

part with their illusions and face the existing realities with eyes wide open.

However, it seems that Georgia is not the only place on the earth experiencing a deficit of common sense. The August 2008 events demonstrated, inter alia, the dangerous explosiveness of unresolved conflicts that were carelessly maintained in a “frozen” state for decades;

and the easiness of transforming them into hotspots. These events clearly demonstrated how fragile the stability on the EU-Russia frontier is; and that the “periphery” of Europe happened to be very close and important to the “core” of the EU. That is why everybody’s eyes in politics should be wide open all the time.

About the author

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Questions and Answers

Interview with Dr. Viacheslav Chirikba, Adviser on Foreign Policy to the President of Abkhazia

Russian Analytical Digest: Why has the situation turned from bad to worse in recent months? Why has Georgia decided to intervene militarily in South Ossetia? Why in South Ossetia and not also in Abkhazia?

Viacheslav Chirikba: One has, of course, to ask the Georgian leadership why they decided to start an all-out military assault on the South Ossetian capital Tskhinval in early August, thus violating all previously signed agreements and destroying, together with the peaceful city, the 16-year-old conflict resolution efforts. We don’t know much about the decision-making process in the Georgian leadership, and what role the numerous advisers to this leadership – American, Israeli, others – played in taking decisions on matters of crucial military and political importance.

But the Georgian motives are quite obvious. Georgia desperately needed to show the West, before the NATO ministerial meeting in December this year, that it was capable of restoring effective control over its break-away republics. South Ossetia, in comparison to Abkhazia, was seen as a relatively easy target, given that it had a much smaller army, that there were many Georgian enclaves deep inside South Ossetian territory and that it had very limited ground access to Russian territory – only through the Roki tunnel. If the blitzkrieg were successful, and Saakashvili thought it had all chances to be, then one of two great remaining obstacles on the way to its desired NATO membership – South Ossetia and Abkhazia – would have been removed.

After the attack failed, Saakashvili blamed the Americans for their false assurances that Russia wouldn’t react militarily to the assault on South Ossetia. Indeed, these calculations proved to be wrong, quite fatally for Mr. Saakashvili and for his weak, but fiercely nationalistic, country. I personally tend to believe that the Americans eventually did give Saakashvili the green light for this military campaign, whatever their own considerations, which might not necessarily coincide in all details with those of Saakashvili. As one piece of indirect evidence for this, I can refer to the talk between Assistant Deputy Secretary of State Matthew Bryza and the American Ambassador to Georgia John Teft with Abkhazia’s Security Council Secretary Stanislav Lakoba and me, as presidential adviser on foreign policy, which took place in the Abkhazian capital Sukhum on 25 July 2008. Bryza said that the situation was very tense and that they were afraid that the “hot-headed boys” in Tbilisi would *do things*, and that if there were no immediate talks, *August would be hot*.

RAD: Do you think Russia was right to intervene in South Ossetia? Do you think Russia was right to move into Abkhazia as well and into Georgia proper?

Chirikba: It is inconceivable to imagine that Russia would sit idly observing as its major political ally in the South Caucasus was being attacked by Tbilisi. The majority of the population of South Ossetia, as was probably known to Mr. Saakashvili, is Russian citizens and Russia was obliged by its constitution to protect them with all available means. It is remarkable that in the wake of the Georgian invasion, Russia first tried to secure a UN Security Council resolu-

tion on a cease-fire forbidding the use of force in this conflict, but the US and UK blocked the resolution, arguing that Georgia was entitled to use arms when necessary. So, we've got what we've got.

It is not quite a matter of "right" and "wrong" in judging the Russian actions. Were the coalition forces right in assaulting Afghanistan and dismantling its Taliban government in the wake of the 11 September attack on America? Were the NATO forces right in intervening in the Bosnian conflict and thus stopping the massacres? These are uneasy questions, and the answers can never be simplistic or black and white.

If Saakashvili's war on South Ossetia had been successful and *if* he'd won, there is no doubt that the territory of South Ossetia would have been cleansed of its indigenous Ossetian population (hence the Georgian name of their military operation, "Clean Field"), and, whatever the Russian motives, Russia prevented this from happening.

RAD: How have the Abkhaz (the people, the media, the politicians) reacted to Georgia's intervention? What was the mood in Abkhazia during the time of confrontation?

Chirikba: The Abkhazians knew all too well that they could have been the target of Georgia's deadly attacks, if it were not for the South Ossetians. They never trusted the Georgians, and their worst expectations were once again confirmed by this latest Georgian aggression. Even the most moderate of Abkhazians have now understood that Abkhazia needs to be separate from Georgia if it wants to survive as a nation. The general mood in Abkhazia was that of compassion with the brotherly people of South Ossetia.

RAD: Do you think that the reaction from Washington (Russia is trying to reestablish its empire, Russia is sending a message to its neighbors not to join NATO) is justified? Does Russia have a "hidden agenda" and was it, in your view, not only about South Ossetia, but about larger geopolitical goals?

