

Once, When We Lived Together in Abkhazia

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International talks on the future of the Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia get underway today in Geneva. High profile diplomats will inaugurate the conference. Delegates, journalists and experts will swarm the hallways of the *Palais des Nations*. This evening, glasses will clink in Geneva’s fine restaurants. Meanwhile, Natia and her four children will share a simple meal in a Government-owned flat near the Tbilisi Airport— Russian-backed separatists hounded them from their home in Upper Abkhazia. The Geneva talks should be about Natia, about real people and their right to return home in security and dignity.

Such focus requires people to understand that this conflict did not begin with Russia’s August 7 invasion of Georgia.

As the Soviet Union disintegrated, Moscow exploited ethnic tensions in the South Caucasus in an attempt to thwart Georgian independence and, failing that, to hobble Georgia’s restored statehood. Backed by a popular vote, Georgia declared independence in April 1991. Backed by Moscow, Abkhaz separatists declared independence three months later. Civil war broke out in the summer of 1992 and, after brutal fighting punctuated by violated ceasefires, the Abkhazian capital of Sukhumi fell in September 1993.

The Abkhaz separatists and their Russian sponsors destroyed a thriving multi-ethnic society of 550.000, among whom 18% were ethnic Abkhaz. 80%—Georgians, Greeks, Estonians, Jews and more—were killed or terrorized into flight by systematic murder, rape, beating and plunder.

Hundreds of thousands still live as internally displaced people in the rest of Georgia or as refugees in other lands. Natia, who lost her husband in the fighting, was displaced until she returned to Upper Abkhazia in 2006.

Her ray of hope came when the Georgian Government wrested control of the Kodori Gorge from local thugs and established the narrow mountain valley as the seat of the Government of Abkhazia. We restored security and normalcy, repaired roads and built schools and a hospital.

Our objective was to give the people of what became known as Upper Abkhazia a decent life, thereby setting an example for the rest of Abkhazia.

Unfortunately, in Moscow and Sukhumi, they were preparing war on Georgia.

Abkhazia—my home—was a staging ground. Stealthily and illegally, Russia began using a former Soviet air base at Gudauta. On April 20, a fighter jet that apparently originated there shot down an unarmed Georgian reconnaissance drone, probably to test Georgian and western reaction.

Russian paratroopers masquerading as peacekeepers deployed with anti-aircraft weapons, artillery and modern armored personnel carriers. Railroad Troops repaired the train line from Sukhumi to a former Soviet naval base at Ochamchire, preparing it to debark 4.000 Russian naval infantry troops during the war.

When Russian tanks attacked north-central Georgia on August 7, a second Russian front was ready in Abkhazia to assault Georgia from the west.

Meanwhile, Russian-backed separatists poured into Upper Abkhazia to repeat the terror of the early nineties. Natia, her children, everyone fled. On television, I watched my office pillaged, some personal effects hurled out the window. With them went our dreams and everything we had done in two years. School windows were shattered, as were the lives of the children who once labored over their lessons in those schoolrooms.

Upper Abkhazia is a ghost valley.

The Geneva talks must restore life.

Cynical Russian diplomats will set diversions, demanding treatment as independent countries for the separatist regimes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, rationalizing their *blitzkrieg* against tiny Georgia and clamoring for new Russian-dominated security arrangements.

If the European Union-brokered talks are to succeed, European diplomats must firmly repulse Russian diversions from the outset. They must refocus on the only legitimate issue: the right of Natia and hundreds of thousands like her to return to their homes in security and dignity.

Toward that objective, the EU should insist that Russia, as agreed, withdraw its forces to the lines they held before the war, not park them in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The EU monitors must have access to Abkhazia and South Ossetia to establish confidence that Russia has kept its word.

Then we can take the first steps toward reclaiming a future of human decency through negotiation, democracy and respect for every person.

The war made this task more challenging, more time-consuming. So be it. Once, when we lived together, Abkhazia was the most prosperous region in Georgia. Together we can restore our homeland.

In late July, I gave an interview, which—perhaps by the will of God—was published on August 7. I said, “When I think about the future of Abkhazia, I see my kids growing up there. I see those people who want to go back to their homes building their future there with their kids.”

Please, in Geneva, understand that Natia wonders whether you will allow that dream to flourish or to perish beneath Russian tank treads.

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