the Russian military base is located, out of proportion. Other observers mention the usage of Russian money for the renovation of factories which are not even working (interviewee 14), or the “construction of a swimming pool in the former coal-mining town of Tkuarchal, where inhabitants are too poor to pay the admission fee” (Fuller, 2015c). Many interviewees also mentioned that the large amount of financial assistance was a disincentive for the Abkhaz to develop their own economy (Khashig, 2012, and interviewees 4, 6, 9). According to Nazarenko, the increased Russian investment in the housing market has led to the “skyrocketing of real estate prices in Sokhumi” and the construction of buildings that are affordable only for a “small circle of elite businessmen and Russians”, pointing towards another negative social effect of Russia’s alleged economic and financial support (Nazarenko, 2011).

As several interviewees added, the Russian money might also come with certain expectations (interviewees 1, 9) – as interviewee 4 claimed, “the money that they gave us for the Complex Plan, this money can be understood as rental payment for the military base...and that raises a lot of questions”. While many Abkhaz are thus skeptical or even openly critical of the Russian assistance, they also see no other way for Abkhazia to survive (interview 8). To conclude this section, it can be subsumed that compared to the size of Abkhazia, the Russian economic and financial assistance is certainly massive, and the Abkhaz have certainly benefited from it. However, little sustainable development has occurred and the assistance has certainly not been “for free”. As Abkhazia is now fully economically and financially dependent on Russia, it is indeed difficult to imagine its survival without the Russian assistance.

Finally, several observers argue that Russia’s rhetoric of supporting the Abkhaz is meaningless and that its whole engagement is merely supposed “to prove that Western partners had set a dangerous precedent by recognising Kosovo’s

independence in 2007” (International Crisis Group, 2013, p. 26). According to interviewee 16, an international observer, Abkhazia is only a tool for Russia to prevent Georgian NATO membership; “Russian-Abkhaz relations created a sheer community of purpose, and trust is very low”. According to these positions, the Russian support in terms of human security is merely a side effect of a power-political calculus, which even goes against international law. In line with theory, the Russian assistance creates “a nexus of dependence in which the patron state can determine to a large extent its relations with the unrecognized entity” (Laoutides, 2014, p. 75) Nevertheless, the last sections have shown that most Abkhaz are thankful for the Russian engagement, which has, from their perspective, certainly improved life in Abkhazia, whatever reasons are behind, and whatever baggage it comes with.

European Assistance

To begin with, it needs to be stated that the European involvement differs from the Russian already in terms of its origins: while the Russian contribution to human security comes almost exclusively from the state (and from tourism), the European assistance is national, supranational, and transnational. It involves the European Union, its Member States, as well as national and transnational non-governmental organizations. As the latter are, however, often partly government-funded, they face almost the same challenges as governmental actors, as will be discussed below. According to Steingaß, the European Union has a very high potential in the field of development assistance, as it is a heavyweight in terms of the amount of its assistance as well of in the formulation of development policy and international norms in general (Steingaß, 2015). Nevertheless, despite difficulties to add up all the different ways in which European Union (states) support human security in Abkhazia, it is clear that support for human security is, in financial terms, much lower than the Russian, as will be demonstrated in the following sections.

The involvement of the European Union in Abkhazia is complex and works in manifold ways: through the EU Delegation in Tbilisi, the European Union Special Representative for the South Caucasus (EUSR) and, to a certain extent, the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM). The latter has no funding for projects and is limited to observing any incidents at the ABL. The EUSR pursues a regional approach to promoting peace and stability (interviewee 16). Importantly, the EU has no office in Abkhazia but acts as a donor for UNDP, which has an office in Sukhum/i but “almost no financial means itself”, and non-governmental projects (interviewee 16). Apparently, substantial American assistance was only provided during the 1990s (interviewee 14).

Abkhaz-Georgian Relations, Personal, and Political Security

According to Akaba and Khintba, the EU has been more active in Abkhazia since 2004 and “became the main mediator in the Georgian-Russian standoff in August 2008” (Akaba & Khintba, 2011). Europeans were indeed heavily

involved in negotiating the Six-Point-Plan which led to the ceasefire. Nevertheless, since 2008, formal progress on agreement on the non-use of force, let alone the status of Abkhazia, is very low, as discussed above. Moreover, there is no longer an international or European monitoring mission on Abkhaz territory – the EUMM is not allowed to enter. Thus, the role of the EU and European organizations is limited to peacebuilding on the community level.

