

Abkhazia's 'creeping' incorporation The end of the experiment of a separatist democracy

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On 5 March 2015 a Russian-Abkhazian treaty on alliance and strategic partnership came into effect; it had been signed on 24 November 2014. In fact, the treaty provides a "roadmap" for the incorporation of Abkhazia into the Russian area of defence and economic and social affairs: as soon as the transition periods defined in the treaty expire, Russian standards and legal regulations will be rolled out in these areas. Despite maintaining the formal status of the Abkhazian government institutions and attributes of statehood (which, however, is a fact of minor importance, as Abkhazia is not internationally recognised as a state), the treaty's entry into force will de facto bring the current model of functioning of this para-state to an end.

On the one hand, the treaty offers the formalisation of Russia's influence in Abkhazia, for instance by providing for the creation of a common Russian-Abkhazian security space, which has actually already been in place for several years. On the other hand, however, the treaty is tantamount to another case – after Crimea – of an actual expansion of Russia's borders at the cost of a neighbouring country. This time, though, it is not being done by way of annexation, but by transforming the Moscow-controlled separatist republic into a specific kind of 'associated territory' (a similar scenario, involving the signing of a treaty leading to very deep integration, is currently being implemented by Moscow towards South Ossetia). In the new situation, finding a resolution to the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict seems to be even less likely than before.

The launch of the process of a 'creeping' incorporation of Abkhazia has not met with resistance from local elites or Abkhazian society. The difficult living conditions and the fact that the republic has had an unclear status for over twenty years have resulted in political independence seeming to have lost its importance as a top value for both the elites and for society at large.

A brief history of the para-state

Abkhazia's current political model was formed after the Abkhazian-Georgian war (1992–1993) and after Tbilisi's loss of control over the province. Regardless of the lack of international recognition of Abkhazia as a legitimate state, the model involved the republic's sovereignty in domestic politics based to a large extent on archaic traditions of tribal democracy (with *veches* – traditional assemblies – as the ultimate manifestation of the 'people's will') and on a certain

margin of independence from Moscow. Russia guaranteed Abkhazia 'protection' from Georgia and was their 'window on the world' (the Abkhazians were allowed to travel practically only to Russia – originally on a limited scale, and if they intended to travel outside Russia, they were obliged to use Russian passports). The republic organised its own free elections (with a real political contest), freedom of speech was respected. An independent and opposition-related media operated in Abkhazia. Sukhumi was a participant in the peace process: Abkhazian delegations

took part in international meetings in various formats, and during the first term in office of President Sergei Bagapsh (2005–2010) informal bilateral talks were conducted with Georgian. The UN observer mission (UNOMIG) maintained an office in the Abkhazian para-state.

Regardless of external circumstances, the creation of such a model of functioning was possible due to the strength and determination of Abkhazia's ruling elite; although this was Russia-oriented, it was consistent in its efforts to build the state structures (with the support from a large portion of the Abkhazian population)¹. The ruling elite stemmed mainly from the academic community and was gradually formed according to criteria reaching beyond the criterion of ethnicity – apart from Abkhazians, the first separatist leadership included two Greeks, two Armenians, one Georgian and one Russian.

The situation changed after the Russian-Georgian war, and especially after Moscow recognised Abkhazia's independence (on 26 August 2008). On the one hand, this move considerably reduced Sukhumi's room for manoeuvre since foreign partners, unwilling to legitimise Moscow's decisions and to challenge Georgia's territorial integrity, decided to discontinue their relations with the para-state. Moreover, the UN observer mission was withdrawn from Abkhazia under pressure from the Kremlin. On the other hand, Russia's recognition of Abkhazia's independence resulted in a number of Abkhazian-Russian 'interstate' agreements being signed. This in fact increased the republic's dependence on Russia (the establishment of a Russian military base, the protection of Abkhazia's external borders by the Russian FSB). At the same time, an evolution of the domestic situation

in Abkhazia could be observed. Permanent crisis and widespread corruption contributed to aggravate and frustrate society and resulted, for example, in growing migration trends, with Russia as the main destination (in practice, anyone interested could obtain a Russian passport). The position of the Abkhazian elite diminished gradually as it lost the last semblances of its independence only to become a collective client of Moscow, almost completely dependent on subsidies granted from the Russian state budget. To legitimise its actions, the elite began increasingly to reach for nationalist rhetoric.

