

# **Georgia-Russian Relations and The Western Reactions**

## **Part I**

Majority of the Russian political establishment was always famous through its aggressive attitudes towards its stubborn little neighbor Georgia. It is also true that the former most of the times preferred to exact pressure on the latter by activating its leverage in the breakaway regions by reminding the southern neighbor of its vulnerabilities.

Throughout the last 4-5 months there have been important occurrence appearing to happen in the Georgian turbulent regions of Abkhazia and S. Osetia. These are indeed very important: the April 16, 2008 Putin announcement on launching the process of opening the Russian official representations and among other functions developing economic relations with Abkhazia and S. Osetia.

What followed was the April 20, 2008 shooting of the Georgian drone over Abkhazia by Russian jet fighter (earlier on March 18, 2008 the Abkhaz authorities claimed they drowned Georgian spy plane however the Georgian authorities denied any involvement in the incident. Abkhazs continued to claim to have shot down Georgian drones on the 4, 8, 12 May. The Georgian side denied them all).

Additionally, on April 29, 2008, Russia announced that it was increasing its peacemaking contingent in Abkhazia by 1.000 men to the almost maximum of 3.000 allowed by the 1994 'Moscow Agreement'.

All the events described above are going to be subjected to analysis in this paper.

Last but not the least subject of discussion in this article is the June 1, 2008 the Russian railway troop deployment officially tasked to restore 50km. long railway line between Sukhumi and Ochamchire. Also violation of the Georgian airspace by the Russian military aircraft as well as other important matters that were discussed at the special UN Security Council meeting convened at Georgia's request on July 21, 2008.

Major trigger of the moves mentioned above among others, NATO-Russian dispute over enlargement, MDS in Eastern Europe and other global gridlocks, was announcement of the Kosovar independence. The March 28 issue of newspaper "Krasnaya Zvezda" reads as follows: "The self proclaimed 'independence' on 17 February 2008 of Kosovo, an inalienable part of Serbia, in a literal sense sold by the leading countries of the West, has created an extremely dangerous precedent for the whole system of international relations and has even complicated the

political-military situation not only in the area of the W. Balkans”. This announcement comes into accord with the official Russian position..

What followed were an unprecedented support/feedback to Georgia from the European Union as well as the whole international community.

First, the April 16 Putin announcement was not left uncriticized by single UN-EU-NATO high official. This, at that time, initial Russian aggressive performance was in a very pragmatic way evaluated by expert G. Khutshishvili. He thinks that the NATO Bucharest summit declaration that produced a clear statement that Georgia and Ukraine are going to some day become members of the alliance has put Russia into haste. The date when Kosovo case happened slowly shifts away. There still is talk on the Taiwan model however. Whatever discussions may be the fact is that when Abkhazs say Russia is helping them in acquiring their long desired independence in reality Russia is gradually absorbing Abkhazia into day after day diminishing its prospects of achieving self-governing (self-regulating) existence of any type. And the April 16 Putin statement is a colorful evidence of that, as argued by Khutshishvili (“Russian actions with regard of Abkhazia and S. Ossetia were unanticipated for Georgia” Caucasian Knot, 18/4/2008).

Pace of scrutiny was kept since events developed swiftly too. Another “famous” incident is the shooting of the Georgian unmanned aircraft on April 20, by the jet belonging to the armed forces of the Russian Federation – MIG 29 fighter (at least Unomig and ICG report so). After initial denial the Georgian side admitted the loss. However the Georgian government officials insisted that according to the video tape that was allegedly attached on drone’s video camera and that survived attack, clearly showed that it was the Russian jet. They provided the radar records as additional evidence arguing that the jet has taken off from Gudauta military base in Abkhazia and flew back to Russia after operation was finished. It is important to note here that the OSCE 1999 Istanbul summit decision on closure of Russian bases in Georgia applies to Gudauta as well. The Russian side, backed up by Abkhaz de facto authorities, claim that it respects the Istanbul summit decision. The parliament of Georgia on the other hand issued a resolution noting that Russia is violating the OSCE decision by not fully complying with it.

Investigation carried out by the Unomig largely confirmed the Georgian version of incident. Additionally, the Unomig accused the Russian Federation in breach of a major treaty on the cease fire and separation of forces in Georgian-Abkhazian conflict (as the conflict is termed by the Unomig) – the 1994 Moscow agreement. Unomig reported as follows:

“The frame of reference of the ceasefire and separation of forces regime in the case of the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict is the Moscow Agreement. It provides for the CIS PKF

and no one else to perform the separation of forces. From a strict peacekeeping perspective, therefore, the Mission considers that enforcement action by third-parties – in this case the Russian Federation - in the zone of conflict is fundamentally inconsistent with the Moscow Agreement and, aside from possible considerations under international law, undercuts the ceasefire and separation of forces regime”.

The Georgian government trumpeted victory! They appreciated this as an unconditional success, a great achievement of the Georgian diplomacy, a clear showcase of how armed aggression could be averted and responded upon peacefully. Large portion of mass-media supported its government position that partially bore common sense (especially if taken into consideration jointly with following successes of the Georgian diplomacy that are being discussed below). Nonetheless, there is a ‘flipside to the coin’ and in this case it reflects upon the final, 36<sup>th</sup> paragraph of the Unomig report. It reads as follows:

“36. By the same token, and from the same peacekeeping perspective, the Mission reiterates its position stated to the Georgian Minister of Defence on 7 April 2008 that the overflight of the zone of conflict by surveillance aircraft constitutes a breach of the Moscow Agreement. In their explanation of the purpose of the 20 April overflight, Georgian officials have referred to the need to conduct reconnaissance of Abkhaz military formations and movements north of the Ceasefire line. However legitimate this purpose may seem to the Georgian side, it stands to reason that this kind of military intelligence-gathering is bound to be interpreted by the Abkhaz side as a precursor to a military operation, particularly in a period of tense relations between the sides. (It is worth recalling that the Abkhaz side reported 16 UAV overflights since last August). A ceasefire regime has a major advantage – preventing war. It does however impose, in return, limitations on the freedom of the sides, including the undertaking by one side of measures that can and will be perceived as threats by the other side”.

