

# Abkhazian elite come to settlement with Kremlin

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27 January 2005

After a debacle lasting three months, a new government has finally been established in Abkhazia. Georgian authorities, including President Mikhail Saakashvili, denounced the elections as unlawful, but the Putin government in Russia congratulated the new incumbent Sergei Bagapsh, who takes over from Vladislav Ardzinba.

Initially, Moscow backed Bagapsh's now Vice President Raul Khadzhimba, who appeared on billboards across Sukhumi hand in hand with President Vladimir Putin. But after he lost the first election and subsequently failed to strong-arm his way to power, the Kremlin was forced to compromise with Bagapsh.

Bagapsh claimed to have won the first election in October of last year, but the result was shrouded in controversy, with both sides accusing the other of ballot stuffing and intimidation. Bagapsh nevertheless declared himself the winner with the support of the Supreme Court. These events occurred almost simultaneously with those in Ukraine, where the Kremlin suffered a larger geo-political defeat with the eventual victory of the US-backed Viktor Yushchenko.

But after Bagapsh's victory declaration, the supporters of Moscow's favoured candidate Khadzhimba rampaged through the Supreme Court, killing one Bagapsh supporter and forcing the court to reverse its decision and declare their man the victor. Their recklessness raised the tension within the breakaway republic close to conditions of civil conflict.

In response, Moscow reminded the warring factions of Abkhazia's total dependence upon their northern neighbour. The Putin government closed down the railway link with Sukhumi, halting the export of Abkhazian agricultural products on their way to Russian markets. At a stroke, the Abkhazian economy collapsed. The selling of citrus fruit to Russian markets

has been the only source of income for the majority of people in Abkhazia since the establishment of the self-declared republic in 1993.

The Kremlin refused to accept the defeat of their favoured candidate and instead called for new elections. The incumbent President Ardzinba backed Khadzhimba, his former second in command, as his successor but ordered a new ballot. Bagapsh at first refused to acknowledge the second round of voting, but eventually the two erstwhile opponents agreed to run on a joint ticket in a fresh round of voting.

The two of them supposedly received more than 90 percent of the vote on January 12, but only Russian observers attended the polls. Georgian president Mikhail Saakashvili complained that ethnic Georgians from the Gali district in Abkhazia, many of whom initially fled Abkhazia after the Georgian army was routed but have since returned, were not allowed to vote freely.

The differences between Bagapsh and Khadzhimba were merely tactical, with the eventual winner advocating just a little more autonomy from Moscow to deal with Tbilisi. Neither candidate advocated ending Abkhazia's independence from Tbilisi and its consequent dependency upon Russia. Recognised by no other nation, Abkhazia relies entirely upon its only trading partner to the north.

This is a sense of political disarray in the foreign policy of the Kremlin concerning what is commonly known as Russia's "near abroad." Its clumsiness and ineptitude in Ukraine, followed by its heavy-handedness regarding the Abkhazian scenario, do not bode well for the future of the region.

But the Putin government is under enormous pressure right across its "near abroad" as US and European influence spreads. Only one year previous to the events

in Ukraine, Georgia itself moved firmly into Washington's orbit with the manipulated election of Mikhail Saakashvili to replace Eduard Shevardnadze. The Baltic states have just recently joined the European Union, further reducing Russian influence in the region. In addition, the Bush regime has moved troops into a swathe of countries right across central Asia that were previously part of the Soviet Union, including Georgia.

Abkhazia declared independence from Georgia in 1993 after a bloody conflict against Tbilisi that left 10,000 ethnic Abkhazians dead. Located in the northwestern corner of Georgia with the Black Sea to the southwest, Abkhazia is just 3,000 sq km, barely the size of a North American conurbation. It is still best known as a former holiday spot for the Stalinist bureaucracy during the Soviet Union, but many Russian tourists still come today for the warm weather.

Many Abkhazians have left to work in Russia. Those who remain live in dire poverty. The ruined economy relies upon citrus fruit like tangerines and oranges, as well as tea and tobacco exports to Russia markets. Russia maintains a single cross-border link as the territory's lifeline and a railway link.

A quarter of a million ethnic Georgian refugees left Abkhazia during the conflict with Tbilisi. Their departure effectively halved the population of the breakaway republic. Georgian President Saakashvili only stokes the grievances and demands for revenge of those Georgian who have left Abkhazia.

Georgian guerrillas seeking to return the pro-Georgian Abkhaz government in exile still infiltrate and attack Abkhazian targets. They operate with the tacit approval of Tbilisi. However, the situation is further complicated by the possible involvement of Chechen rebels encouraged by Tbilisi to attack Abkhazia. The Chechens originally fought on the side of the Abkhazians in their war with Tbilisi but later turned against their erstwhile allies who had the support of Moscow.

On January 25, Saakashvili addressed the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe to outline his plans for the reintegration of both Abkhazia and South Ossetia back into the Georgian state. In a heavily trailed speech, he asserted that the breakaway republics must become part of a "dual, federal state" of Georgia.

However, Bagapsh has already talked about

"deepening" relations with Moscow. Without a specific time scale, he suggested that Abkhazia will get an open border with Russia, the economic boost of Russian investment and further integration into the Russian state. He reiterated the Abkhazian demand of "equal rights" with Georgia in any negotiations, meaning that Tbilisi must accept a priori Abkhazia as an independent state. A peaceful resolution to this protracted crisis appears unlikely, as Saakashvili has declared the reintegration of Abkhazia as his dearest-held wish.



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