

Insecurity and Suspicion in the Wake of Urban Development Projects in Batumi, Adjara

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Abstract

Based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork in Batumi, Adjara, this article discusses how insecurity and suspicion has emerged in local perceptions of governmental development projects. Unemployed youth, in particular, show scepticism towards these developments, and although believing it good that things are being done, many feel uncertain as to where such developments are leading, what groups organize the projects, and who benefits from them.

Political Changes

With a subtropical climate and a location on the shores of the Black Sea, Adjara was well known in the Soviet Union as a holiday paradise for prominent leaders and a key area for growing crops such as tea, tobacco and citrus. As the Soviet Union fell apart in 1991, both the blossoming tourist industry and various agricultural endeavors came to an almost complete halt. Adjara had gained status as an autonomous region within the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. Unlike two other such regions, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Adjara retained this status as Georgia gained independence. Aslan Abashidze's leadership was the main reason behind this success because he managed to steer the region clear of the armed conflicts emerging in others parts of Georgia, although his political relationship to the government in Tbilisi grew strained. Taking control over the police, army and customs offices, Abashidze held a firm grip on Adjara and its population, ruling the region in a despotic manner throughout the 1990s with little regard for Georgia's leaders. In May 2004, a few months after Georgia's Rose Revolution, Adjara again came under the direct control of the central government in Tbilisi, now led by the newly elected Mikheil Saakashvili. Ousting Abashidze from Adjara was seen as one of Saakashvili's first major successes.

Once Abashidze fled the region, things started to change rapidly. Among the most prominent changes was a concerted effort to boost tourism in Adjara. These efforts focused mainly on Batumi and sought to secure financial growth while also, through a series of demolition projects, signal that Abashidze's regime had come to an end. Myriad construction projects began, many of them based on a wish to symbolically erase the former influence of Abashidze by demolishing material signs of his previous presence.

Official rhetoric surrounding the projects declared that the future of the region (and the nation at large) was at stake. If the tourism sector could reach—and even exceed—its former prominence, it would ensure

the kind of financial growth that would potentially benefit the local population. In the many public speeches delivered by President Saakashvili during his frequent visits to Batumi, he made it clear that developing tourism was a high priority, stating that Batumi was to become “the number one tourist destination on the Black Sea” and that the number of tourists visiting Batumi would reach that of Barcelona and Dubai in the years to come. While the president was full of good intentions, locals perceived his goals far differently.

My research, based on long-term ethnographic fieldwork among unemployed youth in Batumi in 2008–2009¹, revealed many young people to be sceptical towards the developments taking place in their city. It was not that they bemoaned the fact that Abashidze no longer controlled the region—many things had indeed been problematic during his time in power. The frequent (and at times complete) lack of electricity rendered streets dangerous at night, and poverty, crime and violence had been inherent features of their everyday lives. But although these aspects of life had been inconvenient, they also provided a perverse degree of certainty in the sense of their permanency. For instance, for many young people, particularly those roughly between the ages of 18 and 25, the time of Abashidze was perceived as a period of neither “post” nor “transition”. That is, it was not seen as something which had followed Soviet times and it was not seen as something necessarily leading to anything different. The tumultuous period from the early 1990s to the revolution in 2003 had simply formed the background to their childhoods and youth. As one young man made clear in an interview, he had not experienced his childhood as being in any way extraordinary because he had had nothing to compare it with.

1 The fieldwork was conducted during nine months and was based on a series of methods, mainly including participant observation among, and semi-structured interviews with, a group of 25 young men in Batumi. Data also included local policy papers and articles in various local newspapers.

For him, crime or street violence was something he had grown up with, and something he knew how to handle.

Suspicion and Conspiracy

With the ousting of Abashidze, life in Batumi had become more secure. But the developments aimed at securing the future of the region initiated by the government of Saakashvili were often read with scepticism. Why would this be so? Several issues were at stake.

First, many were unsure whether the future promoted by the government was one in which they themselves figured. Why, as many locals complained in interviews, did the government not build factories instead of hotels? This would ensure a more constant and secure source of income as the tourist-season not only is short but also uncertain in terms of the expected number of tourists actually coming. With the war in August 2008 such doubts increased dramatically. Conducting my fieldwork in Batumi at the time, I witnessed how the tourist season came to an abrupt end, and fears that the war would ruin not only that season, but many seasons to come were widespread. As one man noted; “The good thing about the war is that now people in Europe know where Georgia is—the bad is that now no one will ever dare to come here.” By the summer of 2009, tourists did indeed return to Batumi. According to local statistics around 137,000 foreign visitors came to the city, but although significant, this was not a number matching the desires of planners and politicians. The great quantity of hotels built in no way corresponded to the number of clients. The disparity meant that the vast majority frequently stood empty and many local businessmen lost considerable amounts of money. Who, locals complained in interviews, would ever stay in these hotels? Who were they being built for? Why so many?