Within the field of peacebuilding, the program mentioned most often by interviewees was COBERM (Confidence Building Early Response Mechanism), a joint EU/UNDP program, endowed with 6.5 million USD in the period of 2010-2015 (thereof 260,000 USD from Netherlands and 6.5 million USD from the EU). COBERM supported 130 non-governmental initiatives in the field of youth work, healthcare, journalism, farming, research, women's rights, culture, trauma relief, etc.; it seeks to "have an impact on confidence building within and across conflict divided communities" and to "to foster a peaceful transformation of conflicts" (United Nations Development Programme, n.d.). According to interviewee 2, COBERM is a "very good instrument", also "because it is outside of the political". Nevertheless, one of the principles of COBERM is to always bring together one civil actor/NGO from Georgia with one from Abkhazia; as "the only thing the EU can try is to establish dialogue on whatever kind of basis" (interviewee 16). An extension of COBERM is in planning and according to (Rimple, 2015), there is speculation that the EU may open a representational office in Sukhum/i. However, no evidence for that could be found.

There are many European NGOs engaged in conflict resolution and peacebuilding, for example, Conciliation Resources and the Berghof Foundation. The Berghof Foundation was the main organizer of the "Schlaining Process" (2000-2007), which brought Abkhaz and Georgian politicians and civil society members together. In 2015, the dialogue work continued with meetings in London and Berlin. Interviewee 1, who organizes Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue meetings for younger participants, stated that the meetings are often "emotional, but in a positive way" and participants are very open. Nevertheless, it often seemed important to balance the political and the non-political, i.e., talks about practical issues, during the meetings.

The Berghof Foundation is engaged in a number of other projects, such as a youth dialogue and an intergenerational network for historical reconciliation and coming to terms with the past. Recognizing the lack of wider impact that comes with the closed nature of most dialogue projects, the Foundation in 2015 started its "Biographical Salon". In each of the Salon meetings, which take place in Sukhum/i, a guest shares her or his personal memories of the Georgian-Abkhaz War. Several meetings have even been broadcast on television (Berghof Foundation, 2016).

Another important organization active in Abkhazia is the British NGO Saferworld, which engages in improving the work of the Abkhaz police to ensure security - particularly in remote, rural areas and in the Gal/i region. They work with other British organizations such as International Alert and local NGOs: the Institute for Democracy, the Sukhum Youth House and the Centre for Humanitarian Programmes. However, as became evident, the work of NGOs is

severely inhibited by the tense political climate. In February 2016, the head of the Administration of the City of Gal/i publicly embarrassed Saferworld when a letter rejecting the NGO's invitation to London for an exchange of best practices - due to the impossibility of ordinary Abkhaz citizens to travel - was posted on Facebook (Administration of the City of Gal, 2016).

To conclude, as this section has shown, the European engagement centers on peacebuilding and dialogue initiatives at the community level. While relatively many projects seem to have been conducted, their larger impact can be questioned:

“if someone would make a long-term plan, 6 years, in several directions, with high-level diplomatic efforts, it might be successful; but the current kind of small-scale projects do not give any results – for concrete people, yes, but the peace-building impact is not there, people will return to their sides and they will keep silent.” (interviewee 10).

As mentioned before, many Abkhaz do not believe that Georgia will, at any point in the future, regain control over the de facto republic. As interviewee 14 stated frankly,

“the EU can't overcome the idea of the territorial integrity of Georgia; but nobody will today unite Abkhazia and Georgia, between us there is a great amount of blood, it is absolutely impossible to reunite us.”

Certainly, the Abkhaz unwillingness to compromise as regards their status can be ascribed to the Russian engagement, which “largely diminished” the “threat of renewed Georgian aggression” (Akaba & Khintba, 2011, p. 40). Unsurprisingly, on a larger scale, the peace-building impact of European organizations has thus hardly been successful. Nevertheless, as interviewee 16 stated, “international non-governmental organizations at least managed to keep alive some contacts between the Georgians and Abkhazians”. Clearly, the European engagement supports Abkhaz civil society more generally and thus contributes to a crucial aspect of political security. From 2016 onwards Georgia will receive several million Euros for the development of civil society, out of which one million was allocated for civil society development in Abkhazia, in addition to COBERM; thus, the engagement will continue in one way or another (interviewee 11).