There is no further commentary needed after reading this passage.

Next in the chain of tensions came the Russian ministry of defence announcement on April 29 that it was increasing its peacekeeping contingent in Abkhazia within the limits allowed. As justification was presented the MOD statement that the rise in provocations against the CIS peacekeepers from the Georgian power structures became more and more vivid. Additionally the Russian side claimed Georgia threatened the Russian citizen’s residing in the region in the first place: "If Georgia puts in place the threat it has made on a number of occasions about the use of

force in South Ossetia and Abkhazia, we would be forced to take retaliatory measures to protect the lives of our citizens," Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov told press, after talking to his European counterparts in Luxembourg on the same April 29. Additionally, the Russian foreign ministry has accused Georgia of sending 1,500 of its own troops and police in the upper Kodori Gorge in Abkhazia. This however was a reaction to what had already happened. The Abkhaz side, feeling the right moment, instantly supported this Russian mood. Maxim Gunjia, the vice foreign minister of the de facto Abkhaz republic, said Georgia was indeed "preparing something", according to the UK's Guardian newspaper: "We expect an attack from Georgia at any time."

The unusually tough statements followed the Russian action from the Georgian side as well as from the international community. EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana commented on 29 April: "'Even if the increase in peacekeepers is within limits, if we want to diminish the perception of tensions, I don't think it is a wise measure to increase now," adding that the EU continues to defend the territorial integrity of Georgia. This was not all at all. The European Parliament delegation to the EU-Georgia parliamentary cooperation committee was in Georgia on May 2 and issued a recommendation to replace the Russian peacekeepers in Abkhazia with an international force. This was the first time European officials have made such a recommendation, and Tbilisi was favorably surprised. The awakening came quickly however when this particular matter was clarified by the EU SR to the S. Caucasus. Based on May 3 interview taken from Peter Semneby by RFE/RL and the July 9 press conference held by the EU high officials in Tbilisi it is expedient to establish thorough analysis of how do the latter really envisage their future involvement in the conflict regions of Georgia.

After confessing to the RFE/RL's Georgian Service Director David Kakabadze that conflicts in Georgia are of significant concern to the EU and statements as well as activities of the EU confirm that the internationalization process are taking place, Mr. Semneby, the EU SR to the S. Caucasus said: "As far as peacekeeping is concerned, and changes in the format and possible European contributions here, there are no such concrete discussions at this moment. But as other European officials have stated before, no option is closed. If the *parties* desire a stronger role for the European Union, the EU will look at the possibilities to contribute in such a way".

Just for the sake of curiosity it is good to know which PARTIES did the SR mean? Maybe Russia or even Abkhazia that is highly intolerant of such ideas at least at this very moment however Abkhaz standpoint still is different subject of discussion under this context. Nonetheless, Semneby seems to be fully aware of the Abkhaz position and understands it: "The Abkhaz side at this moment considers that presence of the Russian peacekeepers is essential for its security," ... "I am not making a statement whether it is correct or not, I am just saying that

this is a perception and a view of the other side, which needs to be taken into account.” (Civil Georgia, Tbilisi / 9 Jul.'08 / 21:35).

If so it probably will take many more decades to somehow bring this issue to its pilot stage of effective functioning not only wordplay. Especially, when Both Eric Fournier, French Ambassador to Georgia and Peter Semneby stressed that unless there is a safe climate in conflict regions the talks on EU involvement are premature. “security on the ground was essential before EU involvement in any new peacekeeping arrangement could even be discussed” – Fournier made it clear to public at the news conference; Semneby added that : “It is not realistic to expect that the European Union will engage in a hostile environment.” Both referring to the Gali blast on July 6, 2008 where four people died including an interpreter of the UN mission in the Gali district.

When handled this way the “hostile environment” might never change since it is in the interests of certain people from the main parties of the conflict that this atmosphere prevails. Further, it is relevant to describe those three major “convictions”) on which the EU’s involvement in the region is based as outlined by Semneby (Civil Georgia, Tbilisi / 9 Jul.'08 / 21:35). First and foremost, there is no alternative to direct talks between the conflicting parties (Georgian-Abkhazia/Ossetian).The international community is vital in creating the appropriate atmosphere. Second, it is important to acknowledge and take into consideration main concerns of the parties. In the Georgian case it is the return of IDP’s and refugees; in the Abkhaz – security and self determination guarantees. Third, EU believes that it is vital to involve Russian Federation in the constructive way in resolution of the conflicts.

Although Semneby said it was mostly Tbilisi and Moscow's responsibility to improve ties, he said the EU believed it also had “the possibility to facilitate” Russia’s “constructive involvement” in the process of conflict resolution that in turn gives grounds for future hopes.

Speaking of actions, it would be highly incorrect if not ungrateful (As Lao Tsu said, “Honorable man knows that nothing is whiter than gratefulness and blacker than ungratefulness”) not to mention why the EU-Russia talks on the so-called Partnership and Cooperation Agreement stalled in the middle of the tensions described above. Lithuania being a “culprit” tabled several demands as set of preconditions for talks to carry on. One of them was linked to the “frozen conflicts” in Georgia and other ex-soviet republics as Moldova. The US Secretary of State, C. Rice and Assistant Secretary, D. Fried both raised their concerns and expressed their positive attitude towards Georgia as to the peacefully negotiating party in the conflict. The Deputy Assistant Secretary, M. Bryza went even further putting it under question whether Russia wanted to be a facilitator or party to conflict.

However, Europe and international community apart from US is not always that fond of the US raising unconditional support for Georgia. As International Crisis Group reports (Georgia and Russia: Clashing over Abkhazia, ICG Policy Report, 5 June, 2008.): “There still is some concern among European diplomats that the US is not consistent enough in urging Tbilisi to cease dangerous rhetoric-action-thought regarding Abkhazia”.

