

The Geo-political Context of the Abkhaz Crisis and its Implications

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In May 2014 a political crisis erupted in Abkhazia, Georgia, which led to extraordinary 'presidential elections' after the resignation of Alexander Ankvab. As had been expected, the 'election' brought to power a candidate most closely linked to Russia, career KGB officer general Raul Khajimba. The 'elections' did not reflect the attitudes of thousands of ethnically Georgian population, who had been stripped of their documents before the 'elections' and consequently were denied the right to participate.

Russian Special Representative Surkov, who travelled twice to Abkhazia during the crisis, has supported Khajimba. Khajimba has also been one of the most outspoken critics of 'passportisation' of ethnic Georgians in Gali district, most vocal on the need to deepen relationship with Russia and a supporter of Russian interests in such issues as Russia's access to property and several Russian-initiated infrastructural projects. Russia as an occupying force is dominating political life in Abkhazia and there is no political force that is free of Russian influence, though, in Khajimba's case, its extent of dependence compared to other politicians, including Ankvab, needs to be noted.

The crisis has various dimensions and causes. There have been genuine internal factors of disappointment and opposition to President Ankvab, as well as an external dimension – Russia's role in managing the crisis and also in creating possible future scenarios.

It is not the first time that Abkhazia, Georgia has faced a political crisis, though the current geopolitical context plays a decisive role in defining its nature and possible consequences. There are two main trends that define the geopolitical context and create both serious challenges and opportunities for all key stakeholders.

One side of the geopolitical context is Georgia's visible progress in its Euro-Atlantic integration marked by the signing of an Association Agreement with the European Union on 27 June. On the other hand, the crisis evolved in a situation where Russia has launched a decisive fight against European integration of Ukraine through invading Ukraine, annexing Crimea and leading a war in Eastern Ukraine. The outcomes of both trends will define not only the architecture of regional security, but also the future of Russia and overall European security. In these circumstances, the stakeholders either choose to go after opportunities and find win-win solutions or face insurmountable negative consequences. Given the extent of complexities of the Russian-Georgian war, as well as the Abkhaz-Georgian conflict, the gap between the divided societies, lack of confidence and trust and security concerns, lack of comprehensive and effective EU policy of conflict resolution, there are no easy solutions. It will require strong political will, strategic vision and courage to take certain political decisions from all sides.

Threats and opportunities

Since gaining independence, Georgia has transformed from a weak, nearly failed state into a young democracy with strong state institutions, developing economy and strong international support. The

successes of Georgia's reforms have had extensive international recognition and have even reached Russian society, where anticorruption, police reforms and reforms of public services have been widely discussed. Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration has become irreversible. The overwhelming majority of the Georgian population firmly supports membership in the EU and NATO; there is no major political force that can go against the Euro-Atlantic choice of society. The 2012 parliamentary elections and peaceful change of power in the country have been decisive in strengthening Georgian democracy and Euro-Atlantic integration. Despite high tensions between the rival political parties, there is full consensus on the foreign policy priorities.

The engagement of NATO and the EU in strengthening security and democracy in Georgia has increased enormously, and the signing of the Association Agreement has demonstrated the will of the EU to get Georgia closer to membership, as well as opening up practical benefits even before its membership. Since 1 September 2014 this new legal framework that associates Georgia with the EU has opened the EU market, which creates huge opportunities for Georgian businesses, investments and overall economic development. The EU will soon abolish the visa regime for Georgia.

To sum up, Georgia has a realistic chance of becoming part of the area of democracy, prosperity and security.

Another side of the geopolitical context is Russia's decisive war for securing its exclusive sphere of influence in the post-Soviet space. The war in Ukraine, which started as a reaction to the will of Ukrainian people to sign the Association Agreement with the EU, annexation of Crimea and the Russian-led war in Eastern Ukraine demonstrate that Russia has entered a decisive moment in playing a zero sum game with the goal of excluding the EU, let alone NATO, from any kind of presence in the region and dominating the post-Soviet space against the will of sovereign states. The countries in the region are considered by Russia instruments in this geopolitical game.

At the same time, in the 21st century Russia has neither economic, nor military, nor ideological resources to win this game. Gradually, Russia is ending up in isolation from the international community with ever-increasing sanctions already damaging the country, but it still has the potential to inflict damage on the countries around it. Abkhazia, Georgia is considered by Russia a tool that can be used against Georgia, the EU or NATO. Since the confrontation has reached a decisive moment, using this card is becoming more realistic.

