

riety? Which flexible arrangements are conceivable for the issuing of visas for Abkhaz holders of Georgian passports that would allow Abkhazia to be included in European education and exchange programs?

Which measures would allow the EU to enhance the efficiency of its necessary long-term engagement on behalf of political and legal reforms in Georgia? The success of these reforms is a precondition for the country's peaceful domestic consolidation and thus also for greater flexibility towards the secessionist republics.

Since the events of August 2008, the prospects of peaceful reconciliation between Georgia and Abkha-

zia, whether in the framework of a common state or as two cooperating independent states, have become even more distant. The same is true to an even greater extent for the possible integration of both into a "political Europe" expanded to include the Black Sea region. Nevertheless, that seems to be the only alternative to the development that currently seems to be the most likely one, namely a factual annexation of the small Abkhaz state by Russia in a Southern Caucasus that will likely be afflicted by geopolitical confrontation and instability for a long time to come.

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Opinion

Georgia's Relationship with Abkhazia

By Paata Zakareisvili, Tbilisi

Abstract

The August 2008 conflict between Georgia and Russia fundamentally changed the situation regarding the separatist territories in Georgia, fundamentally strengthening Russia's position. President Mikheil Saakashvili's government pursued contradictory policies on Abkhazia during 2004–2005, holding talks with the separatist government while also criticizing Russia's role. Georgia's decision to send troops into the Kodori Gorge in July 2006 put its relationship with the separatist region into an irreversible downward spiral. Between 2006 and 2008, the Georgian government could not offer a comprehensive plan for resolving the conflict. Russia played a provocative role at this time, but the Georgian government did its best to ensure that the Abkhaz separatist leadership adopted a pro-Russian position. Moving forward in the wake of the 2008 fighting, the most likely way to resolve the conflict is to reduce Abkhazia's isolation, which only increases Russia's control over it, and develop a more democratic Georgia that will attract Abkhazia away from the authoritarian Russia.

A New Reality on the Ground

The six-day armed conflict that took place from 7 to 12 August 2008 between Georgia and Russia was not unexpected, though the beginning was a surprise as were the inadequate and disproportional activities and reactions the two sides took. It was obvious that military preparations, including political components, had been underway for a long time. Nevertheless, this war could have been avoided. Unfortunately, the sides did their best to launch military attacks rather than try to prevent them.

The six-day blitzkrieg produced disastrous consequences. The fighting disrupted all the institutions working to resolve the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian conflicts. Accordingly, the parties must redefine the types of conflict that are taking place, the various participants in these conflicts and their status. Russia is seeking to change fundamentally the institutions involved in the conflicts, creating a new reality on the ground. All of these changes present a new challenge for Georgia as new state entities are emerging on Georgian territory. We should take this new

reality into account and not pretend that nothing is happening.

The Mistakes of Previous Years

Understanding the current situation requires an analysis of mistakes made in previous years. By August 2008, military conflict had created two frozen conflicts on Georgian territory: Abkhazia, where military conflict ended in autumn 1993, and the South Ossetian Autonomous Region, where fighting ended in summer 1992.

In 2004–2005 the overall social-political situation changed in Georgia as a whole and in Abkhazia. By holding relatively free elections, both societies replaced undemocratic and corrupt systems and brought new groups to power. The changes infused new dynamics into the process of conflict resolution. The impact on Georgian politics has been both negative and positive.

May 2004 marked a turning point when President Mikheil Saakashvili easily resolved the long-running political crisis in Adjara, which had represented a third crisis zone inside Georgia. He removed the tribalistic regime of Aslan Abashidze, the head of the Autonomous Republic of Adjara, who had ruled for many years. After this first success, Saakashvili believed that the other frozen conflicts on Georgian territory could be resolved peacefully. The euphoric president decided to change the dynamics in South Ossetia. For this purpose, Saakashvili began to conduct a show of force, issuing commands to the Ossetian side. Unfortunately, in summer 2004 the efforts by Saakashvili and Minister of Internal Affairs Irakli Okruashvili to return South Ossetia to Georgia resulted in bloodshed. At that time, only Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania's intervention blocked a military attack and opened a process of negotiations.

