

Unrest in Abkhazia

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On 27 May in the capital of separatist Abkhazia an opposition rally was attended by several thousand people. Its leaders – the former deputy president Raul Khadjimba and the head of the organisation of the veterans of the war with Georgia, Vitali Gabnia – are convinced that there is a systemic crisis and have demanded the dismissal of the government, the prosecutor general, heads of regional administrations and that measures be taken to boost economic development. Despite the fact that President Alexandr Ankvab opened talks with the opposition, protesters stormed his office forcing him to leave. They gained control of the local television station. This led to the talks being broken off. The heads of law enforcement agencies supported Ankvab in describing the actions undertaken by the opposition as an attempt at a coup but also left the door open to dialogue. As for the opposition, it announced that it was provisionally taking over power. On 28 May Vladislav Surkov, President Vladimir Putin's advisor, and Rashid Nurgaliyev, the deputy secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, went to Abkhazia.

Commentary

- The crisis in Abkhazia is still internal and for the time being cannot be regarded in terms of civilisation and political choices (for example the pro-Russian option versus the pro-European one). It does not seem that this conflict will lead to a destabilisation of the situation in Abkhazia or to clashes. Despite the tensions Abkhazia's elite is convinced that an escalation of internal conflicts would be suicidal (the ethnic Abkhaz who are in power are a minority). It is quite likely that they will succeed in reaching a compromise (for example a snap presidential election), it cannot be ruled out that this will be dictated by envoys from Moscow.
- This crisis provides an illustration of Abkhazia's dysfunctional nature due to it being a quasi-state creation. Despite the fact that there is political pluralism and fairly effective administrative structures there are problems connected to the dependence on Russian aid, the underdeveloped economy, the lack of political representation of a larger section of people (particularly of Georgians, prevalent in the eastern part of the republic) and criminality and corruption pervasive in the political system. These are turning Abkhazia to an ever larger extent into a "black hole".
- The Georgian factor is not present in the current events in Abkhazia. Following the war in 2008 the two societies remain isolated from each other and Georgians, acknowledging the geopolitical realities, rarely raise the question of Abkhazia even at the rhetorical level.

Tbilisi would only be forced to take action in defence of its compatriots should there be unrest in Gali district, which is adjacent to Georgia “proper” and which is inhabited by ethnic Georgians.

- The situation in Abkhazia presents a serious challenge for Russia which, having recognised its independence in 2008, took over control of the province and thus became responsible for its stability and security. Russia’s policy on Abkhazia is, however, limited to maintaining a military base and allocating subsidies while controlling key sectors of industry. Russia is not, however, taking any measures to help develop Abkhazia economically (the Abkhazians were misled in expecting economic benefits from the Olympic games in the nearby town of Sochi) and do not interfere in the republic’s political life as they make the initial assumption that all the political forces in Abkhazia are pro-Russian. Nor are there any signs that Russia is seeking to annexe Abkhazia since such a solution would be opposed by both Russian society and by the Abkhazians themselves.