

Georgia: Tensions increase between Abkhazia and Tbilisi

Simon Whelan
22 May 2004

For the time being at least, a war of words rather than bullets has ensued between the breakaway Georgian republic of Abkhazia and the Saakashvili regime in Tbilisi. As soon as the Tbilisi central government wrested back control of Adjara, they began to alternately threaten or cajole the Abkhazian authorities. Regardless of repeated claims from the proclaimed capital of Sukhumi that Abkhazia is no Adjara, the new government in Tbilisi is undoubtedly pursuing a similar scenario.

On May 19 it was the turn of conciliation. President Mikhail Saakashvili declared that he will make a special statement concerning resolving the Abkhazian and South Ossetian issue on Georgian Independence Day, May 26. Saakashvili also said that Georgian reunification would be accomplished by peaceful means.

Only the day before Abkhazian Prime Minister Raul Khajimba reiterated his regime's line that no compromise can be found on their autonomous status. He added that Abkhazia's status as an independent state is documented in the republic's constitution and is not subject to discussion.

The Georgian parliamentary chairperson played the role of "good cop," telling RIA Novosti news agency that Saakashvili would "do his utmost to peacefully settle the Abkhaz conflict."

"But everyone should understand that we cannot wait forever," added "bad cop" Nino Burjanadze. In addition, she called upon Russia to do everything it could to resolve the Abkhazian question.

On a visit to the Romanian capital Bucharest on May 15 and 16, inveterate bully Saakashvili promised another "rose revolution." He stated that if another "revolution"—more correctly a coup bringing himself to power—was to be accomplished it would be in the Black

Sea republic. "Revolution" was looming in Abkhazia, he declared.

Racking up the tension a little more, Saakashvili has ordered his ministers to join the army—apparently to learn what military service is all about. The Georgian president said building up the army is one of his priorities and the process should begin in the upper echelons. Ministers who dodged the draft last time round are instructed to hand over department duties to their deputies and train with reservists for three months.

The Georgian government has started to float the idea of a two-member federation state. In its latest April report on the conflict, United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan complained of "slow progress," calling on the Abkhazian side to drop its intransigence.

What Chloe Arnold, writing in the *Moscow Times*, calls Saakashvili's "reconquista agenda" is one designed, funded and incited in Washington. It directly threatens Russian influence within the South Caucasus. Abkhazia, South Ossetia and to a lesser degree Adjara remain the geographical points of Moscow's influence within Georgia. In a visit occurring almost immediately after the deposing of Alsan Abashidze from Batumi in Adjara, an Abkhazian representative arrived in Moscow requesting in vain that Russian troops be stationed on the upper Kodori gorge in Abkhazia—where Georgian troops have a foothold in the region.

Some commentators are speculating that the Kremlin's recent acquiescence on Georgian issues is the result of acquiring a promise from Saakashvili that American troops will not be stationed on Georgian soil. This may be correct, but the same commentators are still unsure of the Kremlin's plan of action concerning Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Early this week Russian Security Council Secretary

Igor Ivanov held talks with Georgian officials about Georgian and Russian relations and, by virtue, about Abkhazia.

Georgian and Russian troops are currently conducting joint patrols on their border to prevent the incursion of Chechen rebels from Russia into Georgia. Chechen refugees in the Pankisi gorge area are reporting increased police harassment by Georgian forces and a growing sense of insecurity. Russia's President Putin and Saakashvili are due to meet in the autumn.

Last week Givi Arghba Abkhazian, Russia's head of state security, accused Georgian authorities of planning moves into the ethnically Georgian Abkhazian enclave of Gali. Abkhazian sources suggested Georgian forces might make an incursion on Georgian Independence Day.

The Abkhazian authorities also requested UN Chief Military Observer Major General Kazi Ashfaq Ahmed closely monitor the situation in the Kodori gorge, the sole Abkhazian territory occupied by Georgian forces. Military experts believe that occupation of the gorge would provide a location from which to punch forward to the Abkhazian capital Sukhumi.

Abkhazian authorities have introduced more troops in the Gali district after claiming that Georgian forces are destabilising the region. About 60,000 ethnic Georgians live in the Gali district. Sukhumi accused Tbilisi of attempting to foment unrest amongst residents as a means to intervene in the region and ultimately overthrow the government in Sukhumi.

In addition, South Ossetian troops are on high alert. Authorities are also suggesting that Georgian Independence Day might be used as an occasion to invade the region. Like Sukhumi, South Ossetian authorities deny an Adjarian-type solution is viable in their territory.

Abkhazia is situated in the northwestern corner of Georgia. The Black Sea coast resorts of Abkhazia were popular during Soviet times. Today the economy is in ruins, much like that of Georgia, and the population is only 100,000 and falling. Its pretensions to statehood notwithstanding, it is little more than a plaything and bargaining chip of the larger surrounding states and, above all, the subject of imperialist intrigues. Whilst the population have been issued Russian passports, any early thoughts of being incorporated into the Russian state have been diminished and support for

reintegration into Georgia is gaining support.

Georgian forces were driven out in 1993 during fierce fighting that killed thousands of ethnic Abkhaz and Georgians. A quarter of a million ethnic Georgian refugees were driven out of the republic. Abkhazia declared independence in 1994, but that status has never been recognised by a single country. Georgia maintains an economic embargo, but Russia has reopened a railway link from the mainland to Sukhumi.

The standoff is presided over by UN military observers and Russian peacekeepers. The UN patrols the buffer zones between the two protagonists. Sporadic fighting and kidnappings characterise an uneasy stalemate. This tenuous situation is likely to deteriorate further in the light of current events.



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