## **Georgia-Russian Relations and the Western Reactions**

### **Part II**

Things developed fast as it probably was expected. A special UN Security Council meeting was convened at Georgia’s request following Russia’s admission that its military aircraft had intruded into Georgian airspace over breakaway South Ossetia on July 8. Issues discussed at the meeting were of the following content: presence of the Russian airborne and railway units in Abkhazia; violation of the Georgian airspace by Russian military aircrafts; and the negotiating format in the S. Ossetian conflict zone.

At the special UN Security Council meeting there was “very strong support” for Georgia’s territorial integrity among UN Security Council members and “very strong condemnation” of acts of “military aggression” by Russia, Irakli Alasania, Georgia’s UN ambassador said (Civil Georgia, Tbilisi / 22 Jul.'08 / 12:22). The support was strong indeed however at certain points not so undivided. When in the first and second cases (railway troops deployment, Georgian airspace violation Russia found itself ‘offside’ the rest of the SC body which supported the Georgian stance) the question of the negotiations format changed turned out to be much more complicated.

Zalmay Khalilzad, the U.S. ambassador to the UN, said after the Security Council session that the United States was “troubled” by the violation of Georgia’s airspace by Russia and he urged “Russia to take steps for it to be a credible partner to the friends of Georgia process and play a constructive role.” He added that the United States was also concerned over the presence of Russian airborne and railway units in Abkhazia “that has no legal basis.” Jean-Maurice Ripert, France’s UN ambassador, told journalists after the session that: “Any solution has to be based on the independence and sovereignty and integrity of Georgia... Violation of Georgia’s airspace is not of any help.” (UN news center). Vitaly Churkin, Russia’s UN ambassador, however managed to take sort of ‘revanche’. According to his statement, the revision of the

negotiating format, the so called Joint Control Commission (JCC) in S. Ossetia aimed at by the Georgian side suffered fiasco since some and particularly one of the members of the SC expressed its total support for the existing negotiating format there. Further, Churkin refused to name the country hinting that it was a member of the UN Secretary General's Group of Friends on Georgia. Further, the Georgian ambassador in his address to the UN Security Council had expressed Georgia's concern over ongoing Russian military exercises in the North Caucasus close to the Georgian border. Churkin, however, responded that: "If it is ok to have US forces exercising in Georgia or in the Black Sea, why could it be questionable for the Russian forces to exercise on Russian territory?"

Importance of the Russian-Georgian tensions are stressed once again, when drawing parallels with how earlier on events developed around the same subjects as referring to S. Ossetia according to almost the same scenario at a special session of the OSCE Permanent Council on July 14.

Russia's acting representative to the OSCE, Vladimir Voronkov, told the Permanent Council session in Vienna that Russian chief commandship was ordered to send the aircraft over the S. Ossetia conflict region in order to clarify and ease the situation ("to cool the hot heads in Tbilisi", as MOD chose to say.). The Georgian Ambassador to the Victor Dolidze told the session that Russia's justification of "the act of aggression" was "feeble," based on "speculative 'information' on alleged plans of the Georgian side to undertake a military invasion."

Representatives from the EU French presidency and the United State both condemned the Russian incursion. Negotiating format in S. Ossetia became issue of disagreement among parties present at the OSCE special session too. While the US called for admitting, Tbilisi-backed South Ossetian provisional administration, led by Dimitry Sanakoev, the EU statement stressed importance of the resumption of talks without further delay, and the use of all negotiating formats - including the JCC. The JCC is currently boycotted by the Georgian side.

But let us go back to the special Security Council meeting. Another subject of critical value was raised at this SC meeting. Namely it was the IDP's and refugees and their return to the places of initial residence. Here Georgian and Russian sides clashed once again. Russian side insisted that it was of paramount importance to first sign the treaty of non use of force and pull out forces from Kodori gorge and only then to start preparations for the IDP/Refugee return; when in Georgian case these two processes should progress hand in hand. The Russian diplomacy had recently attempted to push its draft resolution regarding this issue to the UN SC however failed.

In short, it was pretty “enthusiastic” step of the Russian delegation to put this kind of draft on July 8, 2008 in front of SC especially after having read the resolution adopted by the General Assembly on May 15, 2008.

This resolution unambiguously supports the territorial integrity of Georgia as well as the right of all the refugees and internally displaced persons and their descendants regardless of ethnicity to Abkhazia, Georgia. These excerpts from the resolution read as follows:

“ Deeply concerned by the demographic changes resulting from the conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia, and regretting any attempt to alter the pre-conflict demographic composition there, the Assembly underlined the urgent need for the rapid development of a timetable to ensure the prompt voluntary return of all refugees and internally displaced persons to their homes.

Also by the text, the Assembly emphasized the importance of preserving the property rights of refugees and internally displaced persons, including victims of reported “ethnic cleansing”, and called upon all Member States to deter persons under their jurisdiction from obtaining property within the territory of Abkhazia, Georgia, in violation of the rights of returnees.

... There had been “complete ethnic cleansing” of the Georgian population from Abkhazia, Georgia, and for more than 14 years, the people who had fled their homes were forced to live with a growing sense of hopelessness. By challenging the status quo, Georgia was striving to create new ways to bring about a lasting resolution to the conflict”.

It is also important to note here that those who abstained in the voting confirmed their accord with the above mentioned and explained their abstention by already acknowledged SC res. 1808 dealing with the same issue and the authentic aspiration not to aggravate the complex situation in the conflict region:

“In explaining their abstentions, other representatives said they supported the return of the internally displaced persons and refugees, and recognized Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, the matter had already been addressed by the Security Council in its resolution 1808 (2008) and all parties should refrain from any actions that could lead to an increase in tensions in the region while pursuing a peaceful resolution of the conflict”. (**General Assembly, GA 10708. May 15, 2008.**)

It would perhaps also be expedient to include the EU SR to the S. Caucasus, Peter Semneby’s attitude to the above mentioned decisions as a “positive” abstention. In the interview with the newspaper “Abkhaz Meridian”, he stressed the importance of this resolution as an indicator of how seriously the IDP/refugee issue is taken on the UN agenda. Nonetheless Semneby refrained from going into any specifics since according to him: “Different EU states have varied attitude towards this resolution” (Abkhaz Meridian, N5 (73), May 2008).

