

like the “Russian choice” would imply orientation toward building societies modeled on western democracy.

Should these conditions be met, an agreeable environment for constructive dialogue between the parties would be created. Indeed, the best way out of the current impasse would be a dialogue facilitated by a neutral Russia together with international organizations, which are equally trusted by the sides in the conflict. Peaceful dialogue would broaden prospects for a compromise solution.

As the Bucharest NATO Summit in early April 2008 has demonstrated, there is a growing awareness among Western states that the frozen conflicts are the primary impediments to Georgia’s democratic transfor-

mation and its eventual integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions. It is expected that the Western community will stimulate a more active search for a formula that would bring about the peaceful resolution of the conflicts. To this end, the European institutions whose credibility and resources have not been fully exploited so far must become more actively engaged. As a benchmark of this engagement, Abkhazia should be offered an alternative vision for development towards establishment of European political, legal and administrative institutions. Such a vision could provide a basis for the convergence of development agendas in Tbilisi and Sukhumi, thus contributing to building much needed trust and confidence.

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Analysis

An Abkhaz Perspective: Abkhazia after Kosovo

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Abstract

The Kosovo case opens up a new chapter in the modern history of admitting states into the international community, as this province was recognized against the will of its mother state, Serbia. Now, after Kosovo, one can hardly offer any more or less reasoned explanation as to exactly why the already 15 year-long *de facto* independence of Abkhazia, unlike the independence of Kosovo, cannot be recognized by the international community.

The Case for Abkhazian Statehood

Though the western politicians and governments have hastened to declare the precedent of Kosovo “unique,” everybody understands perfectly well that the right of people to self-determination, upon which the recognition of Kosovo is based, is universal and fixed in the United Nations Charter. According to this right, the independence of East Timor was recognized. Kosovo, East Timor and Abkhazia – in the light of international law – belong to the same order. The insistence on the “uniqueness” of the Kosovo case is obviously flawed, and Kosovo, undoubtedly, has already become a legal precedent.

One of the most important differences between Kosovo and Abkhazia is that Kosovo Albanians never

had a state, whereas the statehood of Abkhazians has existed for more than a millennium. Abkhazia was a kingdom, a principality, and, within the early Soviet federal structure, a full union republic, on equal footing with Georgia. This was the case until Joseph Stalin decided to incorporate it in 1931 into Georgia, against the will of its people.

The current Abkhazian Republic, encompassing a territory somewhat smaller than Cyprus, satisfies all key criteria required by international law for being a state. It has a territory, a population, and clearly defined external borders. The democratically-elected government of Abkhazia exercises effective control over nearly all its territory. Abkhazia has a strong civil society, and free

and independent media. It is capable of engaging in international relations.

Importantly, Abkhazia is economically viable, able to capitalize on the tourist industry and subtropical agriculture. Even in the condition of the economic blockade, only recently lifted by Russia, and the virtual absence of international assistance, Abkhazia presents an economically more viable and politically more stable state structure than some of the “recognized,” but failing states. If its borders are opened and there is enough investment to upgrade its economy to the modern level, it can prosper.

The Russian Factor

Many in Abkhazia realize that the denial of recognition to their country by the West is punishment for their perceived pro-Russian stance. The question of the validity of such a Cold War era-like approach is currently penetrating the western political debate. Thus, during the recent (end of April 2008) discussion at the U.S. Congress Foreign Affairs Committee on a resolution criticizing Russia, Republican Dana Rohrabacher noted: “We have a totally inconsistent position when it comes to some countries that might have areas that want to have their self-determination but are occupied by people who are somewhat pro-Russian.” This despite the fact, in the words of California Democrat Brad Sherman, participating in the same debate, that “There are substantial claims of the people of Abkhazia, and the people of South Ossetia, to go their own way and not to be part of Georgia”. (Cited from: <http://www.voanews.com/english/2008-04-30-voa71.cfm>).

Despite its insistence on the precedence set by the Kosovo process, Russia so far has stopped short of granting Abkhazia formal recognition *de jure*, instead lifting their mutual relations to a much higher level and withdrawing unilaterally from the regime of economic and political sanctions introduced in 1996 by the member-states of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) at the insistence of Georgia.

So far the current process of re-framing Russia–Abkhazia relations resembles in some respects the US–Taiwan model, whereas the US provides economic aid and military protection to Taiwan without granting it formal recognition. But in the long-term the Taiwan scenario is not in the interests of Abkhazia, as it means the continuation of the present legal *status quo* and the “freezing” of the conflict, perpetuating the situation of “no war, no peace.” This uncertain legal status prevents the inflow of large-scale investments in Abkhazia, which are essential for the development of its economy. It also creates a temptation on the part of Georgia to try again to re-establish its control over Abkhazia by military means.