Socio-Economic Security

After the Georgian-Abkhaz War and during the 1990s, humanitarian aid was vital in Abkhazia, that is, “aid and action designed to save lives, alleviate suffering and maintain and protect human dignity during and in the aftermath of emergencies” (Brezhneva & Ukhova, 2013, p. 4). After the war, many international NGOs were heavily involved in the provision of humanitarian assistance. For example, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) immediately built a huge mission with approximately 12 expats and 100 locals, providing food, a home assistance, arrangements for the transfer of letters

across the ABL, helping relatives to stay in touch, and other support to the Abkhaz population. Since 2012, the biggest project involves setting up cooperation between the Georgian and Abkhaz commissions for missing persons, the taking of DNA samples, and the exhumation of war victims. According to interviewee 7, ICRC in one way or another almost assisted everybody in Abkhazia, and this is highly appreciated among the population. Nowadays, the mission has been downsized substantially and many programs have been terminated. Nevertheless, as interviewee 8 describes the situation:

“the first years after the war, I worked at the university and at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and didn’t receive any salary, there was no money, absolutely nothing, the war was over and we lived on what the relatives in the villages raised; but there was international aid and especially ICRC helped tremendously; with food, medication, documents; but there was only humanitarian aid, not development aid or economic development; but the aid was indispensable and it would have been very difficult without it.”

Currently, the biggest INGO in Abkhazia is the Danish Refugee Council (DRC), employing around 45 people. It is the only European organization which conducts infrastructure projects, e.g. the construction of kindergardens or roads. The DRC also engages small-scale economic and social development projects. Another important organization is Action against Hunger. Like the other organizations, they were first heavily engaged in emergency relief and later shifted their focus into developmental projects. As interviewee 13 stated, the Abkhaz “no longer need humanitarian aid: we don’t need fish, we need a fishing rod to fish ourselves; we’re ready for the project to farm it”. Action against Hunger conducts projects in the agricultural sector, livelihood assurance, water, sanitation and hygiene, and others; working on the community level. Another foreign NGO which should be mentioned is Kvinna Till Kvinna from Sweden, the only organization which focuses on women’s rights and supports numerous initiatives in Abkhazia.

The European engagement has certainly had an impact in Abkhazia, as interviewee 3 describes:

“The locals, especially the Mingrelians, perceive our presence very positively. Our presence is probably important from a psychological point of view, due to the ethnic tensions, but also from a material perspective where we really helped to improve people’s lives”.

Nevertheless, with the fading out of humanitarian assistance in Abkhazia, the international presence has decreased significantly; up to the point where interviewee 15 stated “I cant say which international actor is the most active, because there are almost none”. According to her, the sharp decline of international presence in Abkhazia after the 2008 War led to “growing isolation” (Akaba & Khintba, 2011). As interviewee 12 views the situation:

“If the international community has some funds to rebuild a school, they will not rebuild a whole school. They will rebuild several square meters of the roof and one classroom. Particularly when you compare it to Russian aid

with dozens of school rehabilitated, theatres, roads...they are incomparable. That's why for a lot of people the perception is that the international community is not interested to invest into what Abkhazia sees as a priority but to be able to present here and to monitor the situation they need to do something."

Multiethnic Society

Several organizations conduct projects particularly for the ethnic Georgians in the Gal/i district and they also work with IDPs. The work is funded by many different national and international, governmental and non-governmental organizations. As interviewee 10 stated,

"The EU supported us very much, god bless the European Union, I don't want to say anything bad about the local offices which are doing their best; and the EU is putting and putting money to durable housing for IDPs, which is one of our programs."

The largest part of the IDP work is done on Georgia-controlled territory, as the majority of refugees has still not been able to return. Until the 2008 War, Georgian IDP organizations still conducted joint projects with Abkhaz organizations. According to interviewee 10, Georgian NGOs

"worked with Abkhaz NGOs for so many years, immediately after the war we started working together and we have trust...I still want my people to return to Abkhazia, they still want to be independent, but I think no one wants them to be part of the Russian empire...and here our interests might rejoin, and that's where we can do some intermediate steps...We know we want this, and they want this, and it's not discussable. But we can discuss concrete things. Domestic violence, the problem of women, the situation of people without passport."

