

Batumi Oasis for Abkhaz

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Ten years after the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict, a small community of Abkhaz still lives peacefully in a corner of Georgia.

A shiny new Mercedes pulled up on the seafront outside a two-storey restaurant clad in reflective glass and out stepped Aslan Smirba, a deputy in the Georgian parliament, and a former mayor of Batumi. Both the car and the restaurant were his.

Smirba is an unusual figure in a country which last month marked the tenth anniversary of the unresolved Georgian-Abkhaz conflict. As a result of the bloody war, very few Georgians live in modern-day Abkhazia outside of the Gali region, while almost no Abkhaz live in Georgia. Yet Smirba calls himself "leader of the Abkhaz diaspora" in Ajaria, the small autonomous republic in the country's south-western corner.

Smirba is a close ally of Ajarian leader Aslan Abashidze and one of the leaders of Abashidze's party, Agordzineba (Revival). He says that he is also on friendly terms with leading Abkhaz politicians. "In Moscow I met President Vladislav Ardzinba," he said. "The next president will be Raul Khajimba [the current prime minister]."

The Abkhaz of Ajaria are in a peculiar position. Although they have survived well, they have no organisational structure and no one even knows how many there are. They themselves estimate that they number around 2,000.

"It would be more correct to call them 'Georgian Abkhaz,'" commented David Berdzenishvili, the political scientist and leader of the Republican Party, who himself comes from Batumi. "As far as I know, none of the Batumi Abkhaz fought in the war on either side. And I can definitely say that people in Ajaria have never had either anti-Abkhaz or anti-Georgian sentiments."

To a large degree this is due to the history of Ajaria, a predominantly Muslim region, which still has strong ties to Turkey as well as to Georgia. The Abkhaz community here probably settled in the second half of the 19th century. In any case that is when Abkhaz began living in two places where they are found to this day: a district on the edge of the city known as "the little town" and part of the village of Akhasheni. When the Russians took over Batumi in the 1870s the Abkhaz stayed and they say their numbers have remained practically the same.

The locals say that several families moved to Abkhazia in Soviet times, but almost no one has made the reverse journey.

The community has largely assimilated into local society. They speak Georgian, most have lost contact with their homeland and there are now Abkhaz surnames in Ajaria, which cannot be found in Abkhazia itself. Most have mixed marriages.

Few of them remember the Abkhaz language and speak Georgian instead. Strangely enough, the middle-aged tend to speak better Abkhaz than old people, something they themselves cannot explain.

Omer Kudba, an Abkhaz who is head of Ajaria's Union of Writers, says regretfully that he cannot speak his native language. He is afraid that he would be badly received in Abkhazia because he writes in Georgian.

Smirba is relaxed about the assimilation into Georgia and expresses views that you would not hear in present-day Abkhazia. "We are all one people, we are citizens of Georgia and there are no differences between us," Smirba said. "There is absolutely no discrimination."

Berdzenishvili recalls that in 1989 when the first nationalist demonstrations began in Georgia, many Abkhaz joined the opposition movement, the Batumi Popular Front.

"I can confirm that as I myself was chairman of that movement," he said. "When it was clear that the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict was inevitable, all of us - Georgians and Abkhaz - made public statements and appeals, hoping to stop the violence. All of us were together in that - the authorities, opposition and ordinary people. And in Ajaria we managed to avoid any inter-ethnic problems."

The Abkhaz in Batumi also said that they did not experience any trouble during the war of 1993-4. It was very difficult to establish what they thought of the current situation and they limited themselves to general phrases about the need to live in peace and harmony.

Abashidze prides himself on having a special position on the conflict in Abkhazia. After being appointed two years ago to be President Shevardnadze's personal envoy on the Abkhaz issue, he regularly criticizes the Georgian government position. His calls for economic sanctions to be lifted from the unrecognised republic and his pro-Russian sentiments have made him unpopular in Tbilisi and popular in Abkhazia.

"The current relatively stable relations between Ajaria and Abkhazia may come down to the fact that they had an equivalent position in old Soviet Georgia," argued Eteri Turashvili, editor of the opposition newspaper Batumelebi. "Both were autonomous republics. And, today's connections also derive from old family ties and friendships from most of the population of Ajaria."

It is hard to distinguish the Abkhaz of Ajaria from their neighbours - only if you hear their surnames. They do not have their own organisations, cultural centres or schools. Gradually, they have become just part of society as a whole.

Anton Krivenyuk is a correspondent for Panorama, where an earlier version of this article appeared. To read the October issue of Panorama log on to http://www.iwpr.net/index.pl?caucasus_pan_index.html

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