

An ambivalent 'independence'

Abkhazia, an unrecognised democracy under Russian protection

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Abkhazia – a state unrecognised by the international community and dependent on Russia – has features of a democracy, including political pluralism. This is manifested through regularly held elections, which are a time of genuine competition between candidates, and through a wide range of media, including the pro-opposition private TV station Abaza.

The competing political forces have different visions for the republic's development. President Sergei Bagapsh's team would like to build up multilateral foreign relations (although the highest priority would be given to relations with Russia), while the group led by Raul Khajimba, a former vice-president and present leader of the opposition, would rather adopt a clear pro-Moscow orientation. It is worth noting that neither of the significant political forces wants Abkhazia to become part of Russia (while such proposals have been made in South Ossetia), and a majority of the Abkhazian elite sees Russia's recognition of the country's independence as a Pyrrhic victory because it has limited their country's room for manoeuvre. However, all parties are agreed in ruling out any future dependence on Georgia.

The 2009 presidential elections, in comparison to those held in 2004/2005

A presidential election was held in Abkhazia on 12 December 2009, and won by the incumbent president Sergei Bagapsh¹; his most serious opponent was the opposition leader Raul Khajimba. The rivalry between the two politicians started five years ago, at the time of the previous election; an analysis of that dispute is necessary to understand the Abkhazian political scene in its present form.

In 2004, Raul Khajimba, then prime minister, was the candidate of the Abkhazian ruling class. He was supported by both the then president and historic nation leader Vladislav Ardzinba and the Kremlin. Khajimba's nomination as prime minister of Abkhazia and his presentation as a candidate in the presidential election was reminiscent of the succession scenario in Russia in 1999–2000. Furthermore Khajimba, like Vladimir Putin, had served in the KGB for a long time (he has also held the posts of head of the customs service and defence minister of Abkhazia, among other functions). Khajimba had significant funding for his campaign, which allowed him to organise a concert of Russian pop stars in Sukhumi, among other events.

¹ Despite the lack of international recognition, it seems unreasonable to use the form 'self-appointed' or 'so-called' president, or to append inverted commas to the term (which also concerns other Abkhazian officials and institutions) because Bagapsh in fact performs this function and has real power in the separatist republic of Abkhazia, and the republic itself is a party to the peace process. It also must be recalled that the Georgian population of Abkhazia, most of whom were forced to leave the republic as a result of the war of 1992–1993 (between 200,000 and 250,000 people, some of whom returned later), are represented by the Government of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia (in exile), led by Giorgi Baramia. Considering the deficiencies in Abkhazian 'statehood' (since it has been recognised only by Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela and Nauru), the republic is usually referred to as a *para-state*.

The unexpected winner of the election on 11 October 2004 was Sergei Bagapsh, who at that time was director of the Abkhazian power supply networks; his previous roles included that of prime minister. He had promised economic reforms and a reorganisation of the state structures. He received 50.08% of the votes, but Khajimba (who had 35.6% support) refused to recognise the results and called on his supporters to take to the streets. Since Bagapsh's supporters held counter-demonstrations and occupied the television building, among other offices, a serious crisis ensued. Negotiations carried out with Russian assistance ended on 6 December 2004 in a deal, under which Khajimba was offered the position of vice-president (in Abkhazia, as in the USA, candidates run for the presidency in pairs; before the deal, Bagapsh's candidate for vice-president had been Stanislav Lakoba,

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a history professor and former parliamentary speaker, who was nominated head of the Security Council of Abkhazia after the elections). The Bagapsh-Khajimba duo received 90.1% of the votes in the election, which was re-run on 12 January 2005.

As the second highest official in the para-state, Khajimba openly distanced himself from the president, for example by sabotaging his attempts to change the legislation so as to enable ethnic Georgians living in the republic to apply for Abkhazian citizenship. He also built up his own political team during his time as vice-president. Khajimba resigned from that post on 28 May 2009, after more than four years of functioning on the fringe between the government and the opposition. He stated that he had done so in protest against the president's policies, which, in his opinion, were leading to a destabilisation of the situation and could have given rise to anti-Russian sentiments in society.

In the latest election, Bagapsh won 61.1% of the votes and Khajimba won 15.3%; the turnout was 73.5%. As he had done five years previously, Khajimba again accused Bagapsh of election-rigging and abuses, although this time no street demonstrations were organised. Moscow remained neutral on this occasion, and did not offer any particular support to any of the candidates.