The situation remained extremely fluid during the course of 2005. In addition to efforts to address the situation in South Ossetia, changes started to take place regarding Abkhazia. At that time, Irakli Alasania, President Saakashvili's personal representative to address the issue, stressed the importance of establishing direct contacts with the Abkhazian side. Georgia and Abkhazia began developing a joint project focusing on the "Nonrenewal of War". In December 2005 Saakashvili confirmed that he was going to meet de-facto Abkhaz President Sergei Bagapsh, who had been elected the year before against Moscow's will, and sign the agreement whose text had been approved by both sides. However, this initiative never bore fruit and was soon forgotten.

In October 2005 Saakashvili adopted a resolution which criticized the activity of Russia's peace-keeping

forces on Georgian territory. According to the resolution, if conditions on the ground deteriorated, the Georgian government was obliged to terminate peaceful operations and cancel relevant international agreements by July 2006.

The combination of these events resulted in a paradoxical situation: while there was an improvement in the Georgian-Abkhazian relationship, Georgia was implementing policies against Russia's influence which caused tension in the conflict zone. These contradictory moves highlight the uncoordinated working of Georgia's governing bodies, in particular between the parliament on one side and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Security Council on the other.

Abkhazia's "Key to the Future"

In May 2006 Abkhazia unexpectedly proposed a plan for resolving the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict called the "Key to the Future". By initiating this plan, Abkhazia seemed to be taking a leading role in defining relations with Georgia. Although many of the positions laid out in the document were unacceptable to Georgia (such as Georgia's recognition of Abkhazia's independence), there were a few potential points of agreement. While the document said nothing about Russia's role, it did mention Abkhazia's integration into Europe several times. The "Key to the Future" showed that at that time Abkhazia wanted to reduce Russian influence and to ascertain its possibilities for integrating into Europe. It is notable that when Abkhazia's de-facto Foreign Minister Sergei Shamba presented this document to Georgia, Saakashvili and the defense minister were in Senaki to inspect a newly constructed military base. This contrast highlights the situation that existed at that moment in Georgian-Abkhazian relations. While the Abkhazian side was ready for talks, Georgia sought to avoid such relations.

In replying to "Key to the Future" in June 2006, Georgia presented five general principles for a full-scale political plan to resolve the Abkhaz conflict:

- A comprehensive effort at conflict resolution should be based on Georgia's sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity within the framework of recognizing international cooperation. (...)
- A fundamental principle of conflict resolution was an organized and deserved return of refugees to Abkhazia (...)
- The Georgian government expressed readiness to meet its obligations regarding the ceasefire and in implementing a peaceful, political resolution to the conflict. (...)

- The Georgian side welcomed the participation of international organizations as well as regional unions in conflict resolution (...). The Georgian side was prepared to discuss the possibility of specific conditions for the economic development of Abkhazia (...)
- A comprehensive conflict resolution process should be implemented step-by-step, on the basis of a common working plan and continual effort.

The main difference between the Georgian road map and the “Key to the Future” was that the Abkhazians were offering implementation of their proposals step-by-step, while we were offering a comprehensive package. Restoring the territorial integrity of Georgia was the priority. The process of conflict resolution has not produced any results yet, therefore it significantly prevented peace processes.

Georgia Goes on the Offensive

After publication of the document, Saakashvili removed the main officials who were working to resolve the Abkhaz situation peacefully. Irakli Alasania was appointed as the Georgian ambassador to the United Nations. In fact, he departed from the day-to-day process of managing the Georgia-Abkhazia relationship and his main activity became to fight against Russian diplomacy in the UN. At that time, State Minister George Khaindrava resigned; he had been conducting successful negotiations to help resolve the Georgia-Ossetia conflict.

The end of July 2006 delivered a fatal blow to the Georgian-Russian peace processes. By the order of the Georgian defense minister, the Georgian armed forces implemented a large-scale anti-criminal operation in the Kodori Gorge. Kodori Gorge was a de-facto region of Abkhazia. With this operation, Georgia broke the Moscow agreement of April 1994, according to which no side was allowed to send armed forces into Kodori Gorge.