Moscow's recognition of Abkhazia's independence (on 26 August 2008) has considerably reduced Sukhumi's room for manoeuvre.

As a result of the above-mentioned evolution, presidential elections organised on 24 August 2014 ended in victory for Raul Khajimba, considered the most pro-Russian of all Abkhazian politicians (the circumstances surrounding the elections will be discussed further on in the text). Already ten years previously Khajimba had been calling for multi-level relations with the Russian Federation to be bolstered. However, this failed to bring him any success at the time, nor did it in the following two elections. In the new situation the same slogans granted him victory at the polls.

The Russian-Abkhazian treaty

Only two days after winning the elections, Khajimba stated that Abkhazia would not become part of the Russian Federation; quite the opposite – Moscow would help Abkhazia develop its statehood². On the one hand, this anno-

¹ See Wojciech Górecki, 'Abchaskie elity wobec niepodległości', *Studia i Materiały* no. 103, Polski Instytut Spraw Międzynarodowych [The Polish Institute of International Affairs], Warsaw 1996. It is important to bear in mind the change in Abkhazia's ethnic composition – originally (after the war of 1992-1993), the republic was abandoned by nearly all ethnic Georgians (some of them returned to Abkhazia afterwards).

² Хаджимба: Абхазия не будет входить в состав России, *Kavkaz-uzel.ru*, 26 August 2014, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/248120>.

uncement was probably intended to appease the Abkhazians, who still cherished the idea of independence, and on the other hand it was meant to prepare society for the treaty with Russia which in fact considerably reduced Abkhazia's 'statehood' (despite Moscow's declared readiness to take all necessary measures and efforts to foster international recognition of the republic).

The Russian-Abkhazian treaty provides for pursuit of coordinated foreign policy, creation of common defence and security space, formation of common social and economic area and maintaining of cultural, spiritual and interpersonal bonds.

The Russian side expressed its willingness to sign the treaty to strengthen bilateral relations already in August. In mid-October a draft document prepared by Russia (entitled "On cooperation and integration") was submitted to Abkhazia's parliament. In line with Khajimba's announcement that the document required more detailed work, the Abkhazian side introduced a number of amendments to it (including the change of the title), most of which were approved for inclusion in the final version of the text. As it seems, both the process of making amendments and public consultations were intended to prevent the risk of possible protests and to create the impression that both sides have an equal, partner-like status in relations between Moscow and Sukhumi³. The most significant amendment introduced by the Abkhazian side – and approved by Russia – involved the removal of the provision concerning the simplification of procedures of granting citizenship of one of the countries to citizens of the other (which would have made it easier

³ The original text prepared by the Russian side and the version of the treaty proposed by Abkhazia are available at: <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/251796> (Договор о союзничестве между Россией и Абхазией. Поправки абхазской стороны, Kavkaz-uzel.ru, 5 November 2014).

for Russians to purchase attractive real estate in Abkhazia – currently, individuals who do not hold Abkhazian citizenship are not allowed to buy real estate in Abkhazia). As a consequence, an asymmetrical provision was included in the text of the treaty according to which the Russian Federation will take additional measures to simplify the procedures allowing Russian citizenship to be granted to citizens of Abkhazia (Article 13)⁴. The treaty's final title was "On Alliance and Strategic Partnership", and it was signed by Vladimir Putin and Raul Khajimba in Sochi on 24 November 2014. The most significant provisions providing for a gradual, de facto incorporation of Abkhazia into Russia, are contained in Article 3 which mentions the main directions of the alliance and strategic partnership. These include: the pursuit of a coordinated foreign policy⁵, the creation of a common defence and security space, building a common social and economic sphere and maintaining cultural, spiritual and interpersonal bonds. The treaty also provides for the creation of a united grouping of troops composed of Abkhazian and Russian units within a year of the treaty's coming into effect. These troops will be headed by a commander appointed by the Russian side in case of a threat of armed aggression and in wartime (the composition of this grouping of troops, the method of its forming, functioning, use and supply, as well as its command strategy are to be regulated in a separate agreement to be made within six months from the day on which the treaty comes into effect⁶, Articles 5 and 7). Within three years, a Russian-

⁴ The final wording of the treaty is available at: <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/252910> (Договор между Российской Федерацией и Республикой Абхазия о союзничестве и стратегическом партнерстве, Kavkaz-uzel.ru, 24 November 2014).