If we look at the May crisis, the 'pre-election' period and current developments in Abkhazia, Georgia from this perspective, the threat of some form of annexation of Abkhazia is becoming a realistic scenario. In the case of South Ossetia, Georgia, talk about a 'referendum' on joining Russia are quite open. In the case of Abkhazia, Georgia, given the attitudes of Abkhaz society, it will need more sophistication to achieve this goal.

One of the key issues during the crisis, as well as the 'pre-election' period, has been deeper integration of Abkhazia with Russia. Firstly, it came up as a statement of Taras Shamba about the benefits of an Association Agreement between Russia and Abkhazia. After a quite nervous reaction on the part of the society and political elite, this particular wording has disappeared but the substance is still unfolding. What kind of new agreement Abkhazia was going to sign with Russia has been one of the most hotly discussed issues during the 'pre-election' period. The fears by part of the society of losing 'sovereignty' have been quite visible (see e.g. letter of Abkhaz intelligentsia of 10 June 2014). Using different wording and without much explanation of what it entailed, the talk about the need for a new agreement with Russia continued. Right after the 'elections', the issue has

been raised in more detail. Following the 27 August visit of Khajimba to Moscow and his meeting with the Russian president, Putin's spokesperson made a statement that the "possibility and necessity to sign before the end of the year a new agreement on friendship and cooperation and mutual assistance with the aim of qualitative increase of *integration* between the countries was discussed at the meeting". Several components of possible agreement have also been voiced, namely abolition of the 'border' with Russia, creation of a joint army under joint command and creation of 'common space of defence and security'.

To sum up, considering the geopolitical context and unfolding discussions, some kind of absorption of Abkhazia by Russia is quite a feasible course of action. It represents a threat to all stakeholders, Abkhazia, the whole of Georgia and the EU. For Abkhazia, it may even turn into an existential threat. It requires political decisions and actions from all sides.

Measures towards a win-win solution

Abkhaz society should:

- Fully realise the threat posed by Russian monopoly in the peace process, occupation and extensive dominance in Abkhazia.
- Start working on ending Russian dominance and engage the EU in the peace process.
- Despite all the complexities of attitudes towards Georgia, start exploring what kind of practical benefits can be gained from Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration.
- Start direct talks with Georgia and engage in a real confidence-building process. So far, Abkhazia, Georgia has refused direct talks under the precondition of signing an agreement on non-use of force between the sides, which means recognition of independence of Abkhazia, Georgia. Any preconditions linked with the status issue will hinder any real process of confidence building and communication.

Since it is clear that the status issue cannot be resolved at this stage, a status-neutral approach would be most effective in this process.

Considering Russia's role as an occupying force in the region, it is beyond Abkhazia's or the rest of Georgia's ability to implement any of those actions without the engagement of the EU. The EU's actions will be most decisive in guaranteeing security and finding ways for a win-win solution.

The EU should:

- Realise that the existence of the conflicts in this region poses a threat not just to the countries of the region but also to European security as a whole. Ukraine should really become a game changer and cause strategic revision of policies in this part of the world.
- Elaborate comprehensive policy of conflict resolution and prevention, rather than policy of crisis management and reactions to crises created by Russia.
- Exert pressure on Russia to implement its obligations. Against the background of war in Ukraine, the Georgian-Russian conflict and Russia's compliance with its international obligations should become a condition for lifting of sanctions'.
- Direct more resources to confidence building, including communication channels, and information about benefits of Association Agreement.

Georgia, on its part, should:

- Work more actively with the EU to ensure its genuine engagement in the conflict resolution, through both pressure on Russia for deoccupation and implementation of its international obligations, and confidence building across the occupation line.
- Work internationally to link the threats of the escalation, including threats to Abkhaz society, with the war in Ukraine, and create a common agenda for sanctions on Russia.
- Also, be most creative and active in communicating to Abkhaz people the benefits of its Euro-Atlantic integration that can be extended to Abkhazia, Georgia.
- Find ways of addressing the security concerns and fears of the Abkhaz people through a status-neutral approach and with the key role of the EU in the process.

These decisions need to be taken as soon as possible, since the deterioration of the situation in the region is quite rapid. The signing of the 'new agreement' is planned by the end of 2014.

One of the test cases of genuine interest of strategic change in the policies of the sides may be management of the situation with the ethnic Georgian population in Gali. Active engagement of the EU is needed for preventing a humanitarian crisis regarding the Gali population and finding a human-centred win-win solution to this particular threat.