



საგარეო საკითხებისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების ქართული ფონდი
GEORGIAN FOUNDATION FOR STRATEGIC AND INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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**TOWARD A CRIMEA SCENARIO?
RUSSIA'S ANNEXATION POLICIES IN ABKHAZIA
AND SOUTH OSSETIA AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS**

JOHANNA POPJANEVSKI

EXPERT OPINION



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Introduction

Since independence, the conflicts over the secessionist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have constituted troublesome challenges to Georgia's sovereign interests. Tbilisi's lack of control of 20 percent of its territory has not only compromised Georgia's national identity, it has also delayed important state-building processes. Moreover, Russia's invasion of Georgia in 2008 and its subsequent recognition of the two regions as independent states led to the belated realization that the secessionist conflicts are not merely domestic issues but belong to a larger conflict between Russia and Georgia.

Over the last year, a series of events have again put Georgia's relations with Russia and its breakaway regions at stake. Following the coming to power of Moscow-loyal Raul Khajimba in Abkhazia in August 2014, Moscow has initiated strategic alliance agreements with Sukhumi and Tskhinvali, making the regions further dependent on Russia's military support and increasing Russia's political influence over the secessionist authorities. This has been coupled with rumors of Russian pressure on the de facto governments to hold referendums on integration with the Russian Federation and to accede to the Russian-led Eurasian Union. The recent developments are troublesome, especially in light of Russia's annexation of Crimea and its aggression in Eastern Ukraine. Continuous uncertainty among Georgia's Western partners on how to credibly deal with Moscow's policies vis-à-vis its near abroad allows Russia to pursue its assertive agenda in the region.

Moscow as Both a Conflict Party and Peace Broker

Abkhazia and South Ossetia have been separated from Georgia's de facto control since the early 1990s when the regions' push for independence resulted in wars in both territories. In both cases, Russia interfered through providing direct support to the separatist forces.¹ The war in Abkhazia in 1992 expelled almost 250,000 ethnic Georgians from their homes; to date, most of them have been unable to return. Throughout the 1990s, Russia maintained effective control of the regions through peacekeeping missions, predominantly Russian in nature, and through its leading role in the peace negotiations. As such, paradoxically, Russia was allowed to act as the main peace broker in the region while being a direct party to the conflicts. Meanwhile, Moscow gradually increased its own military and political support to the leaderships. This included installing its own representatives in the de facto governments, especially in South Ossetia where virtually the entire

1 For more detailed information about the conflicts, see, e.g., Svante Cornell, *Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus*, Richmond: Curzon, 2001.

leadership is made up of Russian security personnel. In Abkhazia, Russia maintained a firm military presence but was less successful in gaining a foothold in the political structures. In the region's 2003 presidential elections, Moscow openly backed the current de facto president, KGB-trained Khajimba, but he lost to his pro-independence opponent, Sergei Bagapsh. In response to Bagapsh's defeat, Russia closed its border with the region for several days until a compromise was reached through which Khajimba was made de facto Vice President. In the two subsequent elections, Russia continued to back Khajimba but he was again defeated; against Bagapsh in 2009 and, following the latter's death, against Alexander Ankvab in 2011. It suggested that the Abkhazian people, to a larger extent than the South Ossetian population, were favoring independence rather than closer integration with Russia. To further preserve the Abkhazian identity and prevent foreign exploitation, laws were enforced that prohibit direct foreign purchase of property in the region, also valid vis-à-vis Russians. The former administrations, moreover, embarked on a campaign to promote the use of the Abkhazian language in schools and work places.

Toward Further Integration

In May 2014, large-scale street protests, essentially amounting to a coup d'état, broke out in Abkhazia, organized by the Coordinating Council, a Khajimba-led opposition movement. After days of rallying, the protesters stormed the presidential administration building, forcing then-president Ankvab to flee Sukhumi. The protests were fuelled by public outrage against the administration for its policy of distributing Abkhazian passports in the Georgian-populated Gali district, allowing ethnic Georgians to participate in elections and public life. It also accused the administration of a mishandling of the Abkhazian economy. After an impeachment vote in the parliament on May 30, Ankvab stepped down and called for snap elections. In the following August elections, Khajimba narrowly avoided a runoff against his main opponent, Aslan Bzhania, Head of the National Security Council, securing 50.57 percent of the votes. Three factors seemingly contributed to his victory. First, public discontent with the previous leadership; Ankvab, in particular, had been growing for some time, creating an opening for the Khajimba-dominated opposition to challenge the elite. In Ankvab's camp, few credible alternative candidates existed; Bzhania was relatively unknown in the region's political life. Second, over the course of the elections campaign, Khajimba increasingly portrayed himself as a protector of Abkhazian interests, as opposed to a Russian mouthpiece, even criticizing Ankvab's dependence on Moscow. This likely led him to win over votes from the pro-independence camp. Third, and importantly,

ahead of the elections almost 20,000 ethnic Georgians in the Gali district were stripped of their Abkhazian passports which prevented them from participating in the elections.