As it was mentioned in the introductory part of this article recognition of the breakaway Kosovo had a huge impact on shaping the future world politics in general and especially in relation to other conflict regions. Kosovo became catalyst indeed. Every single country in the world admits this. Different countries however see the situation through different prism. The Russian and the 'Western' points of view are obviously extremely divergent. Some European countries as well as member states of EU are suspicious of this case as well however there is unity within EU over this matter. So the main conflicting parties are Russia and the "West".

"Kosovo's unilateral proclamation of independence last February played a key role... Russia has chosen a course of compromise. Russia's leaders could not ignore what happened in the Balkans, but they chose not to respond by recognizing Abkhazia and S. Ossetia, even though they believe that after Kosovo was proclaimed independent they had every right to do so... Tbilisi understands that after Kosovo the prospect of restoring Georgia's territorial integrity has become even vaguer" (*"The Caucasian conflict in the context of world politics"*, Fyodor Lukyanov, RIA Novosti, August 4).

When analyzing this statement there could be lots of doubts raised on how correct this statement sounds and what legal grounds it possesses. It is enough just to mention that Russia itself is pretty sensitive and vulnerable to the separatist/irredentist aspirations form within. Further, elaborating on this topic it is true that there have been human rights abuses everywhere but as most of the international human rights defending organizations of solid reputation stress, none of the breakaway states faced the ethnic cleansing that Belgrade perpetrated on Kosovo. In Abkhazia it was vice a versa as we already saw it form the UN General Assembly last report (other international legal documents released earlier on have confirmed this as well). None of the other conflict regions than Kosovo were subject to the type of UN resolution 1244 that calls the legal status of the region to be determined in future.

Nonetheless, in sharp contrast to the international community Abkhaz de facto leader, Sergey Bagapsh argues that "every conflict is unique of itself the ways of solutions however should of course be universal" (Interview with Sergey Bagapsh, BBCRussian.com). It is easy to see that this statement is unbalanced and emotionally driven to say the least, but that is the position de facto leader chose to have.

Notwithstanding all the above mentioned, additionally not wanting to conclude in the mood soaked with negative/pessimistic spirit however the future of Georgia's breakaway regions is still troublesome. Whether the legal precedent is created or not the realpolitik takes its own course. That is very well-known. And that is alarming our minds today...

## International Press Review

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SPIEGEL ONLINE INTERVIEW WITH ABKHAZIAN PRIME MINISTER



### 'We Don't Want a War'

**Tension is once again rising between Georgia and the breakaway region of Abkhazia, which is supported by Russia but not internationally recognized. Abkhazia's Prime Minister Alexander Ankvab talks to SPIEGEL ONLINE about why his people don't want war.**

Among the various hotspots just beyond Europe's borders, of particular concern to European observers is the breakaway province of Abkhazia, located on the Black Sea within Georgia's internationally recognized borders. The territory, which borders Russia, has been a de facto independent state since a bloody armed conflict with Georgia in 1992-1993 in which hundreds of thousands of ethnic Georgians were expelled from Abkhazia.

In recent months, Abkhazia has once again been a source of tension between Georgia and Russia. Georgia has offered Abkhazia autonomy but refuses to recognize it as an independent state. Tbilisi retains control of the strategic Kodori Gorge within Abkhazia, having deployed forces there in 2006 to disarm a local rebel group.

Russia, on the other hand, has given essential support to Abkhazia, which otherwise has few links to the outside world. Russian peacekeepers are stationed there, the Russian ruble is the official currency and most Abkhazians have been issued Russian passports.

**Tensions flared** between Georgia and Russia in April when Tbilisi accused the Russians of shooting down an unarmed Georgian drone plane over Abkhazia, a charge the Russians deny. The UN Security Council plans to discuss the accusations Friday at Georgia's behest. In a recent report, UN observers said the plane was shot down by a Russian fighter but criticized Georgia for stoking tensions by flying drones over the territory. The Abkhazian Defence Ministry has since claimed to have shot down several more Georgian drones.

In another diplomatic effort, a delegation of ambassadors from 15 European Union countries was also due to arrive in Abkhazia Friday for a two-day visit, where they plan to hold talks with President Sergei Bagapsh. The Abkhazian news agency, Apsnipress, reported that the EU's foreign policy chief, Javier Solana, planned to visit the Abkhaz capital Sokhumi on June 6.

Abkhazia's Prime Minister Alexander Ankvab talks to SPIEGEL ONLINE about why his people want their own state and the role of Russia.

**SPIEGEL ONLINE:** In the last few weeks, your Defense Ministry repeatedly reported the shooting down of unmanned Georgian spy planes. Politicians in Georgia's capital Tbilisi are talking up the strength of their army. Is another war in the Caucasus on the horizon?

**Alexander Ankvab:** We don't want a war. We are trying to make things better. If spy planes don't fly above our territory, we won't be shooting any more down. The Americans appear to have helped their Georgian partners to understand this in the last few days. Therefore we hope that our air defences won't have to fire any more shots.

**SPIEGEL ONLINE:** UN observers have come to the conclusion that it was not Abkhazian forces but the Russians who shot down the Georgian spy planes.

**Ankvab:** Even UN observers can make mistakes, especially if they rely on unreliable sources.

**SPIEGEL ONLINE:** Since the recent recognition of Kosovo by numerous Western countries, there have been discussions about whether Abkhazia could also obtain international recognition. Many Abkhazians are demanding just that from the international community. Does the Kosovo decision offer you hope of recognition?