The Kremlin seems to be fully satisfied with the election of Bagapsh; he is loyal to Moscow and accepts Russian interests in Abkhazia (including its military presence, the expansion of Russian business, etc.). At the same time, unlike his rival, he has avoided openly servile statements or behaviour in his contacts with the Kremlin, and is perceived by Abkhazians as a leader who is more independent from Russia than Khajimba, and thus more credible. Additionally, it is convenient for Moscow that Bagapsh's mandate is weaker than five years ago; his popularity has weakened since then, and it seems that part of the electorate cast their vote for him as being the 'lesser of two evils'.

The Abkhazian political scene: the main actors and their camps

The main rivals in the elections of both 2004 and 2009 represent two major informal political blocs which have different views on the issues which are most essential for Abkhazia, namely the attitude to Russia and the treatment of the Georgian minority.

Sergei Bagapsh is the most influential politician. Members of his inner circle include Alexander Ankvab (the current prime minister and vice-president elect), Leonid Lakerbaia (the deputy prime minister and a likely future prime minister), Valery Arshba (head of the presidential administration) and Sergei Shamba (the foreign minister). Bagapsh's political base is the United Abkhazia party, modelled on its Russian namesake, which holds majority of the seats in Abkhazian parliament². The president is also supported by Amtsakhara, an influential organisation of veterans of the 1992–1993 war, which has 12,000 retired and active military members (chaired by General Garri Samanba)³, and which played the

² A bloc consisting of the United Abkhazia party, the war veterans' association Amtsakhara (Call of Ancestors) and the socio-political movement Aitaira (Revival) holds 28 of the 35 seats in parliament. The other 7 are occupied by the opposition, as represented by the Forum of the National Unity of Abkhazia, the Communist Party of Abkhazia and the Congress of Russian Communities..

³ Amtsakhara is more numerous than the regular Abkhazian army, the latter of which has approximately 7,000 soldiers plus reservists.

role of a Bagapsh's militia at the time of the street clashes after the elections in 2004. The president controls the army, militia and secret services. He receives propaganda support from state-controlled television and the official newspaper *Respublika Abkhaziya* (and its Abkhazian language version *Arespublika Apsny*).

During the recent election campaign, Bagapsh presented as one of his successes the fourfold increase in the state budget over the past five years (to 4 billion roubles, or about US\$130 million in 2010). However, his critics point out that over half of the budget funds are subsidies received in various forms from Russia⁴. Nevertheless, living standards have noticeably improved also, because part of the economy, including tourism, functions as a 'grey' market (for example, it is a common practice to rent private flats to holidaymakers). Between 2004 and 2009, the number of tourists visiting Abkhazia grew tenfold (to reach

800,000 in 2009; these are predominantly Russians). Bagapsh has not managed to complete the state administration reform or avoid allegations of corruption and nepotism.

Raul Khajimba, who has not held any official functions since his dismissal from the post of vice-president, is the highest-profile opposition politician. He is supported by the Forum of the National Unity of Ab-

khazia, an important political party created as a result of a merger of three other parties, four socio-political movements and five social organisations. One of the Forum's components is the other Abkhazian organisation of the 1992–1993 war veterans, the Aruaa (Homeland Defenders) led by Vadim Smyr, whose members fought as militants for Khajimba 5 years ago. Khajimba also enjoys the favour of several major newspapers, such as *Nuzhnaya Gazeta* and *Chegemskaya Pravda*. The former vice-president is not seen a plausible critic of the government because he himself was a high-ranking member of this team; he only became an 'opposition leader' after his dismissal. This happened automatically, in a way, when he announced his intention to run for the presidency; no-one else could compete with Bagapsh on equal terms. It cannot be ruled out that Khajimba's camp will fall apart after his recent defeat.

The key subject of the debate: the attitude to Russia

- **Russian influence in Abkhazia**

One of the most essential topics raised during the election campaign was Abkhazian-Russian relations. Russia, which is the most important partner and 'patron' of Abkhazia, has such a strong political, military, economic and cultural influence in this *para-state* that it is

reasonable to say that Sukhumi depends on Moscow at various levels (although the Abkhazian authorities cannot be classified as a local branch of the Kremlin, which is true of the South Ossetian authorities).