A mere week after the elections, Khajimba met with Putin in Moscow to discuss a new alliance treaty between Sukhumi and Moscow providing stronger security guarantees for the region. Following the meeting, Khajimba also declared his intention to close four out of five cross-border checkpoints along the Inguri River that divides Abkhazia from the rest of Georgia, as such effectively limiting the possibility of exchange between the Gali district and the Zugdidi area. A month later, a Russian-drafted version of the proposed Treaty on Alliance and Integration was leaked, suggesting far-reaching changes to the security structures in Abkhazia. The treaty proposal entailed placing the Abkhazian border officials and interior ministry under Russian command, essentially eliminating the autonomy of the Abkhazian security agencies. Notably, Moscow also proposed changes to the Abkhazian legislation to simplify the process for Russian citizens to obtain Abkhazian passports, enabling Russians to purchase land and property in the region. Russia also suggested that Abkhazian customs regulations would fall under Russian law. In exchange, Russia offered enhanced security guarantees for the region through protecting the Abkhazian-Georgian administrative borderline, to step up economic relations between Moscow and Sukhumi and to increase social benefits to Russian passport-holders in the region.

Russia's initial proposal was met with anything but ease in Sukhumi. Local civil society organizations, along with leading lawmakers, slammed the proposal for entailing wide compromises to Abkhazian sovereignty. In a clear attempt to mediate the situation, Khajimba's office announced that Russia's proposal and Khajimba's view differed on several points and that the de facto president was discussing an Abkhazian version of the draft with the parliament.² In early November, Sukhumi presented its version of the treaty, renamed the Treaty on Alliance and Strategic Partnership, entailing more cooperative as opposed to integrative security arrangements. In its own proposal, Sukhumi also completely ruled out Russia's request for simplified procedures for obtaining Abkhazian citizenship. Following discussions between Sukhumi and Moscow, the parties reached a compromise and the treaty was finalized and signed by both sides in late November.

According to the final agreement, Sukhumi and Moscow will have a "co-ordinated" foreign policy and a "common defense and security space" as

2 See, e.g., "Sokhumi Working on its Proposals to New Treaty with Russia," *Civil.ge*, 17 October 2014.

well as a “common social and economic space.” Sukhumi further agreed to harmonize its customs legislation with the regulations of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union within three years.³ While the final treaty still entailed compromises for Sukhumi, the breakaway authorities succeeded in removing the clause regarding citizenship for Russians.

In December, South Ossetian leader Leonid Tibilov announced that a treaty between Tskhinvali and Moscow was also planned, not excluding that it would entail full integration of the region with Russia.⁴

Meanwhile, other worrisome moves by Russia in the region are worth noting as well. Since July 2014, Dagestani authorities have invested significant funds, amounting to USD 730 million, into a road construction project that connects Avaro with Kakheti. As such, the 83-kilometer motorway will constitute an additional access point for Russia to Georgia other than the existing ones in South Ossetia, Abkhazia and Larsi. The Dagestani authorities have stated that the project seeks to enhance economic relations between Makhachkala and Tbilisi; however, it may equally serve as a military transport route for Russia. Given the size of the investment, it is likely that Moscow is providing direct financial support for the project. Tbilisi is viewing the project as a potential security threat and has announced that no intention of following up on the initiative on the Georgian side of the border exists.

Georgian and International Reactions

In Tbilisi, Russia’s move to establish closer ties with the two secessionist regions has caused notable unease. The leading opposition party, the United National Movement (UNM), expressed early concerns regarding Russia’s backing of the coup that led to Ankvab’s resignation. Parts of the leadership in Tbilisi, including former Defense Minister, Irakli Alasania, and President Giorgi Margvelashvili, referred to the coup as a result of Russian infiltration and as an attempt to sabotage Georgia’s Western integration processes. Shortly after the Abkhazia-Russia treaty was announced, Tbilisi officially condemned the agreement, referring to it as an annexation attempt by Russia, a threat both to stability in the region and to the process of improving relations between Georgia and Russia.⁵ However, the Geor-

3 See, e.g., “Moscow, Sokhumi Endorse Final Text of New Treaty,” *Civil.ge*, 22 November 2014.

4 “S. Ossetian Leader on Planned New Treaty with Moscow,” *Civil.ge*, 11 December 2014.

