



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობების კვლევის ფონდი
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**Syria's Recognition of the So-called "Independence" of the Occupied
Regions of Georgia**

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On May 29, 2018, the Syrian Arab Republic recognized the so-called “independence” of Georgia’s occupied territories of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region. If we take into account that Vanuatu and Tuvalu have now renounced their recognition, Syria became the fifth country (after Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Nauru) to recognize the so-called “independence” of the separatists.¹

After the 2008 Russian aggression and the full occupation of the aforementioned regions, Russia initiated the so-called “recognition” process and started bolstering it. Tbilisi soon countered this with a non-recognition policy. Very soon after, Russia, for various reasons, stopped actively lobbying the process on the international arena.

The activities were so dormant for the past couple of years that a sort of false feeling was formed in certain circles of the Government of Georgia that “Georgia succeeded with the non-recognition policy vis-à-vis the occupied regions.”² Overall, this caused a certain relaxation of attention at the state level as concerned this issue. As a case in point, we can recall the fact of the appointment of Davit Jalaghania, who held the position of the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia after 2008,³ as the Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary of Georgia to the Swiss Confederacy in October 2017. Mr. Jalaghania had supervised the non-recognition policy at the Ministry and knew the details very well. This is probably why he was not replaced in 2012, unlike other deputy ministers, given the overall major government changes in Georgia at that time.

Georgia’s Reaction

The local public had the impression that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, as well as the Government of Georgia, only learned about the decision of the Syrian government from the media.⁴

We believe that in the case of the existence of a properly-run state machine, it would be possible to obtain some sort of prior information about this and take preventive steps, especially when the country has a non-recognition policy with “vulnerable” countries in this regard determined and representatives of the occupation regime periodically dropping certain hints. For example, on September 1, 2017, the so-called “Minister of Foreign Affairs of South Ossetia,” Dimitri Medoev, announced that “South Ossetia is working on the

¹ <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/29257710.html>

² <https://www.ipress.ge/new/80589-tengiz-fkhaladze-saqartvelos-okupirebuli-teritoriebis-araghiarebis-politika-mogebuli-aqvs>

³ <https://old.civil.ge/geo/article.php?id=31717>

⁴ <http://georgianpress.ge/com/news/view/30886?lang=1>

expansion of the recognition of its independence around the world and strengthening international connections. You quite rightly pointed out that the work is on-going both in Europe as well as Asia and the Americas. I cannot speak about which specific countries this involves, however...”⁵

On the same day, May 29, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia condemned the Syrian government’s decision. The statement says that “the Syrian regime made an illegal decision and, as a result of the pressure from the Russian Federation, established so-called diplomatic relations with the Russian occupation regime in Sokhumi and Tskhinvali in violation of the fundamental norms and principles of international law. This decision represents the direct support for Russia’s military aggression, ethnic cleansing and occupation of Georgia’s indivisible regions – Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia.”⁶ At the same time, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia started procedures for severing diplomatic relations with the Syrian Arab Republic, calling on the international community to condemn the actions of the Russian Federation and the Assad regime.⁷ With this initiative, the Government of Georgia quickly severed diplomatic ties with the Syrian Arab Republic on May 31, 2018,⁸ taking certain steps on the international arena as well.

Overall, the Assad regime did not pay an adequate “price” for this recognition. Relations with Georgia have never been important for Assad. To put it bluntly, he loses nothing by the fact that Georgia has ended relations with his government.⁹

International Community’s Reaction

The issue of the so-called “recognition” of the occupied Georgian regions by the Syrian Arab Republic was raised at a UN Security Council session where representatives of Ukraine, the UK and Sweden made statements supporting Georgia. Georgia’s other allies, such as the United States, the European Union, NATO,¹⁰ Turkey,¹¹ Norway,¹² Portugal¹³ and Italy,¹⁴ also condemned the decision of the Assad regime.

⁵ <http://netgazeti.ge/news/218276/>

⁶ [http://www.mfa.gov.ge/News/sagareo-saqmeta-saministros-ganckhadeba-\(20\).aspx](http://www.mfa.gov.ge/News/sagareo-saqmeta-saministros-ganckhadeba-(20).aspx)

⁷ [http://www.mfa.gov.ge/News/sagareo-saqmeta-saministros-ganckhadeba-\(20\).aspx](http://www.mfa.gov.ge/News/sagareo-saqmeta-saministros-ganckhadeba-(20).aspx)

⁸ http://gov.ge/files/495_66194_850862_1221.pdf

⁹ <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/29257710.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.mfa.gov.ge/News/siriis-mkhridan-saqartvelos-okupirebuli-regionebis.aspx?CatID=5>

¹¹ <https://1tv.ge/news/turqeti-siriis-mier-afkhazetisa-da-samkhret-osetis-e-w-damoukideblobis-aghiarebas-saertashoriso-samartlis-gaeros-qartiisa-da-gaeros-ushishroebis-sabchos-gadawyvetilebebis-ukhesh-darghvevad-miichnevs/>

¹² <https://1tv.ge/news/norvegiis-mtavroba-siriis-gadawyvetileba-aghiaros-saqartvelos-regionebis-damoukidebloba-saertashoriso-samartlis-darghvevaa/>

At the same time, it must be pointed out that an inter-structure meeting was held at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia on May 29 where the topic of Syria's recognition of the so-called "independence" of the occupied Georgian regions as well as actions to be taken afterwards, were discussed at the deputy ministerial level.¹⁵

It is possible that it was at this meeting that they discussed intensifying their contacts with the Syrian opposition forces, something which the wider public learned a month after. More specifically, at that time, the President of the Syrian Negotiations Committee, Nasr Al-Hariri, strongly condemned the illegal decision of the Assad regime regarding the recognition of the so-called "independence" of the occupied Georgian territories of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, clearly confirming steady support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders.¹⁶

Reasons for the Recognition of the So-called "Independence"

It is interesting why the so-called "independence" was recognized now and what the actual reasons were.