Since that period, there has been an irreversible decline in the Georgia-Abkhazia relationship. Georgia's strategy was to weaken Russia's influence in the conflict zones while simultaneously increasing the influence of friendly states. Thanks to Georgia's initiative, no direct informal dialogues were taking place between the two sides. It should be noted that the Georgian-Abkhazian direct relationship obviously had a future since the Abkhaz side supported this process. There were no objective circumstances forcing the Georgian-Abkhazian relationship into such a strange and counterproductive position, though it was evident that the Georgian government did not want to allow an informal, regular dialogue between Georgia and Abkhazia.

In recent years, the Georgian government's objective was to expand the Georgian-Abkhazian and the Georgian-Ossetian conflicts into a conflict between Georgia and Russia. The August 2008 fighting successfully achieved this objective. Ironically, now there is no Georgian-Russian process to regulate the conflict. Russia categorized this confrontation as part of Russian-Western relations, and now seeks to dictate terms to the West. In fact, Georgian interests have become less relevant. Statements made about territorial integrity are mostly rhetorical and propagandistic.

Georgia's Inability to Define a Solution

Between July 2006 and August 2008, the Georgian government was unable to present a systematic and comprehensive concept for defining Georgian statehood or a mechanism providing sovereignty for Abkhazia. According to widely held beliefs (reflected in the Georgian constitution of 1995), the presence of the unregulated conflicts prevented Georgia from defining its administrative-territorial boundaries. The key to a resolution of the conflict lay in an agreement between the Georgian and Abkhazian sides. Such an agreement could not be reached until the central government decided what to offer the separatist society. The existing situation of unresolved conflict helped Russia protect Abkhazia from Georgian aggression on one hand, and to assure Western countries of Georgia's inability to democratically resolve the conflict on the other. If the Georgian government could present such a comprehensive solution, it would make it difficult for Russia to continue to take advantage of the situation inside of Georgia and create legal, political and moral grounds for the Western countries to strengthen their influence over both the Russians and Abkhazians.

The 2001 Boden Document laid out basic principles for international cooperation in resolving the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. It provided a basis for elaborating concrete, legal, political and democratic mechanisms and guarantees for both sides. The participants in the conflict had to take this action as neither the UN nor the OSCE could define a concrete level of sovereignty acceptable for protecting both sides.

On the basis of international experience, as well as the principles of regionalism and federalism, the Georgian side had an opportunity to offer the Abkhazian side a specific model for defining territorial boundaries, which would take into consideration the specific historical and legal features of Abkhazia, including its cultural, political, historical and geographic differences from other Georgian regions. A group of Georgian experts

published a “Concept on Abkhazia’s Special Status in Georgia” in June 2004, but unfortunately the Georgian government did not take up its recommendations. The concept sought the establishment of a Georgian-Abkhazian federal republic, thus offering the most progressive and realistic path toward conflict resolution.

Russia’s Provocative Role

The role of Russia in provoking and extending the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict deserves separate consideration. In 2004 Moscow practically provoked a civil conflict in Abkhazia. Elections for the de facto president of Abkhazia stretched for months, during which Russia clearly backed the candidacy of Raul Khajimba. However, at the last minute, Russia decided to support the Abkhazian people’s will in electing Sergey Bagapsh as president, on the condition that the opponents – Bagapsh and Khajimba – be presented in the second elections as candidates for the posts of president and vice-president.

The majority of Georgian politicians claimed that it was Russia’s exclusive responsibility to resolve the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. Before February 2008, the Georgians focused their claims on the failure of the Russians to carry out their peacekeeping force obligations. In February when countries began to recognize the independence of Kosovo, Russia started the irreversible process of becoming directly and indirectly involved in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. Putin declared that unilateral recognition of Kosovo’s independence would disturb the world order and territorial integrity of certain countries. He pointed directly to Abkhazia and South Ossetia. On 6 March 2008 the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs declared that it was withdrawing from the 19 January 1996 CIS agreement, which envisaged economic sanctions against Abkhazia. Then on 21 March the Russian Duma appealed to the Russian president to begin a discussion aimed at recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. At the same time Russia was conducting extensive diplomatic activities against Georgia’s and Ukraine’s inclusion in NATO. Accordingly, at the beginning of April the Bucharest NATO summit took a decision not to offer Georgia and Ukraine the immediate prospect of membership. This decision stimulated Russia to take further provocative steps. On 16 April Putin ordered the government and other state institutions to establish official relations with relevant Abkhazian structures. On 20 April Russian military aircraft shot down a drone belonging to the Georgian armed forces. This incident deepened tensions between Georgia and Russia. On 29 April Russia took a decision to maximally