The most noticeable sign of Moscow's domination in Abkhazia is Russian military presence, sanctioned under Russian-Abkhazian 'interstate' agreements on the common protection of the borders (dated

30 April 2009) and on military co-operation (dated 15 September 2009), resulting in the *de facto* incorporation of Abkhazia into the Russian defence area⁵. The Abkhazian chief of staff Anatoly Zaitsev is believed to be 'Russia's man', whose task is to report to Moscow on any

⁴ 2.3 billion of the 3.8 billion roubles in the budget for 2009 were accounted for by Russian subsidies. See <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/157751/> (accessed on 22 December 2009).

⁵ The latter agreement, which will be binding for 49 years, states that Russia will be able to locate its military infrastructure, including bases, in Abkhazia. Its headquarters will be located in Gudauta. 1,700 soldiers will be stationed in the base, which in fact is already in operation. Formation of Russian-Abkhazian troops will also be possible. Russia has struck very similar deals with South Ossetia, which has officially declared its desire to join the Russian Federation. The Abkhazian shore is protected by Russian military patrol boats.

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moves made by the Abkhazian armed forces. It is commonly believed in Abkhazia that similar insiders also operate in all the other law enforcement agencies.

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The Russian rouble is the currency used in Abkhazia⁶. Additionally, Russian assets include shares in the tourist industry (although no precise data is available, it is a well-known fact that Russian capital is engaged in almost all major investments; this tendency will grow as the date of the 2014 winter Olympic games in Sochi approaches); the monopolisation of road construction and repair contracts by Russian firms; and the monopoly on fuel supply (since the arrest in August 2009 by Georgian coast guards of the Turkish tanker *Buket* carrying 2,700 tons of petrol, a supply which would have met Abkhazia's fuel demand for 20 or 25 days)⁷.

- **The Abkhazian elite's attitude to Russia**

The Abkhazian elite's attitude towards Russia is quite ambivalent. On the one hand, Russia is perceived as the closest ally, the country which has 'saved' Abkhazians from Georgia twice (in the 1990s and in August 2008), and a strategic ally which forms the basis of national security. On the other hand, Russian domination raises serious concerns. An important element of Abkhazian historical memory is the nineteenth-century Caucasian War, in which Abkhazians and Northern Caucasian highlanders fought hand in hand against Russia, in the aftermath of which a significant part of the Abkhazian population emigrated to the Ottoman Empire. Georgia backed Russia during that war. Therefore, Abkhazians fear that they could become victims as a result of any potential new future thaw in relations between Moscow and Tbilisi.

President Bagapsh won the 2004 election contrary to the Kremlin's plans, but he proved during his first tenure (especially after the recognition of Abkhazia by Russia on 26 August 2008) that he respected Russian interests in the para-state, although he emphasises that he is the head of a country which is independent of Russia. As commander-in-chief of the Abkhazian army, he rejected the offer made in August 2008 by the Russian Defence Minister Sergei Serdiukov, who suggested that Abkhazian troops should embark on a preventive military operation in the Kodori Gorge⁸ (Abkhazian casualties during that war numbered 1 dead and 2 wounded⁹). Bagapsh presented his vision of an independent republic, closely co-operating with Russia, in an article published on 16 October 2009 (during the election campaign) in *The Washington Times*.

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He wrote that Abkhazia would never agree to be a "ward" of any other nation, and emphasised that he himself had come to power by winning against a "pro-Russia candidate"¹⁰. In this way Bagapsh seems to be trying to win the broadest possible room for manoeuvre in talks with Moscow (as he himself is certainly not 'anti-Russian').

Although Bagapsh is making efforts to ensure Abkhazia's political independence from Moscow, and supports a multilateral vision of foreign policy – thus provoking protests from the opposition led by Khajimba, who would prefer closer co-operation with Russia – the president is very permissive about the activity of Russian business entities, for which he has also been criticised.

The opposition has presented serious objections to the agreement concluded on 26 May 2009 by the Abkhazian government and Rosneft. This provides for exploration of the Ab-

⁶ The Abkhazian apsar (1 apsar = 10 roubles), which was introduced in 2008, is merely a symbolic currency; only commemorative apsar coins are minted (although they are legal tender in Abkhazia, in addition to roubles).

⁷ Zaur Ardzinba, director of the state-controlled Abkhazian Shipping Company, made allegations that the Abkhazian side's representatives, whom he did not mention by name, had directed the ship to waters controlled by Georgians intentionally, so as to eliminate a competitor to Russian suppliers, including Rosneft. See <http://www.vremya.ru/2009/163/4/236706.html> (accessed on 22 December 2009).