Since 2008, it is no longer possible for Georgian organizations to work on Abkhaz territory. As described above, some contacts have been maintained, but the work occurs on a much smaller scale.

Problems and Shortcomings of the European Assistance

Funding

As the interviews on the ground revealed, the various kinds of European engagement in Abkhazia fall victim to similar shortcomings and difficulties. To begin with, many organizations suffer from a lack of funding – for example, the DRC, Première Urgence, and World Vision (interview 6). According to interviewee 7, there are actually only a few international organizations left in Abkhazia, and while they are present, they do "very very little". As interviewee 11 stated, organizations "often hear that there is no money because of other,

more pressing global conflicts”. As one interviewee stated, “Abkhazia is not in the focus, nothing bad is happening, no one is killed, they have no jihadists” (interviewee 3). After 20 years of support and no formal progress in terms of the status of Abkhazia, “there is a bit of a fatigue from the donors’ side” – “while the needs are there” (interview 3).

On a more technical level, according to interviewee 16,

“the EU has, obviously, limited capacities to engage in such specific conflicts; it is a global, bureaucratic actor staffed with generalists. Employees of the delegations are closest to what is happening on the ground, but transmitting everything to Brussels seems often difficult”.

Financial constraints are especially present because the Georgian-Abkhaz meetings can never be organized on Abkhaz or Georgian territory, means that to “access any kind of dialogue meeting has to bring people to a third place, which is extremely expensive” (interviewee 10). As one Abkhaz interviewee stated, “Abkhazia is ready for direct contacts with the West, but direct, not through Tbilisi” (interviewee 8). Both for practical – Abkhazia and Georgia do not have any financial relations – and as a matter of principle, Abkhaz organizations only work with European organizations that operate out of EU cities (interview 2). Often, problems of cooperation are solely related to terminology – “if someone writes “Abkhazia, Georgia”, we already don’t go there” (interview 2). Technically, Abkhaz organizations are entitled to funding for Georgian NGOs, but for that they have to be registered in the Georgian NGO registry, “which makes the story difficult” (interview 16).

Relations with the Local Authorities

As the interviews in Abkhazia demonstrated, there are often difficulties with the local authorities. As one interviewee argued, the presence of international organizations is actually not really desired, because part of their politics is to bring the Georgian and Abkhaz communities together (interview 7). According to interviewee 12, “particularly with the events in Ukraine, with serious contradictions between Russia and the West, there is a lot of suspicion in the society, among politicians as to what the West does. But this suspicion coexists with the desire to have broader contacts with the international community”. According to interviewee 13, the EU’s principle of “engagement without recognition” “seems like a soft kind of infiltration because there still is this distrust towards IOs/INGOs. As they support the territorial sovereignty of Georgia they will work towards reconstructing that sovereignty”.

In 2013, international organizations formerly based in Sukhum/i were “banned” from working in Gal/i; the local authorities had become suspicious of the organizations freely operating in Sukhum/i (interviewee 13) and asked them to engage more in the vulnerable area close to the ABL. Former de facto president Ankvab told the organizations that the humanitarian phase is over and that “substantial assistance” in terms of infrastructure is needed (interview 7). However, this work is complicated by the fact that the import of materials has

been restricted for UN agencies in Abkhazia (interviewee 6). Meanwhile, some international organizations and NGOs are again allowed to work in all of Abkhazia – “but all depends on personal relations, there is no legal certainty” (interviewee 6). There is now also a regulation specifying that “all national staff of international organizations need to get clearance from the Russian Federal Security Service to cross the ABL for work-related purposes”, which takes three days (interviewee 6). On a more practical level, interviewees 5 and 7 mentioned the frequent rotation of local officials, which makes building long-lasting partnerships more difficult.

Imposed Dialogue

As the interviews revealed, the distrust of the local authorities and parts of society has to do significantly with the type of engagement policy European organizations mainly pursue. According to Georgian interviewee 11, the distrust is merely a result of dialogue projects not being “in the interest of Russia or of the local authorities, they try to politicize” them. However, the Abkhaz and internationals working in Abkhazia share a different perspective. According to interviewee 7, bringing the Georgian and Abkhaz together is completely irrelevant and undesirable for the Abkhaz:

“there is no hate towards Georgians, it is already the next level, they are not interested in Georgia. Any kind of rapprochement is impossible. The different sides are watching different movies – this won’t even change in 40 years.”