⁵ Ibid. In the original Russian version, the word "agreed" was used in place of "coordinated".

⁶ Ibid. The deadline specified in the original Russian version was three months. Furthermore, the two original versions included the possibility of professional military service of Abkhaz citizens in Russian units stationed in the republic. However, in the final edited version of the treaty, this provision has been deleted.

-financed modernisation of the Abkhazian military is to take place which will include a gradual unification of military standards (Article 8) and, within two years, the process of securing the Abkhazian-Russian border and the para-state's maritime border is to be completed (with full freedom of crossing the border with Russia to be maintained, Article 9). Within a year after the treaty comes into effect, a Joint Information and Coordination Centre of internal affairs institutions is to be established, and its main tasks will involve exchanging information and creating a database on organised crime groups (Article 10).

Abkhazia committed itself to adapt its customs legislation to standards applicable in the Eurasian Economic Union (the Eurasian Union) within three years, and to apply Russian regulations in those areas which are not covered by these standards. Similarly, within three years, Abkhazia is expected to adjust its budget legislation to Russian standards (Article 11). A further harmonisation of the Abkhazian legislative system with the Russian one is to cover such areas as: social policy, healthcare and education. The treaty also mentions a gradual rise in the wages of Abkhazian public sector workers to reach the Russian Federation's Southern Federal District level. The wage increase is to be co-financed by the Russian side according to a schedule set in a separate agreement which is to be signed within three months after the treaty comes into effect (Article 14)⁷.

The 'Sukhumi Maidan' and the presidential elections

Abkhazia's adoption and signing of a treaty which radically reduces its 'sovereignty' is closely related to Raul Khajimba's rise to power. During the last two decades, Khajimba, a graduate of a KGB college in Minsk, has held se-

veral posts: of a local KGB head, minister of defence, deputy prime minister, prime minister and vice-president of the separatist Abkhazia. He ran for the presidency in the elections organised on 11 October 2004, losing, however, to Sergei Bagapsh⁸; in 2009 he lost to Bagapsh again, and in 2011 he lost to Alexander Ankvab.

Abkhazia's adoption and signing of the treaty seems to be closely related to the rise to power of Raul Khajimba – a graduate of a KGB college in Minsk.

After his most recent electoral failure, Khajimba became a member of parliament and an opposition leader, and focused on voicing heavy criticism of the government. His political base included activists of one of the two organisations grouping veterans who fought in the war with Georgia – the 'Aruaa' organisation ('Defenders of the Fatherland'); he used their support to organise large-scale street demonstrations. The largest such demonstration took place on 27 May 2014: the scale of the protest (approximate estimates put the number of participants at 5,000-15,000) and the presented radical demands, including the resignation of Ankvab and other top officials from their posts, have led to these events being referred to in the media as the 'Sukhumi Maidan'.

The demonstrations culminated in the president's office being taken by force (the angry crowd stormed the building when Ankvab, who had already launched talks with Khajimba, de-

⁷ Ibid. The treaty also mentions salary rises for Abkhaz military professionals and officers of the ministry of the interior.

⁸ Khajimba refused to accept the election results and urged his supporters take to the streets. This, in turn, sparked a serious crisis in the republic that resulted in a repeat election in which Bagapsh ran with Khajimba as his candidate for the office of vice-president (in Abkhazia's presidential elections the candidates run in pairs). In the election on 12 January 2005 the Bagapsh-Khajimba tandem won 90.1% of the votes. As vice-president, Khajimba sabotaged the draft law submitted by Bagapsh which was intended to enable Georgians to obtain Abkhaz citizenship (Georgians account for approximately 20% of Abkhazia's population).