Chirikba: The USA, and some other countries, like Israel, Turkey and Ukraine, bear a great share of responsibility for the current crisis. They were arming Georgia to the teeth, knowing perfectly well that their huge arms supplies and training efforts can and will be used by Georgia against the population of Abkhazia and South Ossetia – there was no other rationale for Georgia to spend so much effort on massive military preparations. Specifically, the USA and Israel, through their military, logistical and advisory assistance to Georgia can be regarded as participants in this conflict.

History plays a crucial role in the Caucasus, and Abkhazians regard their right to independence as historically justified. Abkhazia is an ancient country, as ancient as Georgia itself. It has its own history, specific language, which is unrelated to Georgian, and its own distinct culture, identity and political aspirations. The majority of Abkhazians are (Orthodox) Christians, though there are also Sunni Muslim Abkhazians. Abkhazia is a democratic country, it has a stable political regime, free media and a viable economy.

In the past, Abkhazia was a kingdom and a principality. In 1810 it came under the Russian protectorate, quite independently from the neighboring Georgian provinces of the time. With the Sovietization drive after the collapse of the Russian Empire in 1917, Abkhazia entered the USSR, again, independently from Georgia. Until 1931 Abkhazia enjoyed the status of a Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR), on an equal footing with the Georgian SSR. The troubles started in 1931, when Abkhazia was included into Georgia as an Autonomous republic by Joseph Stalin against the will of its people. The ensuing years saw the repression of Abkhazian culture by Georgian rulers. The Abkhazian language was forbidden and children had to study in Georgian, which was unknown to them. The Abkhazian place-names were changed into Georgian ones, the majority of Abkhazian politicians and intellectuals were physically exterminated and tens of thousands of ethnic Georgians were moved from Georgia proper to Abkhazia with the aim of making Abkhazians an insignificant minority in their own homeland. Abkhazia had to become Georgia, and Abkhazians had to become Georgians.

After the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, Abkhazia proposed to establish federative relations with Georgia. But instead of negotiations on its political status, on 14 August 1992 Georgia under Eduard Shevardnadze unexpectedly attacked Abkhazia militarily. During the war of 1992–1993 Georgians killed four percent of the entire Abkhazian population and destroyed the small republic's national archives, museums, monuments of culture, and socio-economic infrastructure. The commander of the Georgian forces in Abkhazia, Colonel G. Karkarashvili, in a televised address on the Abkhaz TV warned that he was ready to sacrifice the lives of 100,000 Georgians in order to exterminate the entire Abkhazian nation of 93,000. Georgy Khaindrava, the civilian administrator of territories of Abkhazia under Georgian occupation, stated in an interview with *Le Monde Diplomatique* in April 2003 that the Georgians were perfectly capable of destroying the genetic stock of the Abkhazian nation by killing 15,000 of their youths. For the small Abkhazian nation, all this was their "Holocaust," the attempt of a "final solution" of the Abkhazian problem.

Miraculously, David won over Goliath. In September 1993 Abkhazia won the brutal and devastating war with Georgia. Since that time it exists as an independent polity. The independent Georgian republic is thus 16 years old, and the independent Abkhazian republic is 15 years old.

By its genocidal policies in Abkhazia in 1931–1954 and 1992–1993, Georgia lost any moral and legal right to rule Abkhazia and to exploit its natural riches. Abkhazia will never again be a part of the Georgian state.

As to the current crisis, from a broader perspective, what at first appeared to be a local conflict in South Ossetia caused truly tectonic changes in the world's geopolitical configurations. The mono-polar world as we knew it since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 is over, and now we have an entirely different situation, with three major global centers of power – USA, Russia and China. This is the geopolitical map of the 21st century, and Washington, embittered as it is, has to comply with this new reality.

RAD: What is Russia's plan now vis-à-vis Abkhazia/South Ossetia/Georgia? How can Russia help to establish permanent peace? Can it play a constructive role after what happened? Can Georgians and Abkhaz/South Ossetians still live together as good neighbors after what happened?

Chirikba: On August 26, 2008 the Republic of Abkhazia was officially recognized by the Russian Federation. By recognizing Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia surgically cut off the major problem for Georgia – the territorial one. Paradoxically as it might seem, this will bring the long-awaited stability to the region. Free of its disputed territories, which it was never able to re-conquer and control, Georgia can concentrate on its own internal problems, of which it has quite enough. Besides, Georgia still has areas compactly populated by ethnically and linguistically diverse minorities – Megrelians, Svans, Azeris and Armenians. The lessons of Abkhazia and South Ossetia should teach any government in Tbilisi that the problem of minorities represents a crucial political issue for such a multi-ethnic country as Georgia.

When/if Georgia comes to its senses and recognizes both Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent nations, these three can, no doubt, build up their relations on a new basis, that of equality and cooperation, which will be beneficial for all sides. But this will take time.

RAD: Do you think it is still realistic to think that Abkhazia and South Ossetia can be reintegrated into a Georgian state? If not, what would be your solution?

