ABKHAZIA AT A CROSSROADS: 
ON THE DOMESTIC POLITICAL SITUATION 
IN THE REPUBLIC OF ABKHAZIA

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The de facto lifting of the blockade of Abkhazia following the change of the Kremlin administration, has exposed the republic to the world and has attracted a great deal of interest from both Russia and the West in what is actually going on in this unrecognised state. The phenomenon of unrecognised states itself merits an examination, as any of them can provide a paradigm of how an independent state may be built outside of the international community, and how a political system may be established in a chaotic post-conflict environment. The building of an unrecognised state is not completed until the moment it has been recognised internationally. That moment may come at any time or it may not come at all.

In this regard, it is vital for an unrecognised state to have a stable political system, be capable of addressing ever-changing challenges, be flexible and resist breakup. No country in the world is immune to occasional political crises, and unrecognised states are no exception. The concern here is for the nation in crisis to respond adequately to the issues it is faced with and thus facilitates the strengthening of the existing political institutions rather than expediting their collapse.

The aim of the present study is to examine the domestic political situation in the Republic of Abkhazia, which for the past 18 months' has been beset by a lengthy crisis driven mainly by the lingering illness of the republic’s first leader, Vladislav Ardzinba. A hard-line and generally autocratic leader, Ardzinba alienated many of his former comrades and failed to maintain control over his closest aides and, more important, his relatives. Widespread corruption and ongoing scandals involving members of his family, have gradually eroded the President’s authority and, in a broader sense, the authority of his power.

* The paper is submitted in October 2004.
Several factors account for the domestic political situation in Abkhazia. First and foremost, high levels of democratic freedom and proficient party building should be noted. The opposition media—at least, the press, critical of the incumbent administration (Exo Abxazii, Nužnaya gazeta, Čegemskaya pravda, Delovaya Abkhaziya) enjoy a great deal of popularity. Several opposition parties function along with a number of influential public organisations (People’s Party, Amtsakharra, Aytau, United Abkhazia). Besides, nothing seems to be threatening the current level of democratic freedoms and the multi-party system, at least not in the foreseeable future. The second factor affecting the domestic political situation in the country is that economy and politics—typically for the entire Caucasus region, including North Caucasian subjects of the Russian Federation—are run by clans. Traditionally, there have been two dominating clans in Abkhazia, the Gudauta clan (Bzyb Abkhazia) and the Ochamchiri clan (Abzhuy Abkhazia). The certain equilibrium these two clans have maintained, coupled with the leadership of the jointly acceptable persona (Ardzinba, for instance, have secured a relatively high level of domestic political stability.

On October 3, 2004, the unrecognised Republic of Abkhazia held presidential elections. Remarkably, for the first time an alternative candidate ran in the elections. Possibly, this fact alone has ultimately exacerbated the domestic political situation by adding an exciting, yet dangerous element of intrigue in the presidential election process. Regrettably, instead of an alliance between the “party of power” and the so-called constructive opposition, very feasible only a year and a half ago, we are witnessing division in the political establishment of the republic.

President’s power had gradually grown weaker, as had the authority in Abkhazia in general. The President had retained his strong charisma, but his handicap had become increasingly apparent while the public’s attitude towards his clan and his family had gradually soured. Vladislav Ardzinba began showing symptoms of a serious illness as early as in 2001-2002, during Anri Jergenia’s tenure as Abkhazia’s

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2 Anri Mikhailovich Jergenia was born in 1941 in Leningrad; MA in Law from Moscow State University in 1963; worked as investigator at the Interior Ministry of the Abkhazian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic; chief investigator of the Prosecutor’s Office of the city of