DEMOCRACY AND SOCIETY 25.11.2024 | Olesya Vartanyan

# No way forward, no way back

## With each new crisis, Abkhazia faces increasingly complex challenges in defending its interests against Russia

Four days of protests along with the seizure of key government buildings in the centre of Sukhumi led to the resignation of the Abkhaz leader and the announcement of snap elections last week. Aslan Bzhania thus became the third *de facto* president to be forced to resign from his post prematurely after protestors stormed and occupied the parliament building.

Abkhazia has long seen one political crisis after another, each following one and the same script. Although the most recent crisis ended peacefully, it once again cast doubt over the viability of conflict regions in the post-Soviet space with aspirations of sovereignty.

Russia's recognition of Abkhazia's independence in 2008 and its increased presence over the past 16 years has still not led to the establishment of sustainable institutions in Abkhazia capable of ensuring stable development. This small region sandwiched between the mountains of the Greater Caucasus and the Black Sea is governed by special rules based on the results of the Georgian-Abkhaz war. Following the defeat of the Georgian armed groups, ethnic Georgians, who made up the majority of the local population, were forced to leave the region. The remaining Abkhaz started building a system aimed at protecting their own interests. Gradually, Abkhazia has become a sort of closed island where kinship and informal structures have been more important than official institutions such as the police and the courts. With each passing year, the region has become more and more dependent on Moscow, and there seems to be no end in sight.

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Abkhazia's recognition in 2008 put it on Russian maps of the world, but at the same time reinforced the region's isolation. Very few countries followed Russia's example, with the majority continuing to view Abkhazia as a Russian-occupied part of Georgia. The lack of international recognition inhibits relations with

*institutions such as the police and the courts.*

the *de facto* Abkhaz powers and essentially prevents cooperation with foreign businesses. International support for Georgia's territorial integrity only increased after Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014 and its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Although Abkhazia enjoys the protection of Russian military bases, it has become an even more isolated region where dependence on Russia is only growing.

Since its recognition, Abkhazia began to receive significant capital injections from Russia. These funds allowed it to expand its local bureaucracy, and repair its roads, schools and kindergartens. However, the quality of local government has certainly not improved over time. The majority of residents have continued to solve their problems using informal structures — through relatives and friends, without taking recourse to the police or the courts. The increased size of Abkhazia's bureaucratic institutions has only consolidated the post-war system, without contributing to its reform. As a result, instead of developing the region, Russian financial investment has only contributed to the reproduction of the old chaotic order.

## Russian interests

Moscow has never made any significant effort to reform the Abkhaz system. But Russia did show an interest in change when it came to realising its own economic goals — that is accessing the region's key resource, tourism.

Abkhazia's unique climate, which has holidaymakers since time immemorial, has made tourism the basis of the local economy. Attempts by Russian entrepreneurs to acquire property and grow their businesses have encountered serious obstacles: the laws of the 1990s grant exclusive ownership and entrepreneurship rights to Abkhaz citizens. Moscow initially tried to negotiate but gradually moved to exerting greater pressure, forcing successive Abkhaz leaders to relax the existing restrictions.

Since the summer of this year, the Abkhaz authorities have submitted a number of legislative bills extending the right to acquire real estate and conduct business to Russian citizens. Each of these bills sparked heated discussions. The recent initiative to grant preferences to Russian companies has raised serious concerns among local residents, who believe that the arrival of large foreign players will deprive them of seasonal

income from tourism. These feelings have triggered a new wave of protests, culminating in the resignation of the Abkhaz leader and the announcement of early elections.

But whatever the outcome of the latest crisis, discussions on easing rules in favour of Russian citizens are unlikely to disappear. Abkhazia is still entirely dependent on Russian support, and Moscow, using its leverage, is able to continue exerting pressure. Under these circumstances, the Abkhaz authorities, irrespective of who is in charge, only have one option — to negotiate with the Kremlin.

## Calls for change

The day after the Abkhaz president resigned and the protests came to an end, dozens of representatives of civic and political organisations issued calls for reform. Some of them had drafted petitions proposing not only changes to individual pieces of legislation but also the reform of the whole system of governance.

Such initiatives are nothing new in Abkhazia. The authorities and civic groups have frequently set up expert commissions, held discussions and developed projects. Alongside these initiatives, plans were published and presented. But none of this ever went beyond the discussion stage and certainly never resulted in any genuine changes.

The main problem with past attempts was not a lack of ideas but a lack of confidence among local leaders that their implementation would actually engender change. These doubts are rooted in the structure of local society which has evolved over the last 30 years. For a long time, Abkhazia was an isolated society, with no external support for its institutions. In a region with a population of around 200 000 people, many are linked by family ties which makes running a tight ship impossible. Attempts to impose a new order meet with resistance, especially given that local residents still have weapons left from the war of the 1990s.

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However, the demand for change in society is clear. Promises of reform have repeatedly been used to build electoral campaigns, enabling many candidates to secure victory. People are striving for improvements in their quality of life, knowing that time is running out and a decent future depends on real change. Against this background, fears are being voiced that a series of crises could push part of the population to consider abandoning independence in favour

of unification with Russia.

The annexation of Abkhazia has long been one of the most heavily discussed topics in political and expert circles. This is due not only to statements made by individual Russian ideologues but also to the idea of the possible annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into Russia being voiced at the official level. Such scenarios have been seriously discussed at least twice — after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, and in 2022, when Moscow declared its claim on new Ukrainian territories.

These plans have been condemned not only in Georgia, which continues to see this territory as its own, but also in Sukhumi, where the local authorities still hope to retain at least partial autonomy. However, reality may well change in light of geopolitical challenges. With each new crisis, Sukhumi finds itself facing increasingly complex challenges in defending its interests against Moscow. Who knows how the fate of the region will develop and what decision the Kremlin will make if Russian plans in Abkhazia are thwarted again.

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