cided not to go out to address the protesters). Fearing for his security, he hid in the Russian military base in Gudauta and resigned from office on 1 June 2014. The lack of a decisive reaction from Moscow, which offered no help to Ankvab other than shelter (Ankvab repeatedly attempted to call Vladimir Putin, however, to no avail) sparked speculation suggesting that the opposition's actions might have been inspired by Russia⁹. The arguments in support of this thesis included the Kremlin's dissatisfaction with Ankvab's policy, which it had assessed as being too independent – Ankvab failed to transfer to Russia the territory located around the Aibga village situated on both banks of the river Psou¹⁰, which has served as the border between Abkhazia and Russia. Moreover, he fostered settlement activities of Abkhazians and Cherkess living abroad, who – having obtained Abkhazian passports – were allowed to travel to Russia without restrictions (the Kremlin strongly opposed such settlement activities)¹¹.

Khajimba owed his success mainly to the lack of distinctive rivals and to the fact that some of the voters deliberately chose to vote for the most pro-Russian candidate hoping that he might become a tool in Moscow's hands in an attempt to 'bring order'.

Regardless of the alleged Russian-inspired actions, frustration and dissatisfaction could be observed in Abkhazia with regard to the difficult living conditions and the continuously

growing scale of corruption. The blame for the unfavourable situation was placed on the president, while he himself was accused not so much of dishonesty as of incompetence¹². In this context, some of Khajimba's supporters have claimed that the demonstration organised on 27 May in fact was a *veche*, a traditional gathering of the adult population typical of tribal democracies, during which decisions on the most important community matters are taken (proponents of this concept have presented an inflated number of the demonstration's participants, i.e. up to 26,000 individuals)¹³.

After Ankvab's resignation, the speaker of the parliament Valeri Bganba called a snap election and then – most probably inspired by Khajimba – ordered that a list be made up containing the names of individuals who had received Abkhazian identity documents despite being Georgian citizens (the Abkhazian law bans dual citizenship, with the sole exception being Russian citizenship). As a consequence, the Central Electoral Committee deleted over 22,000 names from the electoral registers – mainly ethnic Georgians¹⁴. They were the potential electorate of Khajimba's most serious rival, the head of the State Security Service Aslan Bzhania, whose candidature had been submitted by Ankvab's camp.

In the election organised on 24 August 2014 Khajimba won in the first round with 51.5% of the votes (the leader of the 'Aruaa' association Vitali Gabnia was appointed vice-president). Aslan Bzhania got 36.6% of the vote, and the remaining two candidates – the minister of defence Mirab Kishmaria and former interior minister Leonid Dzapshba – garnered 6.52% and 3.47% respectively. Khajimba owed his success

⁹ See for example Игорь Ленский, Муляж абхазской демократии, Stopstamp.ru, <http://www.stopstamp.ru/statty/jz3uyp3tiurjy19sks5s.html>.

¹⁰ In March 2011, still during Sergei Bagapsh's rule, Russia reportedly requested that these territories be returned to it. The size of the territories is 160 km², they are adjacent to Krasnaya Polyana and Sochi which were preparing for the 2014 Winter Olympics. The matter has not yet been resolved to date (18 March 2015).

¹¹ Wojciech Górecki, 'No change in the Russian Caucasus. The Winter Olympics amid a local war', *OSW Studies*, January 2014, p. 44.

¹² Interviews conducted by the author in Abkhazia in June 2013 and August 2014. In Abkhazia Ankvab was ironically referred to as *Prorab* (Russian: Пропаб), i.e. a foreman.

¹³ Wojciech Górecki, 'Abchazja. Kraj w cudzośćlowie', *Rzeczpospolita*, 20-21 September 2014.

¹⁴ The total number of individuals allowed to vote in the elections was 132,861. ЦИК Абхазии исключил из числа избирателей более 22 тысяч жителей двух районов, Kavkaz-uzel.ru, 18 July 2014, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/246011/>

mainly to the lack of clear rivals and to the fact that some of the voters deliberately chose to vote for the most pro-Russian candidate hoping that he might become a tool in Moscow's hands in an attempt to 'bring order' and, most importantly, stop the embezzlement of subsidies offered to Abkhazia. Interestingly, the two main candidates were from Abjua (eastern Abkhazia)¹⁵, and all four candidates represented defence and law enforcement institutions.