**Ankvab:** Our citizens argue quite simply and understandably: Why should we be prevented from doing what others are allowed to? Who gets to decide about international recognition? We want to be free, just like everybody else.

**SPIEGEL ONLINE:** Abkhazia is becoming an international bone of contention. **Georgia, with US support, wants to join NATO**, while Abkhazia wants to be an ally of Russia. Is a compromise possible?

**Ankvab:** If Georgia wants to join NATO, that's its decision. Our people have made up their minds long ago. We have found friends, especially in the Russian Federation, who are helping us. We don't want to be a bone of contention. We want to have good relations with all countries, including our neighbor Georgia.

**SPIEGEL ONLINE:** The Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili recently suggested that Abkhazia should have "broad autonomy" within the Georgian fold and offered the Abkhazian president the post of Georgian vice president, a position which does not yet exist. Why are you not willing to even negotiate about that?

**Ankvab:** Abkhazia enjoyed autonomy with -- to use the term currently being employed -- "very large powers" when it was an autonomous republic within the Georgian Socialist Soviet Republic, then part of the Soviet Union. That's long ago now. The situation now is completely different. What Mr. Saakashvili has suggested is unacceptable to us. All the talk about "broad" or "the broadest" autonomy or some kind of post in the Georgian government doesn't interest us.

For the past 15 years we have been an independent state with our own flag, national anthem, police force, border controls and army.

**SPIEGEL ONLINE:** Why did Abkhazia break off talks, which took place under UN auspices, with Georgia two years ago?

**Ankvab:** Because Georgia broke all of the agreements that were made from 1994 onwards after the war. Saakashvili ordered military units to enter the upper part of the Kodori Gorge, which lies in Abkhazian territory. Georgia has taken an aggressive political stance against the republic of Abkhazia. We are ready to sign a peace treaty with Georgia and to continue the dialogue. A condition for that, however, is the withdrawal of Georgian troops from the Kodori Gorge.

**SPIEGEL ONLINE:** During the Soviet era, you were Georgia's deputy interior minister for six years. You worked together with the Georgians then. Why should that no longer be possible?

**Ankvab:** In those days there existed a different country, the Soviet Union. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the war between Georgia and Abkhazia in 1992 and 1993 deeply damaged our relations. In this war Abkhazia lost more people than during World War II. Anyone who now says we should live in the same state, as though nothing had happened, won't succeed.

### **'The US Reserves the Right to Turn Georgia into a Protectorate'**

**SPIEGEL ONLINE:** The problem of Georgian refugees from Abkhazia remains unsolved. According to UN estimates, there are 200,000 refugees, many of whom live in extreme poverty in Georgia. Why can't these people return?

**Ankvab:** We have allowed the unconditional return of refugees into the district of Gali, near the Georgian border. According to various estimates, 45,000 to 60,000 people live there now who had fled during the war. Show us an area in the world where so many refugees have been allowed to return.

**SPIEGEL ONLINE:** Georgia, however, demands that refugees should be able to return to any district of Abkhazia. Why do you reject their demand?

**Ankvab:** We cannot allow it for security reasons. We will not create the situation where the majority of the population wants to get rid of our hard-fought-for republic. If we did, then not much of the Abkhazian people, culture and language would remain. We would like to bring Abkhazians whose forefathers were banished by Czarist regimes back to their homeland. If the international community would be willing to help us with that, we could talk again about the return of Georgian refugees.

**SPIEGEL ONLINE:** Ninety percent of Abkhazians, including you, have Russian citizenship. The currency in Abkhazia is the Russian ruble, Russian peacekeepers safeguard the ceasefire with Georgia. Does that not limit your independence a great deal?

**Ankvab:** No. After the war, Georgia declared our Soviet passports invalid in order to prevent us from traveling. I experienced this myself. We became Russian citizens out of our own free will; no one pressured us to do so. The Russian passports gave us freedom of movement -- a human right. The ruble helps our economy -- we can not afford to have our own currency.

**SPIEGEL ONLINE:** There was a lot of Russian involvement in the Abkhazian presidential election at the end of 2004. Moscow wanted to push its favorite through. But in the end, he lost.

**Ankvab:** There were attempts at involvement and interests were pursued. The most important thing is that we have now left this situation behind us. The people of Abkhazia, and no one else, chooses their leadership. I think everyone understands that.

**SPIEGEL ONLINE:** Nevertheless, Russia has turned Abkhazia into a de facto Russian protectorate, without officially recognizing it as a state. Will this situation change?

**Ankvab:** The US reserves the right to turn Georgia into a protectorate, with its estimated 2,000 civilian and military advisers there. Russia has its interests in Abkhazia. Russian passports are regarded as a form of assistance, and their peacekeeping troops are seen as protection, which we want.

**SPIEGEL ONLINE:** Abkhazia's leadership assures us that it wants a Western-style democracy based on European principles. But your president recently said in a speech that civil liberties are abused in Abkhazia "in many cases" and that a number of state institutions function "very weakly." What's holding back the development of an effective democracy in Abkhazia?

**Ankvab:** More than anything it's our lack of experience. We are still living in a post-war situation, most of all because of the continued blockade of our harbors and airports. After the war we had to contend with massive administrative problems. We are learning as we go along. There are no massive human rights violations in Abkhazia. However, our institutions must enforce citizens' rights more effectively.

**SPIEGEL ONLINE:** Is it really just about the lack of experience, or is it also about the corruption that so many Abkhazians complain about?

**Ankvab:** There is corruption on a grand scale wherever there is a lot of money at stake. That's not the case with us. Yes, crooked officials take bribes or blackmail people. But our main problem is still the dearth of professionalism. Because of the blockade, we lack the budgetary means to pay state officials an adequate salary. This, of course, influences the quality of work on all levels.

