

Working Session 1
Charitable Foundation “ Veresk”

Abkhazia Is Against Nationalism, Racism and Chauvinism

Thank you for providing such a tremendous opportunity to speak at this honorable meeting. As an Abkhazian civil society activist, I would like to bring to your attention the important issue of preventing aggressive nationalism, racism and chauvinism as they are among the root causes of armed conflict and plunge peoples into devastating wars.

Given Abkhazia's multinational status, preventing any kind of manifestation of aggressive nationalism, racism and chauvinism is a priority for Abkhazian society, which, despite only partial recognition of the state's independence and isolation by Europe, is making efforts to create conditions for the full development of all the nations living in Abkhazia and to foster a consensus across society. The rights and freedoms proclaimed in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenants on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, On Civil and Political Rights and other universally recognized international legal acts are among the fundamental principles of the Constitution of the Republic of Abkhazia.

The protracted and bloody Georgian-Abkhazian war, the subsequent economic blockade and the isolation (alluded to above) have caused damage not only on the economic but also the psychological level. The consequences have been so severe that time is still needed to overcome the psychological trauma, and conditions must be created to ensure that people can learn to live free from threats and fear for their future.

To create conditions for such a traumatised community in which there will be no ground for such negative phenomena as nationalism, racism and chauvinism, one must first realise the complexity of the life of Abkhazian society that has had no support for full rehabilitation during the long post-war years, under constant stress, without any serious guarantees for a peaceful resolution to the conflict with Georgia, and faced by its problems on a daily basis. The stubborn refusal of Georgia since 1993 to sign a peace-agreement, coupled with rhetorical speeches from Georgian politicians in relation to both Abkhazia and South Ossetia, can only exert a negative influence on society; this is then extrapolated onto the population of the Gal district of Abkhazia, densely populated by ethnic Mingrelians (regularly categorised as 'Georgians') and contributes to the creation of an image of an 'enemy within'.

The first President of Abkhazia, Vladislav Ardzinba, once (in 1999) signed an agreement on the return of refugees to the Gal district, and, despite frequent aggravation of the situation, as noted by political scientists, Abkhazian society began to develop a more sober attitude to the problem — intolerance and radicalism gradually declined. Regarding the important question of the return of the refugees, the returnees were those not involved in military operations against Abkhazians.

But we should stress that the problem lies essentially on the unsettled relations with Georgia and the still existing threat of a resumption of hostilities, even in spite of the presence of Russian bases. All the worrying trends we see today, especially among the opposition, with calls to remain vigilant, not to forget the ethnicity of the Gal inhabitants, and even to consider them as a potential threat to the Abkhazian state are linked to this issue. Such can easily result in the

formation of a negative public opinion towards these people and might lead to the violation of their rights. Thus, one can see that the obstinacy of Georgia in refusing to resolve the conflict is having the most negative impact on inter-ethnic relations within Abkhazia. Indeed, in the absence of a peace-agreement, it is very difficult to calm the fears of ordinary citizens, which in turn ultimately generate distrust toward the Gal population. It is absolutely necessary to give careful thought to working out democratic mechanisms for Abkhazia's internal structure to include all categories of the population, including the residents of the Gal district.

Representatives of civil society understand that all forms of nationalism, racism, chauvinism, and discrimination can lead to a profound crisis in the society, with long-term adverse consequences that do not contribute to the building of a democratic state. Significant issues of acute importance for the national project (e.g., ensuring national security, issues of ethnic and civic equality) must be taken into consideration and enshrined in the principles underpinning the creation of the nation. In this regard, Abkhazia needs support and assistance, which, regrettably, it has not received in the daunting task of building democratic institutions and establishing solid state-structures in the harsh circumstances it has had to survive. Especially in this regard one has to mention that the opinion of the people living in the country has not merely been utterly ignored by the international community but is regularly discriminated against in favour of Georgia, which, as stated above, 21 years ago inflicted upon us a war for the base purpose of attempting to restore its already fractured territorial integrity.