

Georgian authorities wrest back control of Adjara

Simon Whelan
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On May 6, Aslan Abashidze fled his fiefdom of Adjara to a comfortable exile in Russia, thereby averting clashes between his local militia and the Georgian army.

In the long term, the deposing of the local warlord does not lessen the chances of military conflict in Georgia. Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili has been emboldened by the relative ease with which Adjara was taken back under the wing of Tbilisi and is now threatening both Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

After a relentless campaign lasting six months, beginning almost immediately after Saakashvili was brought to power, Abashidze finally departed without so much as a whimper. After recently blowing up all but one of the bridges connecting Adjara with the rest of Georgia, the local dictator opted for exile in Moscow. The refusal to offer troops or arms to Abashidze by Igor Ivanov, the Russian secretary of the National Security Council, during a late night meeting on May 5, sealed Abashidze's fate. The Adjarian despot, his family and close associates hitched a ride with Ivanov back to Russia.

While Tbilisi has promised not to pursue Abashidze or seek his extradition, they are heaping humiliation upon the departed autocrat. Georgian authorities announced that Abashidze's pedigree dogs, imported cars and assorted consumer luxuries are to be sold off at auction. MZE television reported that Abashidze's favourite dog is called Basmach, after rebels who fought the Bolsheviks in Central Asia during the 1920s.

In the days preceding Abashidze's climbdown, the Adjarian public had displayed their contempt for the despot with mass street demonstrations. After his rival fled, Saakashvili immediately made for Batumi to declare this as his second "Rose Revolution." The Georgian president celebrated the conquest of the Black

Sea region by splashing seawater on his face. He has good reason to celebrate: the port of Batumi is the largest commercial enterprise in the whole of Georgia. The Black Sea port handles 60 percent of all the oil presently passing through Georgia from the Caspian Sea to international markets. These revenues will give the ailing Georgian economy a respite.

Speaking to the crowds in Batumi, Saakashvili promised that he would reunite Georgia. With Abashidze dispatched to obscurity, Saakashvili is now free to turn his attention to two regions that—unlike Adjara—have actually declared themselves autonomous from Tbilisi: Abkhazia and South Ossetia. At the behest of Washington, which wants to see the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (B-T-C) oil pipeline transit nations ruled with an iron fist, the American-trained lawyer will now seriously up the ante against the breakaway republics.

This is one job for which Saakashvili is well qualified: he relishes the rattling of sabres. However, even someone as belligerent as he understands that the breakaway regions, especially Abkhazia, represent a more serious challenge than did Adjara. Both regions have beaten back previous Georgian attempts to end their regional autonomy. The leader of South Ossetia has declared that he will not even speak to Saakashvili until Tbilisi admits genocide concerning his predecessor Eduard Shevardnadze's failed attempt to keep the region within Georgia.

The Abkhazian Prime Minister Raul Khajimba has landed in Moscow on the heels of Abashidze. Spelling out the gravity of the situation, the de-facto Abkhazian foreign minister, Sergei Shamba, ruled out an "Adjarian scenario." He told the Russian news agency RIA Nostovi, "Abkhazia is not Georgia; the Abkhazians have quite different mentality. The Georgian politicians do not take this into account."

Shamba warned that any attempt to reintegrate Abkhazia into Georgia is doomed to failure.

The Abkhazian authorities have stepped up security cooperation with their South Ossetian counterparts, declaring that its security forces are prepared to defend its sovereignty. And Tbilisi's peaceful options for tempting back the breakaway regions are limited. Even with the revenues from Batumi, the economy is still viewed by international markets as in dire straits, and the transit fees to be paid when the B-T-C pipeline begins operating next year will not be enough to satisfy all the competing demands. This leaves nothing to tempt the two regions back into the fold with other than the threat of military action.

Washington welcomed what it called "the peaceful restoration of Tbilisi's authority," calling it a "historic day" for Georgia. The US press has continually portrayed Saakashvili as a democracy-loving free-marketeer and registered its approval. In contrast, the Russian media was clearly angry at a diminution of Russia's influence in the South Caucasus. The victory of Saakashvili over Shevardnadze and Abashidze in Georgia and the setting up of the pro-Washington Aliyev dynasty in Azerbaijan, together with the continuing bloodbath in Chechnya which just claimed pro-Moscow premier Kadyrov, have led many commentators to speak openly of foreign policy disarray in the Kremlin.

Igor Ivanov's name is held in contempt in some quarters. For the second time in six months, he has been involved in the removal of nominally pro-Moscow figures—first Shevardnadze and then Abashidze. Viktor Ozerov, the chairman of the Security and Defence Committee of Russia's Federation Council, was not alone in lamenting the loss of a counterweight to Saakashvili's pro-US orientation. State deputy and director of the CIS institute Konstantin Zatulin believed that Abashidze's hasty demise would leave the way open for Tbilisi to exert pressure on Moscow to remove its military base from Batumi.

The *Moskovskiy Komsomolets* drew bitter comparisons with events in the Persian Gulf: "While Washington is getting itself mired more and more deeply in Iraq, in the Caucasus it has managed to pull off its latest geopolitical triumph."

Another daily newspaper, *Moskovskaya Pravda*, was equally bitter: "The events were not a victory for

Saakashvili over Abashidze, but for America over Russia. The USA is effectively continuing a carve-up of the Caucasus using its puppets in the region."

The scene is set for Saakashvili to exert possible military pressure on the two breakaway regions at the behest of Washington. On the same day that Abashidze fled to Russia, Georgian Prime Minister Zurab Zhvania declared that his country had been included in the US's "Millennium Challenge Account." These monies are only doled out to Washington's most obedient puppets. By beginning the task of Georgian reunification, Saakashvili has proved himself worthy of the Bush administration's favour.



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