**SPIEGEL ONLINE:** Abkhazia lies in the zone of the EU's "European Neighborhood Policy." Diplomats from European countries, including Germany, visit Abkhazia. How can Europeans help the Abkhazian people along the path of peaceful and democratic development?

**Ankvab:** First of all, it would be good if people stopped trying to convince us to return to Georgia. Training for specialized workers would be helpful, which Russia is already giving us.

There are business people in the West who are interested in our region, mainly in the tourist industry because of our 210 kilometers of subtropical coast.

**SPIEGEL ONLINE:** Can you imagine Abkhazia one day becoming a member of the EU?

**Ankvab:** That will depend on us and on Europe.

*Interview conducted by Uwe Klussmann*

## Georgia in 'low-intensity conflict'

Messenger

July

11

Shortly after US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice finished her short trip to Tbilisi yesterday the Messenger interviewed the country's top official for conflict issues, Temur Iakobashvili.

This month has seen the most violence in years and Iakobashvili, the state minister for reintegration issues, said the country is now embroiled in a low-intensity conflict over its two separatist regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

He also suggested that if Russian peacekeepers are pulled out of the conflict zones and replaced by an international policing force, Tbilisi would be ready to sign a pact on non-resumption of hostilities.

A transcript of the interview follows.

(Questions and answers have been edited for length and clarity)

The Messenger: What did you discuss with US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice?

Mainly there were three issues discussed with Condoleezza Rice: Georgia's territorial integrity and peaceful resolution of the existing conflicts, Georgia's aspiration to NATO and third was democratic development and democratic transition inside Georgia.

TM: Were you pleased with the outcome?

It was a discussion, meaning that both sides had an opportunity to express their views on these issues. We had unanimous agreement about Georgia's aspiration to NATO and how soon and when Georgia should be in NATO and support of Georgia in December ministerial meeting—so that issue was the easiest one as there was an understanding on that issue.

On the conflicts, which is more complicated than NATO enlargement for us, we expressed our concerns with the latest developments that are happening in the conflict zones, our worries are related to Russia's behavior in the conflict zones and the escalation of the situation in the conflict zone so we expressed our views on what should be done and how it should be done.

Secretary Rice agreed with our assumption that Russia is not an impartial side in this conflict unfortunately, and... she also understands the program of refugees and [internally displaced persons] cannot be postponed indefinitely.

We elaborated some concrete steps that can be taken and should be taken, in the nearest future—[by] the end of the year—obviously I cannot talk on those details, but they are concrete steps that should be beneficial for all sides.

We also discussed the engagement of the European powers and the European Union in this process and Secretary Rice endorsed the peace plan of Saakashvili. And that was very important for us.

TM: Do you think Europe's doing enough in terms of 'concrete steps'?

There are no concrete steps, that's why we cannot say Europe is doing enough and that is probably the problem—that we need concrete steps besides statements and we are quite encouraged by the initiatives of the German government especially the initiative that the German Chancellor Ms. [Angela] Merkel took and [German Foreign Minister] Mr. Steinmeier and we are looking forward to being familiarized with the German proposals and we believe that there will be a lot of things that we can find plausible and realistic to implement.

TM: You said in May that Georgia literally had to avert war. How close is Georgia to war now?

I would say that where we are at now, it is more [a case of being] not in danger of war but we are already into low-intensity conflict.

And everyday something surprising happens, with a lot of naming and shaming and blaming and even yesterday we had not only the accident with shooting in Kodori Gorge and attack on a Georgian [checkpoint] in Zugdidi district but we also had four Russian airplanes violating Georgia's airspace.

Today we had a weird explanation from Russian foreign ministry [about the airspace violation], and more and more the Russian Foreign Ministry's website becomes weird and obscure.

But we are already in the low-intensity conflict, I must say. And that's why we believe that the situation can be and should be defused.

TM: When you took up the post the name of the position changed from State Minister for Conflict Issues to State Minister for Reintegration Issues. What was the thinking behind this?

When I took this post this office was dealing only with conflict areas, now it is dealing with national minorities as well.

TM: Given the Abkhaz separatist stance on final status issues, is there a danger than the renaming could be counterproductive to negotiations?

I don't think that names matter that much. As far as I remember, the Abkhaz always said that the best negotiator was [current envoy to the UN Irakli] Alasania and Alasania was carrying an absolutely unacceptable for them name—the chairman of the supreme council of the Abkhaz autonomous republic, so it's not about [the] name, it's about substance.

The legacy that I inherited—it gives me the possibility to say that if [the] Abkhaz are interested in negotiations, they do it without this artificial hesitation.

TM: So did you get a negative reaction from the Abkhaz on the matter?

We have a negative reaction about it—they say we don't talk to minister of reintegration.

TM: But they have been talking to you?

Yes, to a representative of the Georgian government.

TM: This week Abkhaz de facto president Sergey Bagapsh said Sokhumi has severed all ties with Tbilisi. What does this mean in effect and how will you proceed?

First of all you cannot dismiss something that doesn't exist. So it will be extremely difficult to cease all contacts when no contacts exist.

I think these kinds of statements are largely for domestic consumption. Because unfortunately all Abkhaz political groups are competing for who is the most anti-Georgian...so it's not adding any confidence to our relations but it is unfortunate that these kinds of fragile issues are largely utilized for domestic political gains.

But we do that kind of thing as well, so...

TM: Last month you met Abkhaz separatist officials in Sweden for talks. Was this worthwhile?

First of all it was not a negotiation kind of meeting so there was nothing planned to achieve and from the beginning we were not trying to achieve something —was more an exchange of ideas.

I'm quite satisfied with this exchange of ideas because I had an opportunity to express my vision and the vision of the Georgian government and they also did the same and I can tell you that we had a very open, very frank, sometimes unpleasant, exchange of ideas but nevertheless very useful.

TM: So will we see more of these talks in future?

If we see a need for that, we will see that.

TM: You said in an academic paper last year that if the West fails to realize the important role that bringing Georgia closer to NATO can play, this could help undermine political forces in Georgia that are using soft power to solve the conflict.