According to interviewee 15, 20 years after the war, the Abkhaz still feel coerced into reunification with Georgia by European officials through a strategy of “helping Abkhazia only via Tbilisi; there often seemed to be a complete lack of understanding that this strategy cannot be successful, especially when there is Russian support without the same conditions”. As interviewee 13 stated, the opinion of the majority is that the Abkhaz “don’t want to live neither with Georgia, nor with Russia, we want to live in Abkhazia, which should be an independent state”. Thus, the perception of the authorities and parts of society that European actors work mainly in the interest of Georgia is key to understanding the suspicion these actors are sometimes met with (interview 2). Interviewee 15 is venting her anger:

“We wrote a great project application which dealt with the Gal/i district, and it was not accepted; I am sure if we had included Zugdidi in the project, it would have been taken!”

The question remaining is what kind of projects the Abkhaz would prefer. According to several interviewees, fields for deeper cooperation with Europe are diverse: the humanitarian sphere (interviewee 15), the fight against corruption or judicial reform (interviewee 9), social and democratic development (interviewees

13 & 14), agriculture (interviewees 2 and 3), governance reform and transparency (interviewee 12), capacity-building and infrastructure (interviewee 3), and health care:

“there have been so many workshops and training and everything, and so little visible, acknowledged intervention in terms of helping, for instance to build a modern hospital, like in Tbilisi, where people with aids could be treated so they don’t have to travel to Tbilisi.” (interview 12).

Evidently, it would also be important to directly work on stereotypes persisting in Georgia and Abkhazia about the respective other, fuelled by war narratives and the lack of people-to-people contacts; due to the sensitivity of these issues, several interviewees suggested working in regional formats (interviewees 1 & 10).

According to interviewee 2, it would be crucial to strengthen the role of women in peacebuilding:

“In the Geneva process there is usually almost no single woman; and we think maybe women can have different approaches; if women were able to participate in peace negotiations or consultations, they would start discussing more everyday problems, like the safety in border regions, social issues etc...But men only discuss global problems, and the result is zero”

Despite the need for women’s empowerment, the interviewee stated that there are very few international actors who support women’s initiatives in Abkhazia, while “in Georgia there are numerous”. Clearly, many Abkhaz are frustrated, perceiving the European engagement in Abkhazia solely through the lens of peacebuilding, while vast engagement is present in *all kinds of fields* on the Georgian-controlled territory. As Kvarchelia summarizes: “The EU links the idea of de-isolation exclusively with the resolution of the conflict. All this is seen in Abkhazia as a discriminatory approach and increases distrust of Western institutions” (Kvarchelia, 2011, p. 33). Interviewee 7 adds: “The West purposely leaves Abkhazia in this condition...in Zugdidi [behind the ABL] you immediately see the difference...the Abkhaz think that the lack of assistance is evidence for double standards.”

The Georgian Position and Geopolitics

If there are so many possible fields for engagement for the international community, why does it not become more active? Arguably, as Abkhazia is a small territory, more engagement would not require much, even given the shortage of funding in the context of other, more ferocious crises. As interviewee 12 stated:

“I kept saying ‘you need to work with the government, with the parliament’ - because if we want to change the system in the direction of a more democratic society, I don’t think it would be right to work only through civil society”.

However, as interviewee 16 claimed, European institutions cooperate mainly with NGOs because they adhere strictly to their policy of non-recognition, which makes any official cooperation with the de facto authorities impossible. This prevents any type of twinning or technical cooperation; it is impossible to work at the legislative or institutional level, e.g. through capacity-building, so projects are implemented semi-officially or on the community level (interviewee 6). Evidently, the restraint of the international community can be attributed to geopolitical considerations (interview 7).

It is clear that the Georgian government is very much opposed to cooperation outside of dialogue and humanitarian projects, as it fears that any kind of engagement with the de facto authorities will strengthen their international and local legitimacy (interview 9). This leads to a conflict of goals, illustrated by interviewee 12:

“If we want to influence the human rights situation we can’t avoid working on judiciary reform, talking to the courts, judges, parliamentarians. It has to be a comprehensive, holistic approach. A bit here, a bit there, it helps, but it’s not that effective...But the reasoning of the international community was that ‘there are limitations as to what we can do, Georgia would not like us to get involved with officials, because they will see it as the legitimization of Abkhaz authorities’...Is non-recognition equal to wanting Abkhazia to develop in a very unconstructive and undemocratic way?”