⁸ Ivan Sukhov, *Prezidentskiye vybory v Abkhazii v 2009 godu: chastichnoye povtoreniye proidennogo*. Noyabr 2009. International Centre for Defence Studies, Tallinn. pp. 30-31.

⁹ <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/newstext/news/id/1227695.html> (access on 21 December 2009).

¹⁰ <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/oct/16/abkhazia-will-succeed/> (accessed on 21 December 2009). Similar statements have provoked allegations that Bagapsh is 'anti-Russian'.

khazian shelf by the Russian company in search of oil, and for opening a chain of petrol stations in Abkhazia, which in the opinion of the critics may pose a serious threat to the ecosystem of this para-state, the main branches of whose economy are still tourism and agriculture¹¹. An agreement which is being negotiated at present with Russian railways raises even stronger emotions. Under the deal, the management of Abkhazian railways is expected to be taken over for ten years by Russians, who will repair the railway traction and stations, among other tasks. The opposition has noted that this could be funded with a loan (worth 2 billion roubles, which is equivalent to approximately US\$65 million), granted by the Russian government to the government of Abkhazia, which in turn would give the money to Russian railways¹². The opposition, including Khajimba, has also criticised the privatisation of real estate properties, including attractive tourist resorts, which started in autumn 2009. As a rule Russians have been buying up this property, often at relatively low prices¹³. It cannot be ruled out that Bagapsh intends to facilitate a broader political independence for Abkhazia by granting business licences to Russian entities. However, it is also possible that the president is using this 'pro-independence' rhetoric in an attempt to distract attention from the unfavourable economic deals with Russia.

The world beyond Russia: in search of other partners

Abkhazia's ruling class is aware that the Russian-Georgian war and the recognition of their country's independence by Russia in August 2008 has reduced room for manoeuvre in Abkhazian politics. In 2007, Maxim Gunjia, the deputy minister of foreign affairs, developed a concept for co-operation with the European Union, which envisaged the implementation of joint projects (ecological, social, economic and scientific) without seeking the formal recognition of Abkhazia. Gvindzhiya also proposed the 'Taiwan way', meaning economic development and internal reforms combined with limited external political contacts. Those concepts, which were in line with the EU's activity as observed in the conflict region until the end of 2007, are no longer under serious consideration.

For the moment, practically the only 'diversification' of Sukhumi's foreign policy lies in its contacts with the ethnically cognate Cherkess republics in the Russian-controlled Northern Caucasus (Adygea, Karachay-Cherkessia and Kabardino-Balkaria), which are treated as an addition (and even intended as a slight counterbalance) to relations with the central authorities of the Russian Federation. Abkhazian elites believe that if relations with Moscow cool, their contacts with those republics would still be correct. Such expectations, considering how authority in Russia is centralised, seem quite groundless.

Individual contacts are also maintained with Turkey, the traditional partner for the Caucasian countries. Several million people of Caucasian origin, including Abkhaz, live in Turkey. Those few Turkish entrepreneurs and NGO activists who have established contacts with Abkhazia

(several Turkish schools and at least ten Turkish firms operate in Abkhazia) are usually representatives of this group. Sukhumi has pinned great hopes on a possible improvement in Turkish-Armenian relations (Armenians are the third largest ethnic group in Abkhazia after Abkhazians and Georgians¹⁴), and especially on closer contacts between Russia and Turkey, which would open up new prospects for Abkhazia (for example, sea and air links with Turkey would be able to establish in such a case).

¹¹ See for example Izida Chaniya, 'Puteshestviye po zamknutomu krugu,' *Nuzhnaya Gazeta*, no. 22, 2 June 2009.

¹² 'Bolshaya abkhazskaya afiera: zheleznaya doroga – kredit – shcheben', *Nuzhnaya Gazeta*, no. 23, 9 June 2009.

¹³ Alen Merdzhanian, 'Deputaty obsuzhdayut zakon o privatizatsii,' *Nuzhnaya Gazeta*, no. 23, 9 June 2009.

¹⁴ According to the 2003 census, the population of Abkhazia is 215,272 people. The most numerous ethnic groups are Abkhazians (94,606 people, 44%), Georgians (45,956 people, 21.3%) and Armenians (44,870, 20.8%).