Is this a real danger now?

We are in a situation where the conflicts are not frozen anymore, and in this reality we may see all sorts of developments.

The Georgian government is committed to a peaceful resolution. There is a very strong decision made that we are not going to start war. What we are trying to do is consolidate the international community to avert dragging Georgia into war.

And second to find durable solutions to these conflicts that are pending to be solved.

TM: If there is a new peacekeeping force, would the Russian force stay there while the new one is brought in?

What we are saying—it's not to get Russians out. We are saying that we have to switch from a military operation to a civilian operation and we say that we don't need military gung-ho guys there, we need policing forces where Russians can be definitely within the policing forces...but we need a different nature of the operation.

We are not saying Russia go home, we are saying we don't need militaries to repatriate refugees and IDPs and keep the situation defused.

And the very moment that Russian militaries will be out of Abkhazia and international police forces will be in Abkhazia, Georgia will take the unilateral responsibilities on non-resumption of hostilities.

### **Report: Restoring Georgia's sovereignty in Abkhazia**

David L. Phillips

Atlantic Council of the United States, July 29

*archived at [groups.google.com/group/genewsfiles/files](https://groups.google.com/group/genewsfiles/files) on July 31*

## Executive Summary

This report evaluates the international community's response to the conflict in Abkhazia. It recommends a package of immediate measures to the Georgian and Abkhaz sides to prevent the escalation of violence. As part of a multi-year strategy, it also suggests steps that Georgians, Abkhaz, and international stakeholders can take to lay the ground for future negotiations. In addition, the report proposes a diplomatic initiative by the United States and the European Union (EU) that would restore Georgia's sovereignty, while preserving the interests of Abkhaz.

The immediate priority is mitigating conflict. Russia's recent actions, however, have brought Russia and Georgia to the brink of war. The United States and key European allies should strongly urge Russia to reverse its decision establishing legal ties to Abkhazia and South Ossetia and to withdraw its paratroopers. Western allies should also publicly affirm that recognition, de-facto annexation of Abkhazia, or acts of war constitute a line that Russia must not cross.

If Russia crosses this line, the EU should suspend its negotiations with Russia on a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), revoke its visa facilitation regime for Russians, and impose sanctions on Russian businesses investing in Abkhazia.

The United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) can show solidarity with Georgia by conducting joint military training exercises with the Georgian armed forces, and by including Georgia's Membership Action Plan (MAP) on the agenda of NATO's upcoming ministerial meeting in December 2008. NATO should extend its Combat Air Patrol to prevent further violation of Georgian air space by Russian war planes.

Russia cannot be a mediator if it is a party to the conflict. Therefore, the United States should withdraw from the "Friends Group" — where Russia acts as facilitator — and steward its transformation into a Contact Group including some countries from the Friends Group, the so-called New Group of Friends, and other countries with good intentions.

Tensions can be immediately reduced by:

- Dialing Down the Rhetoric: Georgia should pledge not to use force against Abkhazia. Abkhaz leaders should also pledge no first use of force, open crossings to and from Abkhazia, and agree to facilitate the phased return of persons displaced by the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.
- Composing a New Security Force for North Kodori: The government of Georgia (GoG) should invite countries from the New Group of Friends to replace Georgian police with a temporary International Police Force for North Abkhazia whose rotation would be monitored by United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) and Abkhaz inspectors. Establishing an international police force would have the effect of eliminating the Abkhaz excuse not to negotiate. (Georgian security forces would depart once the international security force is fully deployed).
- Continuing Direct Talks: Discussions between GoG officials and Abkhaz representatives should continue as a follow-up to meetings in Sukhumi and Stockholm in May and June 2008. Meetings could be upgraded to negotiations pending progress.
- Expanding the Autonomy Proposal: The GoG should identify specific power-sharing arrangements and enumerate measures to protect and promote group and minority rights as a follow-up to President Mikheil Saakashvili's offer of "unlimited autonomy" (April 2008).

The ongoing plight of refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) is a source of great tension. To address this problem, the United States and European countries should urge Russia to redeploy its peacekeepers from the Gali and Ochamchire districts and allow international civilian police (CIVPOL) to steward the phased and voluntary return of IDPs. Russia and Abkhaz

authorities adamantly oppose returns. They might view the situation differently, however, if the GoG pledged to annul the Russian-led peacekeeping operation (as allowed under the 1994 Moscow Agreement on Ceasefire and Separation of Forces<sup>1</sup> and the 2003 Sochi Agreement<sup>2</sup>) unless peacekeepers were replaced by international police in Gali and Ochamchire.

In addition to the package of conflict mitigation measures described above, the GoG and the international community should take steps over the next two to three years to address the following basic elements of the conflict, thus changing the dynamics of future negotiations.

#### Prepare More Effectively for the Return or Resettlement of Refugees and Displaced Persons

- Manage returns by resuming work of the Joint Fact-Finding Group (JFFG) on collaborative law enforcement and UN-led Quadripartite Meetings (QPMs) on IDPs. This effort should be fast-tracked if there is an agreement to replace peacekeepers in the Gali and Ochamchire districts with an international police force.
- Evaluate conditions for Gali returnees to improve future assistance and protection programs.
- Survey IDPs to determine whether they want to go back to their homes or whether, as a last resort, they prefer to resettle with compensation.
- Improve the living conditions of the most vulnerable IDPs and, if they choose to resettle, assist with relocation, livelihoods, and social services.
- Implement the IDP Action Plan, which should be adopted by the GoG at the earliest possible opportunity.
- Establish an internationally financed Property Claims and Compensation Commission with emphasis on clarifying property rights.

#### Strengthen Georgian Democracy, including Minority Rights

- Consolidate democracy through greater parliamentary debate and public input into reform measures, as well as increased participation and accountability at all levels of government. Donors should focus on democracy, not just state-building for Georgia.