Several versions were put forward. Among them, especially notable is the opinion that since autumn 2015, which marked the beginning of the involvement of the Kremlin in the conflict, the Assad regime has become even more dependent on Russia. According to this version, Syria's recognition of the so-called "independence" of the occupied Georgian regions was due to Russian manipulation. Georgian officials¹⁷ and some experts¹⁸ support this version.

Another reason was the fact that historically large groups of Abkhazians and the Northern Caucasus diaspora used to live in Syria and continue living there to this day and lobby the Assad regime for the recognition of the so-called "independence" of Abkhazia.

It should definitely be pointed out that such enclaves did exist and it is possible that they played a certain role. However, it is a fact that we had this situation for all these years and yet there was no recognition of any "independence."

¹³ <https://1tv.ge/news/portugalia-sagartvelos-teritoriuli-mtlianobis-mkhardamcher-ganckhadebas-avrcelebs/>

¹⁴ <https://1tv.ge/news/italia-asadis-redjimis-mier-sagartvelos-okupirebuli-teritoriis-aghiarebas-gmobs/>

¹⁵ <http://www.mfa.gov.ge/News/sagareo-saqmeta-saministroshi-ucyebatashorisi-shek.aspx>

¹⁶ <http://www.interpressnews.ge/ge/politika/501023-siriis-opoziciuri-dzalebis-umaghlesi-molaparakebis-komitetis-prezidenti-asadis-rezhimis-mier-afkhazethisa-da-ckhinalis-damoukideblobis-aghiarebas-gmobs.html?ar=A>

¹⁷ [http://www.mfa.gov.ge/News/sagareo-saqmeta-saministros-ganckhadeba-\(20\).aspx](http://www.mfa.gov.ge/News/sagareo-saqmeta-saministros-ganckhadeba-(20).aspx)

¹⁸ <https://www.ambebi.ge/article/223803-ra-shedegi-ekneba-siriis-mier-okupirebuli-samxret-osetis-damoukideblobis-agiarebas-ekspertebis-shepaseba/>

We believe that one interesting factor played a decisive role in the issue of the recognition: in order to curtail possible problems which could arise, the Government of Georgia avoided directly criticizing the Assad regime. However, this year, after the regime once again used chemical weapons in Syria, the Georgian side altered its position which was expressed in a statement made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia on April 7, 2018.

Specifically, it says that: “The Ministry of Foreign Affairs expresses its concern over the use of chemical weapons in the town of Khan Shaykhun which resulted in massive casualties among the peaceful population. By deploying chemical weapons, Syria violates the norms of international law. These actions could not continue to go unanswered. Therefore, we believe that the United States’ response was timely, limited and proportional. It is important that the strikes occurred only after due warning.”¹⁹

Conclusion

- The role of a catalyst in the issue of the Syrian Arab Republic’s recognition of the so-called “independence” of the occupied Georgian regions was played by the April 7, 2018 statement made by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia;
- Russia has the resources and the potential to create problems for us in terms of non-recognition not only in the Middle East but other regions as well;
- The recognition of the so-called “independence” of the occupied Georgian regions by the Assad regime, which is extremely dependent on Russia, is definitely no huge tragedy. However, it would still be an inadequate choice to ignore it completely;
- Whether or not we like the Assad regime, it represents the Government of Syria and the recognition of the so-called “independence” of the occupied territories by it is a bad precedent;
- The Syrian case also showed that the risk of the recognition of the so-called “independence” of the occupied Georgian territories is real and letting one’s guard down in this regard can be detrimental;
- There is a myriad of such so-called “vulnerable” states on all of the continents of the world – ones that are failed states as well as non-democratic regimes where the Kremlin has trade-economic and military-political leverage for achieving its desired results;
- This Syrian action is also undesirable because it is a country in close proximity to Georgia and we were forced to sever diplomatic relations with it;
- If before the countries of Oceania, Latin America and Africa were more immediate concerns in terms of non-recognition, now the Middle East (and hence the Arab world)

¹⁹ <http://mfa.gov.ge/News/%E2%80%8Bsaqareo-saqmeta-saministros-ganckhadeba.aspx>

has also been added to it. Consequently, the Government of Georgia will have to conduct active work in this regard with the Middle Eastern states and their leaders who might not be distinguished by high levels of democracy;

- At the moment, Jordan, Yemen and Libya are on the list of the so-called “vulnerable” states in the Middle East. Georgia must strengthen diplomatic contacts in this direction and take preventive measures;
- It would be desirable for the appropriate Georgian structures to jointly assess the situation, reviewing and correcting the non-recognition policy upon necessity;
- It is necessary to constantly conduct coordinated work with our Western partners about the non-recognition policy;
- This year, the Georgian Threat Assessment Document for 2015-2018, which identifies the threats facing Georgia, analyzing the possible scenarios for their realization, their probability and results, expires. Unfortunately, it is yet unclear which structure will renew it and how. It is also vitally important to make this issue clear.