According to interviewee 3, “neither the UN or UNDP nor others can, because of the political situation, work with the [de facto] government – there you have the voice of Georgia, preventing this to happen”. Interviewee 8 stated that the situation is monitored in Georgia fiercely: when Nokia wanted to cooperate with the Abkhaz provider Aquafon and when a Benetton store was opened in Sukhum/i, even though it was not clear if it was a fake or actual franchise, there were protests in Georgia (interview 8). According to interviewee 5, Georgian officials actively block the Abkhaz from traveling, contacting people in European embassies and telling them not to accept the Abkhazian’s Russian passports. When Abkhazians should have been enabled to participate in a student exchange program without applying through Tbilisi, Georgian officials intervened as well (interviewee 16). According to interviewee 12, “even when the international organizations do good things, they have to be very low-profile because they always have to keep in mind what Georgia would say”. Certainly, this puts the international community in a very difficult position: as interviewee 5 stated, “we’re trying not to be political but of course in this part of the world everything is political”.

However, this is not to say that the Georgian government is opposed to any kind of engagement. According to interviewee 11, Abkhaz students can enter Georgian universities easily and with funding by the Georgian government; many Abkhazians are benefitting from access to health care in Georgia; Georgia delivers medication and vaccines for Abkhazia, etc. However, many of the options Georgia offers are not effective; for example, it seems unimaginable for most Abkhaz to go to Georgia to study or to employ somebody who had recently studied in Georgia. According to interviewee 11, the Abkhazian

government is scared of good experiences of Abkhazians in Georgia, or of too-good personal relations, as they interfere with the narrative of Georgia as the enemy (interview 11). However, it certainly has something to do with societal, and not only governmental, discourses. Interestingly, the Georgian side hesitates to clearly state their policy with regards to international engagement in Abkhazia. Interviewee 11 stated that the EU and US are Georgia's "strategic partners, they know what our policy is and we know what their policy is, so we don't have to exercise control"; nevertheless, the interviewee also clearly asserted that "capacity-building or major infrastructure (the rehabilitation of major roads/highways) is certainly something the international community can't do".

However, many interviewees stated that the Georgian-European geopolitical game might fail. For instance, interviewee 5 claimed that:

"they're playing a waiting game, hoping that ultimately Russia will squeeze Abkhazia so much that Abkhazia will want to come back to Georgia, or Georgia will improve so much that Abkhazia will want to join again – but, sorry, you waited too long and there's going to be no one left who remembers the shared experience. Right now there is still people left who remember the shared experience, but soon you have this new generation for whom Georgia is nothing."

Instead of an eventual return of Abkhazia under Georgian control, the Georgian-European strategy might even push Abkhazia into the arms of Russia (interviewees 5, 6 & 9). Clearly, it also inhibits the improvement of human security in Abkhazia in many fields – for instance, in economic security, political security, and health security.

European-Russian Cooperation and Conflict

Interestingly, the interviews revealed that there is absolutely no cooperation between Russian and European actors on the ground in Abkhazia – not even in terms of small infrastructural projects, which are supported by both (interviewee 5). Theory suggests, however, that donor cooperation enhances the success of international assistance. It also became evident that Europe exercises a certain self-restraint in Abkhazia: "if we support Abkhaz NGOs more, the Russian NGO legislation might diffuse to Abkhazia" (interview 16). Certainly, the fear of Russia objecting to European engagement in Abkhazia grew bigger after the outbreak of war in Ukraine in 2014 (interviewees 9 & 10). As Rimple reports, Sergei Markedonov, Associate Professor of Foreign Policy and Regional Studies at the Russian State University for the Humanities in Moscow, claims that Russia did not object to the EU's attempted contacts with Sokhumi before the Ukrainian crisis, but that "[t]his attitude, however, changed after Ukraine" (Rimple, 2015). Nevertheless, many Abkhaz interviewees were hopeful that Russia and European organizations could work together:

“Of course there are external factors that are not very favorable for cooperation, like the conflict between Russia and the West over Ukraine...to avoid unnecessary clashes there has to be more dialogue, if not cooperation, more dialogue on what is happening. And gradually cooperation. What didn't work in Ukraine, didn't work, but it's a different situation, in Georgia – why not try and work together in the context of Abkhazia.” (interviewee 12).

