



ELSEVIER

Contents lists available at SciVerse ScienceDirect

Communist and Post-Communist Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/postcomstud

The dynamics of electoral politics in Abkhazia

Donnacha Ó Beacháin

School of Law and Government, Dublin City University, Ireland

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 27 April 2012

Keywords:

Abkhazia
Elections
Parliament
Georgia
Caucasus
Post-Soviet

ABSTRACT

Presidential and parliamentary elections in Abkhazia are pluralistic and competitive. They have led to the transfer of power from government to opposition forces. This in itself is a remarkable fact in the post-Soviet context, where the outcome of elections very often is determined in advance by the ruling elite. The article explains how and why this form of electoral democracy could occur in Abkhazia, arguably the most ethnically heterogeneous of all post-Soviet de facto states. Drawing on a wide variety of primary sources and data from within Abkhazia, particularly interviews with key players, the author describes the remarkable willingness of the main political actors to compromise and assesses to what extent Abkhazia's democratic credentials are sustainable

© 2012 The Regents of the University of California. Published by Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Unlike many of the successor states of the USSR, Abkhazia¹ has already witnessed a post-election transfer of power from government to opposition. While the post-Soviet space contains many states that fix elections, which simply flatter the incumbent or confirm an anointed political heir (Wilson, 2005), recent Abkhazian presidential and parliamentary elections have been noteworthy for the fact that voters and analysts could not with certainty predict the outcome. Remarkably – considering the importance of Abkhazia as a zone of conflict and a fault-line separating Russian and US spheres of influence in the Caucasus – almost nothing has been written about how this de facto state organises its domestic politics and, in particular, how it conducts elections. This paucity of election-related assessments is exacerbated by the fact the international organisations normally entrusted with the task of evaluating elections in the post-Soviet space, such as ODIHR, have refused to monitor the electoral process in Abkhazia, despite repeated requests from the Sukhum(i)-based Central Election Commission (Tabagua, 2011). For many, particularly the Georgian government and its supporters, Abkhazia is merely a pawn of Russia and it is frequently maintained that nothing takes place in the region without the approval of the Kremlin (Rakviashvili, 2010; Subeliani, 2010). To examine the domestic politics of Abkhazia would, under this view, merely confer legitimacy on the illegitimate.

In the small but increasing literature on de facto states (Pegg, 1999; Lynch, 2002, 2004; Mihalkanin, 2004) Abkhazia is usually examined exclusively in the realm of conflictology, international relations or geopolitics. Assessments or analyses of elections in Abkhazia and the work of the state parliament, the National Assembly of Abkhazia, are virtually non-existent. The works that have examined aspects of domestic affairs within Abkhazia have not focussed on electoral politics but rather the economy (Popescu, 2006), minorities (Berge, 2010; Kølsto and Blakkisrud, 2011), inter-ethnic relations (Trier et al., 2010), nation-building (Kølsto and Blakkisrud, 2008), civil society (Popescu, 2006) or they survey popular attitudes within Abkhazia

¹ The terms “president”, “parliament”, “assembly”, “state” are used throughout the text as they are the terms used within contemporary Abkhazia. Their usage also helps avoid cluttering the text with constant references to terms such as “de facto” before each mention of a person/title/institution within Abkhazia.

(O'Loughlin, et al., 2010). Even those few articles that have looked at the state-building process in Abkhazia (Kølsto and Blakkisrud, 2008; Caspersen, 2011) have eschewed a detailed examination of electoral politics.

This article attempts to rectify this anomaly in the literature on Abkhazia and de facto states generally by providing a comprehensive introduction to the dynamics of electoral politics within this partially recognised post-Soviet state. Much of the analysis that follows has been framed by scores of interviews conducted within Abkhazia with MPs, parliamentary office holders (speakers of parliament and deputy speakers), presidential candidates, prime ministers and cabinet members, election officials and NGO's leaders. These interviews have been conducted over the course of a decade (2001–2011) and are complemented with election data supplied by Abkhazia's Central Election Commission and the independent League of Voters. Details of parliamentary candidates were supplied by the National Assembly of Abkhazia and relevant legislation – for example, Laws on the elections of the President, local elections, political parties, the national assembly—were supplied by different state institutions in Abkhazia. Most of the treatment of the recent presidential election in Abkhazia (August 2011) is based on interviews and conversations with key actors during the campaign, including the three presidential candidates and their campaign managers. It has also benefited from following all three campaign teams as they conducted public meetings in different parts of Abkhazia.