increase the Russian peacekeeping contingent in the conflict zone of Abkhazia, expanding it by 545 military personnel, bringing the total to 2,542. This decision aroused anxiety in Georgia and many international organizations. On 31 May, 400 members of the Russian railway forces entered Abkhazian territory. These tensions lasted until August.

Georgia may have systematically opposed Russia’s policy, but it took no measures to satisfy Abkhazian interests in order to neutralize them. On the contrary, it was obvious that the Georgian government did its best to force Abkhazia to adopt a pro-Russian position. Only one conclusion is possible: escalation and constant tension suited Georgia. It seems that Georgia hoped to attract more attention from the West and neutralize the Russian aggression by means of international institutions.

Russia Ascendant

As a result of the six-day war, Russia now fully controls the territories of Abkhazia and the former South Ossetian Autonomous Region. By violating international legal norms and shirking the peacekeeping obligations it had taken on, Russia recognized the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, concluded agreements with them and stationed military bases and frontier soldiers in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. By means of this demarche, Russia strengthened its positions in the entire South Caucasus and put in doubt the ability of Western countries to realize their goals in this region. Russia controls considerable force, thus greatly reducing Georgia’s chances to join NATO.

International recognition of independence for Abkhazia and South Ossetia is unlikely. It is obvious that Russia has refrained from persuading its allies to recognize their independence. It seems that Russia does not want international recognition of these territories. Russia apparently seeks to isolate these territories, making it possible to establish military infrastructure there without any outside interference. Belarus is the only country which Russia has forced to recognize the territories’ independence. Belarus is a member of the Russia-Belarus Alliance and by recognizing the territories’ independence, the next step could be Abkhazia’s and South Ossetia’s integration into this alliance.

Today deisolation seems to be the only way to alleviate the situation in Abkhazia. As far as possible, it should be released from Russia’s grip and encouraged to join international organizations and Western institutions. For this purpose, Georgia has to cancel the law on the occupied territories that it adopted in October 2008.

Georgia is currently fully isolating Abkhazia in compliance with this law. All countries and organizations consider it compulsory to follow this law except for Russia. This improvident law has helped Russia expand its uncontrolled influence on the territory of Abkhazia and nobody can prevent this expansion. Moreover, Georgia has to review its policy denying passports to Abkhaz citizens. If the Georgian government provides such passports, the owners will be given an opportunity to travel abroad without Russian documents.

The worst thing in Russia's recognition of Abkhazia's and South Ossetia's independence is the issue of Kosovo's integration into the European Union. In this regard, debates on receiving Kosovo into the UN will start again. By that time, Russia may try to trade Abkhazia and South Ossetia for Kosovo and make Europeans recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia in exchange for Kosovo's integration into the UN.

Moving Forward

It seems that Georgia lost Abkhazia forever after the war in August. The present situation offers little hope. How-

ever, over the long term, it may be possible to provide a solution. Russia apparently is taking strict control over Abkhazia in the run-up to the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics. After the games are over, the Russian government will have to refocus its resources to develop the rest of its regions, and accordingly Russia's pressure on Sochi and the neighboring territory of Abkhazia should be weakened. During this time, Russia cannot become a country of steady democratic development; rather it will continue to be based on corruption and state repressive institutions. It is easily predictable that the situation of the Abkhazians will not be better compared to the other North Caucasus peoples. By that time Georgia should establish a safe and reliable state with a distinct European orientation based on democratic institutions and this orientation will help us involve Abkhazians in the construction of a state where identification and development will be protected by a constitutional agreement. Georgia should reach a level of democratic construction that will provide the population of Abkhazia and Ossetia the opportunity to make a real choice between democratic Georgia and authoritarian Russia.

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