

HOW LIFE GOES ON

A “Nationally” Representative Household Survey Demystifies Life in Abkhazia

INTRODUCTION:

Scholarship on Abkhazia and South Ossetia has frozen in recent years. There is substantial agreement among regional specialists that the strategies of the three parties to the conflict have reached stable equilibrium, and that the structural changes that support this equilibrium are unlikely to change in the near future (Nodia 1995; Suny 1995; Nodia 1998; Lynch 1999; Coppieters, Legvold et al. 2005; Wheatley 2005). Russian military, diplomatic, and financial support for the secessionist territories serves Moscow's interest in keeping leverage over Georgia. The Abkhaz and South Ossetian governments have managed to carve out living conditions for their citizens in the midst of a geo-strategic stalemate, and influential families have made small fortunes as "frozen war" profiteers, controlling profitable smuggling routes and economic bottlenecks (King 2001). The government in Tbilisi seeks to eventually regain its lost territory by internationalizing the conflicts using all the tools at its disposal. At the same time, because it is the main actor with an interest in overturning the status quo, it is easy to paint Georgian nationalists as warmongers (Nadareishvili 1997; Derluguian 2005). While the abstract threat of escalation and wider war in the South Caucasus rears its head every few years, the simple truth is that there often seems to be little room for original analysis of these conflicts.

Some scholars have suggested that the real story of the post-Socialist "frozen conflicts" is not the conflicts themselves, but the economic activities, social organizations, and state building that happens *inside* the conflict zones (Tilly 1985; King 2000; King 2004). It has been difficult to systematically study these patterns, of course, since the enduring uncertainty over the nature of final territorial compromise makes it difficult -- even dangerous -- to attempt to gather systematic demographic information in Abkhazia or South Ossetia. As George Orwell often noted, in war all information is political. In the absence of reliable and systematic data, analysts are forced to rely on anecdotal information for their inferences. Enterprising scholars have unearthed powerful individual narratives, of course, but in practice most of what makes it into print is drawn from extended interviews with intellectuals in Tbilisi and Sukhumi, reports written by NGOs, and impressionistic weekend field trips to conflict zones. The voices that are lost in this are the voices that should matter the most: the voices of people that continue to conduct business, raise children, and prepare for the future in the disputed territories.

TOPIC OF RESEARCH:

The research aims to create and publish an original dataset to can help scholars answer questions about life in Abkhazia. The data will be drawn from the first "nationally" representative household survey in Abkhazia, conducted by the Caucasus Research Resource Centers (CRRC) during the spring of 2008, made publicly available this upcoming summer.

At the time of the conference proposal, it was hoped that the data collection effort would be completed by April. Due to unforeseen complications related to Kosovo recognition, the statistical analysis of these data will not be possible by the time of the symposium. Instead I will

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present the methodology for sampling and data collection, and discuss the hypotheses that the survey will be designed to test (below). The survey will attempt to exploit sub-national variation in the data (e.g., comparing the characteristics of some Abkhaz citizens to others) to better understand the character of life in Abkhazia.

The overall goal of the research project is to disaggregate and demystify the interests of the population of Abkhazia, identifying which constituencies would stand to benefit from various proposed peace settlements. Like most of the world's citizens, the people that live in of Abkhazia are pawns to international forces that are completely beyond their control. What makes the Abkhaz situation special is that these forces are transparent to Abkhaz citizens, and the different possible outcomes are fairly well-understood. These survey data will measure how individuals and families have responded to their peculiar situation, mapping the contours of the politically relevant subdivisions of Abkhaz society.

DELAYS AND OPPORTUNITIES:

The Kosovo precedent obviously casts a long shadow over the political future of Abkhazia. In upcoming weeks, the Abkhaz government will attempt to wrangle bilateral aid from the Russian government. Some members of the Abkhaz parliament also believe that this is the best possible time make a bid for full diplomatic recognition, though it is difficult to know how they could bring this to pass. Uncertainty should begin fade soon after the Russian presidential election, but it may take time for expectations to settle. In the mean time, our project's liberal constituency in the Abkhaz Parliament feels that it is vulnerable to criticism from fringe nationalists. The CRRC has been asked to lower our profile in Abkhazia temporarily, until the President is ready to publicly endorse the project moving forward. Since we do not wish to expose our political allies to unnecessary risk – or run the risk of our enumerators being harassed by the Abkhaz interior ministry – our de-facto project manager on the ground is moving cautiously.

The unfortunate delays in the implementation of the survey will make it impossible to present preliminary findings in early April as planned. On the positive side, the symposium can now serve as an open forum to suggest additions or modifications to the survey instrument before we begin fieldwork, refining the data collection effort to better serve the needs of the academic specialists in attendance.