Secondly, and in some ways related to the above, determining who was behind the projects was often unclear. One popular opinion was that it was Saakashvili himself, or at least his family or friends, who were trying to earn money on state-sponsored projects. Another theory was that the actual reason for the many hotels being built was related to a ring of businessmen (Russian, Turkish or Kazak) seeking to launder money illicitly earned through relations to organized crime. Some held that it was in fact Abashidze who, through Russian mediators, was slowly regaining power in the region. This, some argued, was perhaps even taking place with the knowledge of Saakashvili who, the argument went, officially promoted connections being built with the West while secretly allowing Russia to take over. Ironically, as governmental attempts to promote transparency and eradicate corruption intensified, local perception seemed to be not

that corruption had been reduced, but rather that it had become better hidden.

Thirdly, concerned groups of citizens arranged public gatherings in the city, expressing their criticism of the architectural styles of the new buildings. A much discussed case was that of the Sheraton hotel—the first high-rise in central Batumi. While some were angered by the very size of the building, arguing that it went against the general appearance and historical-architectural legacy of a city consisting of much lower buildings, others were nervous that the design of the building bore traces of Turkish architecture. The top of the building was considered to resemble a Muslim minaret which was read as a sign of Turkish businessmen and architects secretly attempting to reinstate Turkish influence in the region. Such agitations were further fuelled by the fact that many of the construction-workers were held to be Turkish and not Georgian, meaning that jobs related to the many construction projects were not created for the local population but for foreigners.

It is noteworthy that there are religious undertones in the suspicions and conspiracies at stake, especially in relation to Turkish business interests, and these are often connected to a perceived threat of Muslim influence. Although a city where the majority of the population (around 63%) is Georgian Orthodox, the Turkish influence in the region’s historical past is vividly remembered. It is however also noteworthy that suspicions and conspiracies were rarely (if ever) framed as a question of Adjara vs. Georgia. Local aggravations toward the government, then, should not read as separatist sentiments. Developments in Batumi were rather seen as being an extreme case of processes taking place in many other major cities in Georgia. Indeed, the tensions existing locally in Batumi also exist among large parts of the population in Georgia proper in relation to reform and modernisation processes that have taken place since the revolution.

Conclusions

Whether the suspicions or conspiracies outlined above are related to actual reality is hard to determine—they might be truthful and they might not. At one level this is irrelevant. What is interesting is the ways in which they have come to animate local perceptions of contemporary developments in Adjara. There were, of course, also numerous locals who shook their heads at such opinions, saying that it was nonsense or mere hearsay. But suspicions, conspiracy theories, gossip, scepticism, uncertainties, and at times outright fear, thrived in Batumi in the shadows of governmental constructions. This prompts me to advise attention to the local ambiguities surrounding governmental efforts to secure Adjara’s

future development. As reflected in Nana Papiashvili's article on developments in Batumi (also in this issue), statistics show locals to be positively minded toward developments concerning infrastructure (roads, gas supply, sewage, trash collection), but more sceptical when it comes to questions of what has been done in relation to social issues, unemployment and healthcare. This is a direct result of the fact that recent developments in Adjara, and particularly Batumi, have been aimed at the tourist industry rather than towards the more immediate needs of the local population. In this sense the development of Adjara and Batumi has been remarkably narrow, primarily addressing only one sector: tourism. To be sure, if tourism reaches the heights aimed at by the government (with several million visitors coming to the region each year) many locals will, potentially,

benefit from the developments taking place in terms of increased job opportunities. But if this does not happen, then what? Indeed, the number of tourists visiting Adjara has increased substantially within recent years. However, the tourist season in Adjara is still restricted to a couple of months during summer. In terms of possible employment the remaining months of the year continue to be marked by a serious lack of opportunities for large parts of the local population, and future development policies should take this into account. If Batumi is to become the success-story hoped for, current developments need to be paired with an equal amount of attention being paid to other sectors where jobs could be created, and, more importantly, to the social needs of the local population.

About the Author

Martin Demant Frederiksen holds a PhD in Social Anthropology and is currently External Lecturer at the Institute of Culture and Society, University of Aarhus, Denmark.