The Abkhazians realize that if recognition happens at all, for some time the only state willing to recognize it will be Russia. But Russia’s steps concerning Abkhazia will in all probability be dependent on how successfully Georgia moves towards NATO membership. At the April 2008 NATO summit in Bucharest, the question of granting Georgia and Ukraine a membership action plan (MAP) was postponed, primarily because of Russia’s objections and Georgia’s unresolved ethno-territorial conflicts. But, despite Russian objections, in mid-term perspective, Georgia’s ascension to NATO remains rather probable. For the US, which dominates NATO, Georgia’s location along a lucrative east-west transit corridor, its proximity to the Caspian oil reserves, and its pro-Western and Christian population is of exceptional importance. At the same time, there is a firm consensus among the Russian political elite that if Georgia enters NATO, this will happen without the participation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The unilateral lifting of economic sanctions against Abkhazia by Russia on March 6, 2008 caused an angry reaction from Georgia and condemnation from the US and several EU countries. For many in Abkhazia this outpouring raised serious questions as to the moral grounds for such condemnations, directed essentially against the economic and social development of an impoverished people as a result of the brutal Abkhazian–Georgian war of 1992–1993. In reaction to this condemnation, the Abkhazian parliament on 30 April issued an appeal to President Bagapsh, calling on him to stop talks with representatives of those countries belonging to the UN Secretary-General’s Group of Friends of Georgia and participating in peace negotiations between Abkhazia and Georgia. The parliamentary statement read that the members of the Friends of Georgia group “are more concerned with the support of economic and political pressure on Abkhazia than with objective and constructive resolution of the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict. By supporting the regime of economic sanctions, the representatives of the Secretary-General’s Group are thus denying the people of Abkhazia the right to the proper development of their country.”

The Way Forward: Independence from Georgia

The appeal by President Saakashvili to the Abkhazian and Ossetian peoples to reintegrate into Georgia, uttered on the eve of the Bucharest NATO summit on Georgian television in the Georgian language (not understood by the majority of Abkhazians and many Ossetians), left little impression on the peoples of the two unrecognized republics. Everybody understood that he was making the case for the benefit of the Western audience assembling in Bucharest.

The recent downing of four Georgian Israeli-made drones by Abkhazian forces over Abkhazia sparked a new wave of Georgian accusations. The Georgians managed skillfully to divert the issue of provocative flights of Georgian reconnaissance aircraft over the UN-controlled security zone in Abkhazia, prohibited by the Moscow agreement of 1994, to the fact that they were downed, as claimed by Georgia, with possible Russian assistance. Saakashvili asserted that the planes had been flying, were flying and would be flying over Georgian territory, despite the fact that the spy planes were conducting operations in a highly sensitive security zone over Abkhazia. The Russian response was to increase the number of peace-keeping troops. Both sides are accusing each other of preparing for military actions and the discourse of “war” is present in the Russian, Abkhazian and Georgian media.

History, as we all know, often tends to repeat itself, and similar problems in relations between Abkhazia and Georgia arose at the beginning of the 20th century, after the collapse of the Russian empire, when newly-independent Georgia was trying to subdue its long-time western neighbor, Abkhazia. At that time, in 1918, a geopolitical project was developed by the distinguished

British politician and diplomat Lord Curzon, who saw Abkhazia as an independent and neutral buffer state between Russia, Georgia and Turkey. Considering the present international situation, one has to admit that exactly such a scenario would guarantee the creation of stable peace in the western part of the South Caucasus. An alternative to this would be permanent frozen conflicts and a lack of development in the region.

It is clear to any objective observer that Abkhazia will never again return under Georgian control. One can also claim that its recognition is imminent. Abkhazia was attacked in 1992–1993 by Georgia and Georgia should prove to Abkhazia that it can be a friend, not a foe. To do this, Georgia should lift economic sanctions and recognize Abkhazia as a separate entity, exactly in the same way as Russia recognized separation from Georgia, as the Czech Republic recognized Slovakia, and as Indonesia recognized East Timor. This recognition will serve as a basis for new relations – friendly, mutually beneficial and equal, which will eventually create an atmosphere of confidence and cooperation, stimulating opportunities for regional economic integration, open borders and free movement of services, labor and capital across the Caucasus.

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