RESEARCH HYPOTHESES:

Data from the forthcoming survey will be made available to research scholars, and we hope that it will be able to be used to answer many different kinds of questions about life in this understudied corner of the Caucasus. There are three specific questions that bear directly on the prospects of nonviolent conflict resolution, however, which I hope can serve as the focus for our conversations at the conference.

The first set of questions relate to the security of property rights, and how perceptions of probable future conflict resolution efforts relate to current investment patterns. Anyone who has spent time in Sukhumi can attest to the plethora of skeleton hotels foundations, rusting factories, and collapsed family homes -- enduring testaments to fact that property rights in Abkhazia are unsettled, and people are not sure what will happen when "the war" ends and home ownership is

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contestable again. Most narratives of the Abkhaz conflict emphasize the enduring mutual fear and distrust between Georgians and Abkhaz who each covet the other's property. This static

picture only captures part of the social reality in this corner of the South Caucasus, however. Since de-facto independence in the early 1990s, Abkhazia has become economically dependent on its northern Russian neighbor. Abkhaz men migrate north seeking better pay for unskilled labor in other parts of Russia, and Russian, Kazakh, and Armenian investors are increasingly interested in securing beachside property. This creates a whole new constellation of interests in Abkhazia, many of whom care little for the particulars of the grievances generated by the military struggles of the early 1990s, and are primarily interested in a settlement that creates secure property rights and allows new investment into the territory. These apolitical entrepreneurs represent a potentially powerful constituency for overturning the status quo from *inside* Abkhazia, and the portions of the population that share these characteristics should be identified and mapped.

The second set of questions relate to political engagement and perceptions of disenfranchisement among the population. One of the patterns that is visible across the South Caucasus is a palpable distrust of the electoral process, and huge segments of the population that boycott elections altogether, out of some combination of disinterest and protest. In the absence of systematic data collection from the entire population, it is difficult to know whether the opinions of those that show up to vote are representative of the opinions of those citizens that refuse to vote, but might take part in post-election protests. The distinction between these two groups is often lost on distant foreign observers, who are forced to draw inferences on the contours of Abkhaz politics from the statements of political elites in Sukhumi. These elite voices understand these dynamics, however, and target their day-to-day rhetorical pronouncements for foreign audiences and at the parts of the population that participate in "normal politics." As recent events in Georgia and Armenia have demonstrated, it is often the citizens that have lost faith in "politics as usual" that are the prime movers of events in the Caucasus. Understanding if the interests and perceptions of the voters differ systematically from the interests of the nonvoters -- and how they differ -- is a worthy goal.

The third set of questions relate to the strategic formation of identity, and the degree to which the current conflict can be rightfully regarded as an "ethnic" conflict at all. If Abkhazian statehood were to be internationally recognized tomorrow, it would surely be a multiethnic state, with a substantial proportion of the population self-identifying as Russian, Georgian, Mingrelian, or Armenian. Yet it is also important to remember that these "ethnic" markers are not static, and can change many times in the span of a single lifetime. It would be very interesting to know, for example, how common it is for self-identifying Abkhaz citizens with Mingrelian grandparents to report themselves to be ethnic Abkhaz. More broadly: What Abkhaz citizens emphasize their ethnicity as a core part of their self-identity, and does this tend to correlate with a belief in the fundamental irreconcilability of the territorial conflict? Are there subsections of the Abkhaz population that are not nationalistic in a traditional sense, but are still strongly opposed to territorial conciliation for other reasons? Most important of all: How are various subsections of the Abkhaz population preparing themselves -- economically, linguistically, and socially -- for various kinds of territorial settlement? It is obvious that answering these questions has profound

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consequences for the sustainability of different visions of conflict resolution, since they speak directly to whether certain settlements can be "sold" to nationalist constituencies.

POLICY RELEVANCE:

The conflict in Abkhazia tends to be presented as tectonic clashes between immobile geostrategic interests. It is not surprising, therefore, that policy makers have made little practical headway in the last decade. Digging under the detritus of the Soviet collapse and presenting a typology of the kinds of life that are climbing up through the rubble can offer valuable new insights into the Abkhaz status quo, and which forces might undermine the current order. There are many dormant interest groups in Abkhazia, and the echo chamber of politicized discourse that runs between Moscow, Sukhumi, and Tbilisi often excludes these voices. Those that are interested in medium-term conflict resolution must find new rhetorical space to maneuver, which means moving beyond stale generalizations about the irreconcilability of ethnic interests, crude applications of the Kosovo analogy in international law, or dissecting rhetorical escalation. A more sophisticated language requires a more nuanced understanding of the facts on the ground. This data collection project is intended to be a modest step in that direction.

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