Interviewee 4 even expressed the hope that Abkhaz-Russian-European cooperation

“could also be some kind of platform for some kind of contacts between the EU and Russia. If you want to achieve that Russia one day returns to Europe, you can't break off contact completely; and one possible platform could be Abkhazia. This is a fantastical idea, of course, but our whole existence is like a fantasy story, we're not even one million people.”

On a less fantastical level, it is clear that the worsening of Russian-European relations has made European engagement for human security in Abkhazia even more challenging.

Conclusion

The state of human security in Abkhazia is dismal. There is no formal progress in terms of peacebuilding or settling the status issue. The domestic political environment has got tenser in the last two years. The socio-economic situation is gloomy, with unemployment close to 70%, agriculture lying fallow, and the only significant possibility for earning money being catering to Russian tourists. While there is still no agreement with regard to the return of the IDPs, which is an additional problem that has not been dealt with in this paper, those Georgians who did return to Abkhazia are often particularly vulnerable.

This paper asked how international actors have contributed to human security in Abkhazia since the end of the Georgian-Abkhaz war in 1993. The problems and shortcomings of international assistance to Abkhazia have also been discussed. To begin with, it has been shown that both the Russian and the European engagement contributed to personal security on the ground; however, in totally different ways. While the Abkhaz feel physically protected by the Russian army and Russian border guards, the Europeans have, especially since 2008, limited their engagement to work for the development of civil society, particularly in the field of peacebuilding. As regards the domestic political situation and political security, the Russians have had a huge impact on domestic political (in-) stability, while the Europeans only do small-scale projects with civil society. Also in the field of the economy, the Russian contribution to human security is clearly more extensive than the European, despite shortcomings such as the fuelling of corruption. As suggested by theory, the dominant role of Russia as the patron state decreases Abkhazia's autonomy and in some respects even increases its vulnerability. European actors are afraid of legitimizing the de facto regime and thus abstain from any activities

that could be interpreted as state building. Lastly, Georgian authorities are monitoring European activities closely and signaling that the current policy of limited engagement shall not change.

While it is not up to the author to judge about the ultimate motivations for the Russian and European engagement, it has become clear that concerns for human security have been subordinated to geopolitical considerations among Russian, European, and Georgian decision-makers. Lamenting the focusing on the recognition/non-recognition debate, Laoutides calls for a

“new model of international recognition”, which “is required to minimize the sources of fragility for de facto states, and engage the international community in appropriate state-building processes, thus minimizing dependency of the unrecognized entities. The suffering and lack of opportunity for the peoples of de facto states can only be thoroughly addressed if the international community decides to reassess the question of statehood and state recognition, rather than resorting to short-term solutions that satisfy ephemeral political agendas.” (Laoutides, 2014, p. 86)

The new model could be such that it recognizes the de facto state’s effective control over a given territory and the necessity for the international community to work with present realities, without formally recognizing the de facto state under international law.

As Müller and Ziai claimed, when the cooperation and coordination of donors is necessary, “tough universalisms are not in order” (Müller & Ziai, 2015, p. 13). Despite the above-mentioned expectations, the case at hand has revealed that in our post- (or new-) Cold War world, geopolitical considerations are far from over. Whether major donors will merely fall back into “Cold War frames for action” will have to be determined. Given the prevalence of conflicts in which old and new donors are involved on opposing sides, focusing on human security and the contribution of external actors sheds new light on separatist conflicts and gives a voice to people on the ground, who are often overlooked in the context of conflict between global international actors.

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Acronyms

ABL Administrative Boundary Line

CIS Commonwealth of Independent States

COBERM Confidence Building Early Response Mechanism

EU European Union

EUMM European Union Monitoring Mission

EUSR European Union Special Representative

FSB Federal'naya sluzhba bezopasnosti Rossiyskoy Federatsii

ICRC International Committee of the Red Cross

IDP Internally Displaced Person

INGO International non-governmental organization

IO International Organization

MFA Ministry of Foreign Affairs

NGO Non-governmental organization

ODA Official Development Assistance

OSCE Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe

UN United Nations

UNDP United Nations Development Programme

US United States

USD US Dollars

UNOMIG United Nations Observer Mission to Georgia

(Federal Security Service of the Russian Federation)

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