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It seems that at present Bagapsh's group is the only one interested in developing contacts with foreign partners other than Russia, especially as part of multilateral projects. Such contacts would be useful in reinforcing Abkhazia's position in its dealings with Moscow. The special way in which the Danish Foreign Minister Per Stig Moller was received during his visit to Abkhazia on 7 October 2009 proved how desirable such contacts are; he was the first official representative of the West, except for members of various missions, to visit Sukhumi since Russia's recognition of Abkhazia. In his article for *The Washington Times*, Bagapsh appealed to the EU and the USA for co-operation with Abkhazia "in seeking a peaceful path forward."

Bagapsh's group is flexible, as was proven by their contacts with Georgia to negotiate issues concerning the Kodori Gorge, after it was occupied by Georgian troops in summer 2006. The opposition saw those negotiations as a betrayal of national interests, and demanded that the Georgian troops should leave Kodori as a precondition of any talks.

All political forces in Abkhazia rule out any potential subordination of the republic to Georgia, and are ready to accept contacts between Sukhumi and Tbilisi only as equal partners.

The case of the Gali region

Attitudes towards ethnic Georgians, who predominate in the Gali region in the eastern part of Abkhazia, raise controversies among the para-state's ruling class. Politicians agree that these people must be integrated with the rest of Abkhazian society, although they disagree about whether they should be given Abkhazian citizenship (almost all the Abkhazian Georgians already hold Georgian passports, and it is quite likely that they would keep them after being granted Abkhazian documents, despite formal impediments to this).

President Bagapsh (whose wife is Georgian) would like to offer citizenship to ethnic Georgians, but his efforts were thwarted by Khajimba as vice-president over the last few years. In late July/early August 2009, the president managed to push through amendments to the citizenship act in parliament, which gave rise to allegations that he wanted to 'buy' Georgian voters that way¹⁵. To prevent that, it was decided that the new passports (necessary to take part in the voting) would become available after the elections. Between 3,000 and 4,000 documents have been issued in the Gali region so far, while its population is estimated at between 40,000 and 80,000 people. Support for Bagapsh in Gali was significantly higher than in other regions (in percentage points)¹⁶.

¹⁵ Ivan Sukhov, op. cit., pp. 24-26.

¹⁶ <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/163034/> (accessed on 21 December 2009).

Attempted forecast

President Bagapsh's team is likely to remain the strongest political force in Abkhazia. At the end of his second (and final) term of office in autumn 2014, they will certainly try to promote a successor who will be convenient to them. Raul Khajimba may still be the opposition leader, if his political base is enhanced.

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This could happen through an alliance with Stanislav Lakoba, the former head of the Security Council, who resigned from that post on 18 August 2009 in protest against amendments to the citizenship act. Lakoba has temporarily withdrawn from politics, but he is still a very important figure in public life because he enjoys enormous esteem, being one of the fathers of the Abkhazian 'statehood' idea, a history professor and the author of comprehensive studies on Abkhazian history. Since he does not speak Abkhazian, he may not run for the presidency,

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but his support may be decisive for the victory of another candidate. However, the break-up of Khajimba's team is another possible scenario. In such a case, the Abkhazian political scene is likely to become fragmented.

The way in which the recent election was held has confirmed that Abkhazia, even though it is an unrecognised state, is home to processes characteristic of democratic countries, such as (1) electoral competition, during which the candidates build extensive blocs and enter into temporary coalitions, and the representative of the government team has no guarantee of winning the election; (2) sharp criticism of the government by the opposition, which highlights errors and omissions, for example in economic policy; and (3) the po-

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larisation of the media. Political pluralism and the presence of not only democratic institutions but also democratic practices make Abkhazia stand out from other post-Soviet countries.

However, when analysing Abkhazian politicians' programmes and their visions for the future, it should be remembered that this republic is politically, economically and

militarily dependent on Russia, and the degree of this dependence in fact prevents Sukhumi from taking any actions contrary to Moscow's interests. Russia will do anything necessary to prevent any destabilisation of the situation before the Winter Olympics in Sochi in 2014. It can be assumed that Russian plans involve Abkhazia's use as a 'base' for the Olympics (for importing building materials and workforce, and for tourist facilities), and in the longer term as an additional health resort ('Sochi B'), a maritime military base complementary to the one in Sevastopol, and a crucial bridgehead in the Southern Caucasus.



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