The structure of the paper will proceed as follows. The first section provides a comprehensive overview of Abkhazia's political system, examining its presidential system, its national assembly and the parties and individuals elected to the legislature. A brief section is then provided to introduce the issue of how elections are conducted in Abkhazia before exploring in detail relevant case studies. These include the most recent parliamentary elections (2007) and the last three presidential elections (2004, 2009, 2011). Such an overview will assist in establishing the extent to which Abkhazia's democratic credentials are sustainable. Utilising a wide variety of primary sources and data from within Abkhazia, particularly interviews with key players, this article concludes that Abkhazia has achieved a greater level of democratic practice than many other post-Soviet systems including the other unrecognised or partially recognised states.

2. A brief historic overview

The collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917 facilitated the emergence of the short-lived Democratic Republic of Georgia, which incorporated a truculent Abkhaz population that, in 1919, was granted autonomy within the new state. When the Red Army invasion obliterated Georgian independence both Georgia and Abkhazia were made Soviet Socialist Republics within the USSR. Amendments later in 1921 and in 1925 diluted Abkhazia's status until, in 1931, it was reduced to an autonomous republic within Georgia. A 'Georgianisation' policy was vigorously implemented during the 1930s and 1940s accompanied by substantial migration to the region, which risked the Abkhaz being overwhelmed by other nationalities. The last Soviet census in 1989 indicated that the Abkhaz constituted only 17.8% (93,267) of Abkhazia's 525,061 residents. Though conditions largely improved for the Abkhaz after the death of Stalin and Beria's execution (both ethnic Georgians) in 1953 there were popular demands for secession from Georgia in 1957, 1964, 1967, 1978 and 1989. As Soviet power declined, and Georgian nationalists sought independence, the Abkhaz tried first to remain within the USSR before opting for independence. The bitter Georgian–Abkhaz war of 1992–1993 claimed about 10,000 lives and victory for the Abkhaz caused approximately 250,000 ethnic Georgians, many of them Mingrelians, to flee Abkhazia. A ceasefire, which gave Russia a central role in the region, remained largely intact until 2008.

Securing international recognition for its status has always been a challenge for the Abkhaz regime (Shamba, 2001, 2009; Gvindzhiya, 2011). Relations were established with individual parts of the Russian Federation in the north Caucasus and throughout the presidency of Vladimir Putin there was a discernible rise in Kremlin support for Abkhazia, particularly as the Georgian government, led by President Saakashvili, augmented efforts to join NATO while embarking on a number of initiatives aimed at thawing the hitherto "frozen conflicts". The recognition of Kosovo in February 2008 along with a decision at NATO's Bucharest summit two months later that Georgia would one day become a member of the military alliance were key events in putting Georgia and Russia on a collision course in 2008 (Asmus, 2010) The brief war that erupted in August of that year involving primarily Russian and Georgian military forces resulted in Abkhazia, along with South Ossetia, being recognised as independent states by the Russian Federation, with Kremlin allies Nicaragua and Venezuela quickly following suit. In more recent times Abkhazia has been additionally recognised by three tiny states, all located in the South Pacific Ocean: Nauru, population 15,000; Vanuatu, population 224,000; and Tuvalu, population 10,500 (Gvindzhiya, 2011; Chirikba, 2011).

3. The political system of Abkhazia: the president

The constitutional structure in Abkhazia is indisputably presidential and yet, while power is concentrated in the hands of the incumbent, the last decade has witnessed successive peaceful elections in which the outcome was uncertain and the result was respected by the defeated candidates. Moreover it has been possible to have power transferred between government and opposition. The fact that this has occurred in a relatively inauspicious geopolitical setting makes Abkhazia something of an oddity among post-Soviet states.

The president is elected for a maximum of two consecutive 5 year terms (Article 49 of Constitution). S/he must also be a citizen of Abkhazia and between 35 and 65 years of age. The upward age limit, noteworthy amongst a people famed for their longevity, inhibits an incumbent entertaining notions of becoming a president for life. A cabinet of ministers, including a prime minister, is chosen by and is responsible to the president (Constitution of Abkhazia Article 56). There is also a position of vice president, established in 1995, but the powers of this position are largely confined to deputising for the president. The

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1046678>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1046678>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)