

Abkhazia Offers Citizenship to Diaspora

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A new law will offer citizenship to anyone of Abkhaz origin, even if they were not born in the republic.

The breakaway republic of Abkhazia is offering citizenship to members of the diaspora, in a move intended to encourage them to boost the numbers of an ethnic group that currently accounts for less than half the population.

Since Abkhazia unilaterally declared itself independent from Georgia 12 years ago, its leaders have had to contend with the fact that Abkhaz do not make up the absolute majority. In a move intended to swell the numbers, the republic's parliament approved a new law at the end of October that gives anyone who can claim Abkhaz origin the right to claim citizenship.

Diaspora Abkhaz will not be asked to give up their current nationality – except for those now living in Georgia. Nor will they have to take up residence in Abkhazia, unless they want the vote.

Georgi Khaindrava, Georgia's minister for conflict regulation, dismissed the initiative, telling IWPR that it will have little real impact.

“This initiative is a fine reflection of the Abkhaz leadership's level of political culture. As it turns out, this bunch of people that they call the Abkhaz parliament has no idea of the meaning of human rights. It merely underlines yet again that Georgia is absolutely right when it says that there is discrimination in Abkhazia on grounds of ethnicity.”

The last census conducted by the Soviet authorities in 1989 showed that the Abkhaz accounted for just 17 per cent of the then autonomous republic, while Georgians made up 43 per cent of the population.

The end of the conflict saw tens of thousands of Georgians flee their homes, so the balance shifted in favour of the Abkhaz. Nevertheless, they are still only a relative rather than absolute majority, accounting for 44 per cent of the population, with 26 per cent Armenians and 21 per cent Georgians, according to a census conducted last year.

It is impossible to say how many people in the diaspora would count themselves as ethnic Abkhaz, but some sources suggest that in Turkey, Syria and Jordan, the countries where most of them live, there are upwards of 500,000.

The proposed change to the citizenship rules is clearly intended as an incentive to encourage the diaspora to return. The communities abroad are descended several generations ago from the hundreds of thousands of Abkhaz and other North Caucasian people, who fled or were expelled to the Ottoman empire after Russia defeated them in the Caucasian wars.

According to Vladimir Nachach-ogly, the head of Abkhazia's parliamentary legal committee, the new law will facilitate the return of Abkhaz.

“If you think about how few Abkhaz actually live in their historical homeland, the repatriation issue must

become our national idea, since the future of our nation and our state depends on it," he told IWPR.

Meeting Abkhazian president Sergei Bagapsh at the beginning of October, diaspora leaders in Turkey expressed approval of the proposed change to the law, saying it might well encourage people to go back.

Georgian political analyst Paata Zakareishvili thinks it unlikely that the Turkish Abkhaz will return in droves. "[Turkey] is about to join the European Union – why would its citizens want to go to an unfamiliar place – and what's more, one that is always talking of imminent war with the Georgians?" he told IWPR.

Zakareishvili says that of just 600 diaspora members who settled in Abkhazia after 1993, all but 60 have since gone back to Turkey.

One obstacle facing the foreign nationals attempting to build new lives in Abkhazia is language, since they are unlikely to speak Russian. Even though Abkhaz is supposed to be the state language, – still the dominant language with government and parliamentary meetings conducted in it.

Only the Ministry of Culture and, naturally enough, the State Foundation for the Development of the Abkhaz Language, conduct their business in the indigenous language.

Boris Tuzhba, the editor of Apsny, the only Abkhaz-language newspaper thinks it is a disgrace that it sells only 100-150 copies on the newsstands every week – the rest of the print-run of 1,000 goes to government offices. "We have no [private] subscribers, only the government departments," he said. "And I'm not even sure they actually read Apsny."

The language is kept alive in Abkhaz villages, but urban residents tend to speak Russian. There have been few takers for the free language courses offered in the capital Sukhum for some years now.

Abkhaz is considered very difficult for non-natives to acquire. New learners have to struggle both with its complex grammar and the many possible variations in sound – there are about three times as many consonants than in Russian or English.

But is language the sole marker that defines ethnicity? Writer Boris Gurgulia believes identity goes much deeper.

"What unites the Abkhaz people is Apsuara – the unwritten code of Abkhaz behaviour which has evolved over many centuries," Gurgulia told IWPR. "It is observance of the rules of Apsuara that allows us to preserve our identity and feel part of a single Abkhaz nation."

It is not only linguistically that Russia's influence is strong. More than 80 per cent of Abkhazia's population actually hold Russian passports. Because the republic has renounced Georgian sovereignty, residents had no way of travelling freely abroad until Moscow extended an offer of citizenship to them, which came into force in 2002.

Between 40,000 and 50,000 Georgian refugees have returned to the Gali region in southern Abkhazia to reclaim their homes there, but despite years of negotiations, no agreement has yet been reached on their status or rights of permanent return. To claim Abkhazian citizenship, they would have to give up their status as Georgian nationals.

For Zakareishvili, the new law will create an unacceptable level of discrimination.

“In handing out free citizenship, the Abkhaz think they’re showing the world what a democratic republic they are, but in reality this doesn’t meet even the most basic humanitarian standards,” he said. “By adopting this law, they are blatantly ranking their own citizens into first and second class. And there’s even a third class – the Georgians. Others may retain Russian as well as Abkhaz citizenship, but Georgian [nationals] will have to renounce their citizenship.”

Abkhazia is not actually short of new immigrants, but they do not enjoy legal status and would not qualify for citizenship if they wanted it, since that requires five years residence. Economic growth – particularly in Black Sea tourism – over the past two to three years has attracted large numbers of migrant workers from other parts of the former Soviet Union, mainly Armenia, Russia and Tajikistan.

President Sergei Bagapsh has said he will grant citizenship to any foreign businessman who invests at least two million US dollars.

Tamaz Ketsba, a lawyer in Sukhum, thinks an influx of money from diaspora investors would go a long way towards assuaging the fear of predatory foreign capital that still persists here.

“Abkhazia’s economy is only just beginning to take off and it needs investment, but there are concerns that with no local investors, foreign capital may threaten the country’s security,” he explained. “The new law will stimulate investment by the Abkhaz diaspora, which will without doubt counter local concerns about foreign investment.”

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