Chirikba: It is utterly unrealistic to believe that Abkhazia and South Ossetia, after years of bloodshed between them and Georgia, would want to reintegrate into the latter. Now, after the latest Georgian aggression, the last hopes for this have died. Abkhazia and South Ossetia will never again be a part of the country which wants to destroy them as nations. It is better for the Georgians and for the rest of the world to understand, at last, this reality. Abkhazia and South Ossetia are distinct and separate nations, and they will remain like this.

RAD: What should Europe and the US do? What would you recommend Russian politicians to do? What would you recommend Georgian politicians do?

Chirikba: Europe, the US and Georgia alike should understand that it is not possible to get Abkhazia and South Ossetia back into Georgia. They should respect the right of these two small freedom-loving nations to self-determination and build their relations with them accordingly. The independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia will bring about peace and stability in the Southern Caucasus. As much as in the Balkans, self-determination seems to be the only viable solution left to these protracted and deadlocked conflicts. Only those who want to perpetuate the situation of no war, no peace forever, would insist on the preservation of the *status quo* or on the restoration of the borders of the former Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic. But this will never work, as it is not possible to turn back time.

RAD: What will happen next, after Russia's recognition of the two regions' independence? Will they join Russia or seek to be countries on their own? How will they survive?

Chirikba: It is of utmost importance for Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and for Russia as well, that other countries follow suit and recognize the independence of the two formerly *de facto* states. I think that there is a good chance that we will see such recognitions rather soon.

But the current extremely hostile reaction to this process on the part of the US, European Union, G7 and OSCE seems to be quite irrational. Are these not the very same countries which only recently recognized the forced separation of Kosovo from Serbia and recognized it as an independent state against the will of the Serbian government, having thus drawn new lines in Europe? Why are the South Ossetians and Abkhazians, who are trying to escape from the Georgian bully and who already have viable statehoods for more than 15 years, denied the same right to recognition as was allowed for Kosovo Albanians? Only because they are perceived as pro-Russian, and the Albanians (and Georgians, for that matter) as pro-Western? Unfortunately, what we see in this angry reaction is the application of the policy of double standards and attempts to use these morally dubious principles against the historical choice of the nations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Principles should not be conditioned by political considerations, and the right to freedom from oppression is indivisible.

Abkhazia will remain a separate independent state, and it does not plan to become a part of any other state. It is determined to prove to the world that it can be a responsible member of the international community, which is governed by the rule of law, and which supports democracy, civic liberties and rights, free media and respect for minorities. The natural beauty of Abkhazia, its mild subtropical climate, warm Black Sea and excellent beaches will soon turn this country into a popular tourist destination for many in the West and the East alike, bringing about economic prosperity. The world must give the peoples of Abkhazia and South Ossetia a chance to lead the peaceful and dignified life they deserve!

Questions and Answers

Interview with Archil Gegeshidze, Senior Fellow at the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies (GFSIS) in Tbilisi

Russian Analytical Digest: Why has the situation around the separatist regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia turned from bad to worse in recent months?

Archil Gegeshidze: The “colored revolutions” in Georgia and Ukraine in 2003 and 2004, respectively, and the NATO and EU expansions to the east in 2004, by which the West moved to Russia’s borders when it included the Baltic States, signaled to the Kremlin that the existing *status quo* in which Russia had retained influence on the post-Soviet domain was no longer sustainable. Indeed, Georgia began to make strides toward NATO integration and, at the same time, attempted to “unfreeze” the long dormant conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia by changing the Russia-dominated negotiation and peacekeeping formats. An agitated Russia resorted to regime change tactics by financing proxy political forces in Georgia and imposing an economic embargo (2006) in the hope of stimulating social insurgency. As these policies failed, the Kremlin may have decided to entrap Georgia in a major military provocation in the Russia-backed breakaway regions of Abkhazia and/or South Ossetia. Russia put this plan into operation following the West’s recognition of Kosovo’s independence and the NATO Bucharest Summit (February–April 2008). The plan included: unilaterally – in fact illegally – withdrawing from a CIS economic and arms embargo imposed in 1996 on Abkhazia; increasing troop strength and introducing paratroopers into Abkhazia; illegally moving heavy weaponry and offensive forces into Abkhazia; deploying the railroad troops to prepare rails for invasion; building an illegal military base near Tskhinvali (South Ossetia); undertaking large-scale military exercises near South Ossetia and Abkhazia; and failing to redeploy the troops.

Separatist governments in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in coordination with Russia, had been systematically rejecting peace initiatives either proposed by Tbilisi or brokered by impartial third parties. The last one was a German-mediated peace plan for Abkhazia. In the meantime, the separatists in both regions willingly yielded to Russia and either disengaged from political dialogue with Tbilisi (as was the case with Abkhazia) or insisted on keeping outdated negotiation formats (South Ossetia). At the same time, Russia was allowed to continue its military build-up in these breakaway regions.

The Georgian government failed to develop a proper vision to resolve the conflict. The primary deficiency of Georgia’s approach has been its inconsistency and wrong assumptions. Instead of establishing direct dialogue with the separatists, the Georgian government sought direct and indirect ways of coercion. Rather than identifying measures for step-by-