Summary and an attempt at a forecast

It can be stated that by signing the treaty with Russia, Raul Khajimba fulfilled his pre-election promises. According to the treaty's provisions, within the next three years Abkhazia's integration with the Russian Federation will proceed to reach a level which in practice will mean the republic's real and full incorporation into the Russian defence, security, economic and social space. At the same time, the Abkhazian government institutions are to be formally maintained, despite being unrecognised by the international community. This is also how Georgian authorities have interpreted the treaty: Georgia's parliament has considered it to be an attempt at Abkhazia's annexation¹⁶, and the Georgian Foreign Minister Tamar Beruchashvili said that the treaty is a step towards a de facto annexation of Abkhazia by Russia¹⁷. The treaty was condemned by several Western states and institutions including the USA, NATO, the European Union, and the European Parliament. Protests

were also staged in Abkhazia itself – approximately 1,000 people took part in a meeting organised by the Amsakhara party on the day the treaty was signed. It is noteworthy, however, that a rally organised on the same day in support for the government had twice as many participants¹⁸. In the weeks that followed, no similar protests have been organised, which suggests that Abkhazian society *en masse* has accepted the treaty (still a decade ago this would have been much less likely).

The treaty between Russia and Abkhazia has made the prospect of resolving the Abkhazian-Georgian conflict ever more distant. The same can be said about the possible renewal of the dialogue between Sukhumi and Tbilisi which was discontinued after the war in 2008.

The treaty's entry into force and the future signing of all agreements scheduled in its provisions would enable Russia to take full control over key areas of the functioning of the para-state. What is particularly important is the announced unification of the two legislative systems (which in practice will mean an adjustment of Abkhazian regulations towards Russian standards). This is expected to make management of the province much easier for Moscow in the following areas:

- **defence and security**, where particular attention can be drawn to the announced unification of military standards, including in the

¹⁵ Abjua, also referred to as Ochamchira Abkhazia, and Zypyn (western Abkhazia, the Gudauta District) have been involved in a traditional rivalry. Since the beginning of the 1990s the para-state has been ruled by representatives of the two regions interchangeably: Ardzinba represented Zypyn, Bagapsh – Abjua, Ankvab – Zypyn, Khajimba – Abjua (he is a native of the town of Tkvarcheli).

¹⁶ Парламент Грузии объявил попыткой аннексии Абхазии новый договор республики с Россией, Kavkaz-uzel.ru, 17 October 2014, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/250927>

¹⁷ Georgian MFA Condemns New Treaty Between Moscow and Sokhumi, Civil.ge, 24 November 2014, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=27847>

¹⁸ Митинги сторонников и противников договора с Россией прошли в Сухуме без инцидентов, Kavkaz-uzel.ru, 24 November 2014, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/252894>. As can be concluded from later statements by the Amsakhara party activists, the party intended to criticise not just the treaty itself (although during a party meeting the party members had considered it a "violation of the republic's sovereignty"); most importantly they intended to criticise Raul Khajimba and the para-state's government for not having organised sufficient social consultations when they were working on the treaty.

training sector, which in practice will make the Abkhaz military a component of the Russian armed forces. This will be further facilitated by the fact that Russia would be allowed to arbitrarily appoint the commander of the united grouping of troops, should it consider that a threat of military aggression might be imminent (Moscow might consider that such threat – posed by Georgia – is permanent). So far, regardless of the Russian military base and Abkhazia's unquestioned dependence on Russia, the Abkhazian military has enjoyed a certain independence (demonstrated, for example, by the strong position of the president as the head of the armed forces; it is noteworthy that the two previous presidents had a less servile attitude towards Moscow than the current one);

- **the economy and social affairs;** here the most significant change has been the planned adjustment of the Abkhazian budget legislation to Russian standards and Abkhazia's adoption of customs regulations consistent with the standards observed in the Eurasian Union and the Russian Federation. This will enable Russia to directly manage the Abkhazian economy and to influence the republic's domestic affairs to an extent larger than so far. The adjustment of the Abkhazian regulations to Russian standards will include the widely understood social sphere (healthcare, education, culture etc.), which means Moscow is likely to take real control over Abkhazian society and to be able to inspire processes which would be favourable to Russia (for example by developing selected academic subjects at universities, creating scholarship programmes, funding specific initiatives and projects). This is likely to further the degradation of the Abkhazian elite and to reduce 'all things Abkhazian' to mere folklore.