5 See, e.g., “Tbilisi Condemns Russia’s Move to Sign New Treaty with Sokhumi,” *Civil.ge*, 22 November 2014 and “Parliament Condemns Russia’s ‘Attempt to Annex’ Abkhazia,” *Civil.ge*, 18 October 2014.

gian government was initially careful in its response to the developments, likely as a result of its ambition to normalize relations with Russia. This led the UNM to accuse the government of inaction and to call for a protest street rally that took place in Tbilisi on November 15 and gathered thousands.

In spite of the serious nature of the unfolding developments, Georgia's Western allies – just like the Georgian government – were initially modest in their reactions. Shortly after the treaty was announced, US Ambassador Richard Norland restated the US's support for Georgia's territorial integrity but added "It's a little hard to imagine more integration [of Abkhazia with Russia]." Others appeared more concerned. Lithuanian Foreign Minister Linas Linkevicius stressed at a Friends of Georgia meeting in Luxembourg on October 21 that "We must condemn and stand against any attempt aimed to legalize the annexation of Georgian territories. All these efforts are the logical continuation of what Russia is doing in other regions, for example in Crimea." Since then, the West has sharpened its tone against Moscow, especially following the conclusion of its partnership treaty with Abkhazia. In late November, the EU's Foreign Policy Chief, Federica Mogherini, stated that the agreement is "Detrimental to ongoing efforts to stabilize the security situation in the region."⁶ The US and NATO have also denounced the treaty. The US State Department stated in November that Washington would not recognize the document, urging Russia to instead fulfill its obligation under the 2008 ceasefire agreement with Georgia.⁷ NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg stated that the treaty "Violates Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity and blatantly contradicts the principles of international law, OSCE principles and Russia's international commitments."⁸

Conclusions

Russia's recent actions in Georgia strongly suggest that Moscow is tightening its grip on Georgia's two breakaway territories, possibly aiming at fully integrating the regions with the Russian Federation. This is alarming, especially in light of Russia's annexation of Crimea last year and its continuous aggressiveness in its neighborhood.

6 "EU: Moscow's Treaty with Sokhumi 'Detrimental to Efforts to Stabilise Situation,'" *Civil.ge*, 25 November 2014.

7 "US 'Will Not Recognize Any So Called Treaty' Between Moscow and Sokhumi," *Civil.ge*, 25 November 2014.

8 "NATO 'Doesn't Recognize So Called Treaty' Between Moscow and Sokhumi," *Civil.ge*, 25 November 2014.

Khajimba's victory in Abkhazia is noteworthy as it shows that Russia has gained a political, as opposed to just military, advantage in the region. This is troublesome as stronger Russian influence in the local decision-making structures may open up to full annexation of the region. However, given his narrow victory and his promises to the public, Khajimba is likely facing a challenge in balancing the interests of Moscow with those of the Abkhazian people who are largely still in favor of Abkhazian independence. This already became visible in connection with the treaty negotiations where leading civil society organizations and lawmakers objected strongly to Russia's attempts to compromise Abkhazia's sovereignty. While Moscow – through having its own candidate now installed in power – to a larger extent than before is able to exercise political influence over the leadership, the public's reactions make it doubtful whether or not Russia can control the region's future simply through Khajimba. The property rights issue is likely to become particularly decisive in this regard. The current Abkhazian legislation that prohibits foreigners from buying property and in the region is an important tool for the Abkhazians to preserve their demographic advantage and to prevent the region from exploitation by Russian investors. Notably, by suggesting amendments to Abkhazian law to simplify the process only for Russian citizens to obtain Abkhazian passports, Moscow not only attempted to facilitate its own presence in the region but also effectively excluded the possibility for other foreign investments there. While the government succeeded in removing the provision from the treaty, Russia is likely to continue to push the issue at the political level.

Nonetheless, Abkhazia's desire for independence vis-à-vis Moscow should not be underestimated. This constitutes an opportunity for stronger engagement by the West in the region which could potentially counteract Russia's current domination. The situation is more problematic with regard to South Ossetia; the leadership in Tskhinvali has long been under the direct influence of Moscow and the leadership has openly stated that it does not exclude integration with Russia. A public voice in favor of independence is also largely missing in South Ossetia.