Suggested Further Reading

- Peled, Daniella 2011. "Batumi Boom—Georgia". *Monocle* Vol. 48(5).
- Frederiksen, Martin Demant 2011. "Good hearts or big bellies—Dzimakatcoba and images of masculinity in the Republic of Georgia". In: Vered Amit & Noel Dyck (Eds.) *Young men in uncertain times*. Berghahn Books.
- Frederiksen, Martin Demant 2011. *Haunted by time—Brotherhoods and temporal margins in the Republic of Georgia*. PhD Thesis. Aarhus University.

CHRONICLE

From 27 March to 22 April 2012

27 March 2012	The Chief of the General Staff of the Armenian Armed Forces Colonel-General Yuri Khachaturov visits Georgia
29 March 2012	The nineteenth round of the international Geneva talks between Georgia and Russia is held focusing on the non-use of force and international security arrangements
29 March 2012	The World Bank's private-sector investment arm, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) become shareholders in the Bank of Georgia by converting some of their loans to the bank into equity
30 March 2012	Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin accuses Georgia of setting up an illegal armed formation next to the administrative border with the breakaway region of Abkhazia
1 April 2012	Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borisov visits Georgia to discuss energy and transport projects between the two countries
3 April 2012	Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili meets with NATO Secretary General Anders Fogh Rasmussen at the NATO headquarters in Brussels
3 April 2012	The new parliament in the breakaway region of Abkhazia elects Valery Bganba as its new speaker
4 April 2012	Georgia's Civil Registry Agency declares that billionaire opposition politician Bidzina Ivanishvili is not eligible to obtain Georgian citizenship through a naturalization process

6 April 2012	Georgia says it has ceased its obligations under the Open Skies Treaty vis-à-vis Russia
6 April 2012	Georgia invites relevant international organizations to deploy long-term election observation missions to monitor the entire electoral campaign in the country in the lead up to the October parliamentary elections
8 April 2012	A mass opposition protest, including the Azerbaijan Popular Front Party (APFP), Musavat (Equality), and the People's Party as well as NGOs and youth groups, calls for reforms and the resignation of Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in Baku
9 April 2012	The ex-chief of the local KGB Leonid Tibilov is declared the winner of the presidential runoff by the electoral commission in the breakaway republic of South Ossetia
9 April 2012	Georgian minister of culture and monument protection Nikoloz Rurua says that the Stalin museum in the Soviet dictator's hometown of Gori will be transformed into a Stalinism museum to focus on the Soviet regime's repressions
10 April 2012	Georgia tests a domestically-produced drone
11 April 2012	The opposition Industry Will Save Georgia party joins the opposition coalition Georgian Dream led by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili
12 April 2012	Six persons suspected of having participated in the assassination attempt on Abkhaz leader Alexander Ankvab are arrested in the breakaway region of Abkhazia
12 April 2012	A film festival of Azerbaijani films is cancelled in Armenia's second largest city of Gyumri after dozens of protesters block the festival venue
12 April 2012	The Russian Foreign Ministry recommends Russian citizens to refrain from travelling to Georgia due to the absence of security in the country for Russian citizens
17 April 2012	Georgian Prime Minister Nika Gilauri tells the first high-level meeting of the Open Government Partnership (OGP) in Brazil that the government is setting up an agency, the Georgia Reforms and Partnership Enterprise (GRAPE), to promote and export the country's reforms worldwide
18 April 2012	Georgian Foreign Minister Grigol Vashadze meets with U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton in the NATO headquarters in Brussels
18 April 2012	Azerbaijani investigative journalist Idrak Abbasov is beaten by security personnel from the SOCAR state energy company after filming a confrontation that erupted when SOCAR employees were demolishing houses in the village of Sulutepe near Baku
19 April 2012	NATO reiterates having "disagreements in principle" with Russia over Georgia during a meeting of foreign ministers in the framework of the NATO-Russia council in Brussels
19 April 2012	Azerbaijani security forces say they have killed the head of a group allegedly linked to al-Qaeda and have arrested 19 of his supporters who were planning to carry out terrorist attacks in Azerbaijan
22 April 2012	Several thousand protesters from the opposition movement demand the release of political prisoners and the resignation of Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev in Baku
22 April 2012	Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili and American property tycoon Donald Trump unveil a construction project for a residential tower to which Trump has lent his name in Georgia's Black Sea resort of Batumi

Compiled by Lili Di Puppo

For the full chronicle since 2009 see www.laender-analysen.de/cad