



Transforming Conflict and Building Cohesion through Identity: The Challenges of the Abkhaz-Georgian Case

Rick Fawn

School of International Relations, University of St. Andrews, UK

The Abkhaz and Georgians shared much common identity and historical experience. Nevertheless, identity served to create and sustain one of the most intractable conflicts in post-Cold War Europe. Nestled in mountains along the eastern coast of the Black Sea, with a magnificent subtropical climate, Abkhazia gained de facto statehood following war with Georgia in 1992-93. Since then Abkhazia claimed a multi-ethnic ethos, even though only some 50,000 of the 250,000 Georgians who were expelled were permitted to return. For Georgia, state integrity, including lost territories, remained integral to national identity.

The 2008 Russian-Georgian war transformed the conflict dynamic. Abkhazia gained unprecedented capacity, greatly underwritten by Russia, to build statehood, with Abkhaz identity central to it. The recognition of the “loss” of Abkhazia for Georgia has become greater, although the apparent integral place of Abkhazia in Georgian identity remains. Despite deeper physical divides since 2008, nevertheless both parties have increased interest in finding a modus vivendi.

Both parties would be served to demonstrate rejections of exclusivist identity-building projects. The presentation opens to discussion of how identity transformation can be undertaken in a dynamic where the dividing lines have become deeper but where the European ethos of tolerance, multi-ethnicity is every more important to both conflict parties.