The context in which the current developments are taking place is important to note. Abkhazia and South Ossetia have long constituted tools for Moscow to destabilize Georgia and to delay its Western integration processes. Starting from the early 1990s, the failure of the West to perceive and challenge Russia's assertiveness in the region and to engage credibly in the peace processes allowed Russia to employ increasingly aggressive measures against Georgia while maintaining its control over the peace-keeping and negotiations, effectively preventing a solution to the conflicts. Tensions escalated with the coming to power of Vladimir Putin in Russia

in 1999 and, further, with the accession to power of Mikheil Saakashvili in Georgia in 2004. The Western orientation of the Tbilisi government did not rhyme well with Putin's interest in controlling his neighborhood. From 2006, a series of provocations, coupled with the West's continuous neglect of Russia's actions and its unwillingness to provide security guarantees to Georgia, led to the outbreak of a five-day war between Georgia and Russia in August 2008. The war resulted in the occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia by Russia and, subsequently, the recognition by Moscow of their independence. Ever since, Russia has maintained and expanded its military presence in the two territories in violation of the peace agreement that was concluded between Tbilisi and Moscow in 2008. While, as such, Tbilisi has remained under a direct and continuous security threat from Russia, it has pursued its ambition to integrate more closely with the EU and NATO. With the launch of the Eastern Partnership Initiative in 2009, Georgia's EU integration process, in particular, became more pronounced: negotiations on a visa-free regime with the EU were initiated and in June 2014 Georgia signed the EU Association Agreement, entailing access to the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). At the Wales Summit in September 2014, Tbilisi was promised closer cooperation with NATO, including new NATO training activities in Georgia. Thus, Russia's recent moves in Georgia, just like in Ukraine, must be analyzed in the light of Moscow's interest to preserve its power status in the region and to prevent Western interference in its sphere of influence. It is unlikely a coincidence that Moscow's actions in relation to Abkhazia and South Ossetia coincide with important steps in Georgia's Euro-Atlantic processes. Rather, it testifies to the notion that Russia is employing measures to harm Georgia's Western integration.

Indeed, for Tbilisi the implications of the recent events are very serious. First, closer integration of Abkhazia with Russia, and possible complete Russian absorption of South Ossetia, are severe setbacks in Georgia's campaign to reintegrate the regions and ensure the return of IDPs to the two territories. Second, the current government has sought to improve relations between Tbilisi and Moscow through, for instance, appointing a special envoy, Zurab Abashidze, to engage in direct talks with the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister, Grigory Karasin. While the Georgian government was initially careful in its response to Russia's actions both in relation to Ukraine and, later, in Abkhazia, Moscow's treaty proposal led Tbilisi to significantly sharpen its tone, even threatening to withdraw from the Abashidze-Karasin talks. As such, Georgia is facing a challenge in balancing its continuously strong interest of restoring its territorial integrity with its quest to, at the very least, normalize relations with Russia. Russia's recent

actions in the region have made it clear that any improved relations with Moscow will be impossible without subjugation to Russian interests which carries serious threats to Georgian sovereignty. Given its recent actions in Ukraine, Moscow is unlikely to stop at attempting to fully annex Abkhazia and South Ossetia but is likely to pursue attempts to destabilize Georgia either politically or militarily.

The developments have also brought with them domestic controversies at the political level in Tbilisi. The UNM, in particular, has demanded a more determined response to Russia's annexation attempts from the government. Georgian political life has long been strongly polarized, worsened through a series of arrests of former government officials in 2012-2014. A continuously divided political scene in Georgia, especially with regard to issues that essentially are of important mutual interest, does little to counter the threat to which Georgia remains exposed by Russia.⁹

In sum, the developments in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, for all intents and purposes an attempt by Moscow to further destabilize Georgia and sabotage its Western processes, highlight the urgent need for a firm international response. The West's ambiguity in relation to Russia's previous actions in the region has not gone unnoticed in Moscow. Russia continues to blatantly ignore its commitments under the 2008 peace agreement through its occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and the partnership agreements constitute yet another violation of Georgia's sovereignty. While the West's economic sanctions against Russia in connection with Ukraine have caused damage to the Russian economy, Moscow has displayed its intention to pursue its assertive agenda in the region. The developments in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, coupled with Russia's road project and attempts to infiltrate in Georgian society, show that the risk of renewed military action against Georgia cannot be excluded. It is, therefore, vital that the international community, as well as Georgia's political forces, unite efforts to counter the threat Russia poses to stability in the region. Speeding up Georgia's integration with NATO and the EU is vital in this regard. Equally, it is essential that Georgia's political forces overcome their differences and engage in constructive dialogue regarding issues of mutual national interest and develop a strategy in relation to Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Russia.

9 See, e.g., Mairbek Vatchagavaev, "Planned Road From Dagestan to Georgia—Road of Friendship, or of War?," *Eurasia Daily Monitor*, Volume: 11 Issue: 174, 2 October 2014.