Enshrine minority rights by upgrading the constitution to include special provisions to protect and promote minority rights in accordance with international norms.

#### Link Economic Development and Peace Promotion

Make Georgia vibrant and economically attractive so that Abkhaz and Ossetians would gain materially from being a part of it.

Set up free-trade zones in Gali and Ochamchire under international administration and secured by an international police force. Expanding the Poti free-trade zone would also increase the sale of Turkish goods.

Develop a reconstruction and development plan for Abkhazia led by the GoG with assistance from private experts and donor countries, and bolstered by international financial institutions (IFIs).

- Expand Turkey's role by streamlining customs procedures and liberalizing port visits of merchant ships, including commercial ferry service between Sukhumi and Trabzon.
- Foster trade relations between Georgia and Russia by encouraging Russia's membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO) once the Roki and Psou checkpoints are placed under Georgia's control.

#### Reduce Abkhazia's Isolation

- Invest in Track-Two activities via an umbrella grant to support non-governmental organization (NGO) project financing and capacity-building.
- Ensure that Abkhaz traveling with Georgian passports benefit from the EU's pending approval of the visa facilitation regime, and inform Abkhaz of the travel opportunity through a public information campaign.

- Involve Abkhaz in international exchange programs such as International Research and Exchanges Board (IREX), Fulbright scholarships, and the International Visitors Program, even if they refuse to travel under a Georgian passport.

#### Enhance International Security Efforts

- Upgrade UNOMIG consistent with recommendations emerging from the Secretary General's pending review of peace operations for Abkhazia.
- Expand CIVPOL's Community Police Training Program as a step toward joint activities related to humanitarian issues. Personnel would come from several countries, including Serbia, which has police capacity and good relations with Russia.
- Urge Abkhaz authorities to reign in militias and make sure that local police meet standards of law and order.

While these measures may establish positive trends, comprehensive peace requires Moscow to make the strategic decision that resolution is in Russia's interest. If Russia is a major part of the problem, it must also be a part of the solution.

The approaching 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi — just 35 kilometers from the Abkhaz border — could help motivate the parties to reach a mutually acceptable diplomatic solution. Before engaging Russia, however, the United States must undertake the difficult diplomacy of bringing Europe on board. The United States and the EU must recognize the urgent need for collaborative diplomacy and agree to a joint approach before sending an envoy to Moscow to make the case that a stable and sovereign Georgia is in Russia's interest. The envoy should enumerate specific rewards if Russia uses its leverage in Abkhazia to deliver an agreement, such as:

- The EU will intensify negotiations with Russia on a PCA.
- The international community will accelerate Russia's admission to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD).
- The GoG will lift its objection to Russia's membership in the WTO.<sup>3</sup>
- The U.S. Congress will withdraw Jackson-Vanik, thereby waiving the annual requirement for renewal of Most Favored Nation (MFN) trading status.
- The North Atlantic Council will affirm that NATO forces will not be used to assert Georgian control over Abkhazia.

If Russia continues to undermine Georgia's sovereignty, however, the envoy must also make it clear that the international community is prepared to act in concert so that Russia pays a steep price. Following are possible measures:

- Western countries will condition their participation in the 2014 Sochi Olympics and call on the International Olympics Committee to review Russia's compliance with host country standards of conduct.
- The EU will impose sanctions on Russian firms illegally investing in Abkhazia. It could also suspend the visa facilitation regime for Russians, as well as talks on the PCA.
- NATO will affirm its commitment to a MAP for Georgia. NATO will also extend its Combat Air Patrol to Georgia and expand NATO exercises in Georgia.
- The United States will strengthen its bilateral security cooperation with Georgia by dispatching the Secretary of Defense and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff to Tbilisi and reviewing Georgia's military hardware requirements in the context of annual U.S.-Georgia National Defense Talks.
- The GoG will annul the Russian-led peacekeeping operation (PKO); if Russia then refuses to withdraw, its troops will remain not as a peacekeeping force but as an occupation army.

Once Russia recognizes that it is at a fork in the road and takes the prudent path of cooperation over confrontation, the United States, Russia, the EU, and the United Nations (UN) would co-

chair a Dayton-style negotiation until the following deal points are agreed:

- Status: The GoG and Abkhaz authorities will agree on a constitutional arrangement addressing status while upholding their respective core interests.
- Security: The PKO will be transformed into a CIVPOL.
- Humanitarian: Large scale humanitarian and development assistance will create conditions so that refugees and IDPs may voluntarily return to their homes across Abkhazia, or opt for resettlement and compensation.
- Development: International donors will work with the GoG and Abkhaz authorities to develop a plan for relief, rehabilitation, and reconstruction across Georgia, with special emphasis on Abkhazia.
- Internationalization: An array of processes and institutions will be created, enabling Abkhazia to forge links with the international community.
- Implementation: A Peace Implementation Council (PIC) will ensure that benchmarks and timetables are met. It will include the co-chairs who will be responsible for guarantees and peace implementation.

There are serious obstacles to achieving of the comprehensive peace plan proposed in this report. It should be an urgent priority for the United States and Europe to act on this together and, to this end, U.S. leadership is indispensable. Forging transatlantic cooperation will be difficult, especially during the waning months of the Bush administration. Moreover, the United States and Europe will only be fully motivated when they recognize that the issue of Abkhazia is of first-order significance. The situation is just too dangerous to ignore given its volatility, as well as the strategic and humanitarian consequences of war.

Russia must be convinced that the West is serious about using carrots and sticks to realize a diplomatic solution. Moscow currently believes that it can get the rewards described in this report without changing its approach to Abkhazia. What Russia really wants is for Georgia to forgo its NATO aspirations. This report does not endorse a trade-off between Georgia's MAP and Russia's helpful role in Abkhazia. The author strongly believes that aggression must not be rewarded. Only Georgia's leadership can balance priorities to realize Georgia's primary objectives: a MAP leading to NATO membership and restoration of sovereignty in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which will require Russia's assistance.