The changes discussed above will enable Russia to de facto expand its territory to include Abkhazia without a separate act of annexation similar to the one organised in Crimea (it should be remembered, however, that Russian 'border guards' have been stationed on the Abkhazian-Georgian border and the South Ossetian-Geo-

rgian border since 2009)¹⁹. A similar scenario is currently being implemented towards South Ossetia – information on the preparation of a treaty between Russia and South Ossetia was shared in November 2014²⁰, and in mid-January 2015 four drafts of the treaty were published (the original one prepared by the Russian side and three other versions prepared by South Ossetia). Based on these documents, representatives of both sides prepared a common version of the text. On 19 February 2015 the text was finally approved by the Russian government, and on 18 March it was signed by Vladimir Putin and South Ossetia's leader Leonid Tibilov (the treaty is entitled "On alliance and integration")²¹. Regardless of this treaty, on 18 February 2015 Russia and South Ossetia entered into an "Agreement on the state border" (the document was signed by the two foreign ministers). It is worth noting that after recognising the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Moscow followed a very similar scenario in its actions towards the two para-states, i.e. it signed identical agreements with each of them on the same day. This symmetry of actions has continued to be evident – on 16 February 2015, President Putin's adviser Vladislav Surkov said that there should be no border between Russia and Abkhazia²². However, the fact that

¹⁹ The tactic of 'soft conquest' in which the conquered territories are allowed to maintain the external attributes of independence and which involves the adoption of a different approach to specific territories, was used by Russia as early as in the 19th century. For example the Principality of Abkhazia was incorporated into Russia (together with western Georgia) in 1810, only to be dissolved in 1864. Until then Abkhazia had enjoyed autonomy and had been ruled by its own princely clan of Shevarshidze-Chachba.

²⁰ Южная Осетия и Россия разрабатывают новый интеграционный договор, *Kavkaz-uzel.ru*, 20 November 2014, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/252665>. See also Maciej Falkowski, 'Russia's "Neighbourhood Policy": the case of Abkhazia', *OSW Analyses*, 26 November 2014, <http://www.osw.waw.pl/en/publikacje/analyses/2014-11-26/russias-neighbourhood-policy-case-abkhazia>.

²¹ Правительство России одобрило проект договора о союзнничестве с Южной Осетией. *Kavkaz-uzel.ru*, 20.02.2015, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/257636/>

²² Владислав Сурков заявил о необходимости снять российско-абхазскую границу, *Kavkaz-uzel.ru*, 17.02.2015, <http://www.kavkaz-uzel.ru/articles/257396>

an 'integration' treaty has been signed with Abkhazia first proves that this para-state is playing a more prominent role in Russian politics. This sequence of events can also be interpreted as a demonstration of power (contrary to the case of South Ossetia, whose representatives repeatedly expressed their willingness to become part of Russia, the Abkhazian elite has always considered their republic's independence to be a kind of axiom).

The treaty between Russia and Abkhazia has made the prospect of resolving the Abkhazian-Georgian conflict ever more distant. The same can be said about the possible renewal of the dialogue between Sukhumi and Tbilisi which was discontinued after the war in 2008 (the only form of bilateral contacts has been the so-called 'Geneva format' agreed at that time).

The introduction of the provision on 'coordinated foreign policy' is tantamount to the fact that such dialogue would have to be approved of by Russia. It seems, however, that this would only be possible if Tbilisi agreed to make considerable concessions to Moscow, involving for example consent to reactivate the railroad running through Abkhazia which has been out of service since the early 1990s (this would make it possible to re-open railway connections between Russia and Armenia). In the long-term perspective, another concession of this kind could involve Georgia joining the Customs Union and/or the Eurasian Union. It cannot be ruled out that Moscow will at one point attempt to convince Tbilisi to take such measures, suggesting that failure to do so may lead to one or both of these para-states being annexed.

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