

Russia's "Neighbourhood Policy": the case of Abkhazia

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On 24 November in Sochi, President Vladimir Putin and Raul Khajimba, the leader of Abkhazia, signed a Russian-Abkhazian treaty on alliance and strategic partnership, despite Abkhazia not being recognised as a state by the international community. Under this treaty, Abkhazia, which still retains a semblance of independence, will be integrated with the Russian Federation in the areas of: defence, border control, customs policy, social policy and law and order. During the ceremony marking the signing of the treaty, President Putin also promised that US\$200 million of aid would be granted to Abkhazia in 2015. This treaty will be used as an instrument to place pressure on Georgia in order to provoke a crisis in the country and disrupt or reverse Tbilisi's pro-Western orientation and, in the longer term, to subordinate Georgia to Moscow in geopolitical terms. This also fits in with Russia's policy in the entire post-Soviet area, where its intention is to subordinate and then manage selected areas. This policy involves the use of flexible methods which break the rules of international law (for example, those concerning the inviolability of state borders or non-interference with domestic affairs) and creating various models of integration which equate to Russian control.

The provisions of the integration treaty

The signing of the treaty marks the culmination of the tactic Russia has been employing with regard to Abkhazia since May this year. Moscow viewed the previous president, Alexander Ankvab, as being too independent, and he was removed in a coup and replaced by a former KGB officer, Raul Khajimba (August 2014). In late August/early September, Russia demanded that Sukhumi sign the integration treaty (supplementing and enhancing the agreement on friendship, co-operation and mutual assistance signed in 2008), giving its Abkhazian partner a few weeks to suggest amendments. When some of these amendments were approved, despite protests from numerous circles in Abkhazia (including Ankvab's camp and some of the veterans of the war with Georgia of 1992–1993), the treaty was signed.

Under this deal, which formally upholds the decision of 2008 to recognise Abkhazia as an independent state, Russia committed itself to intensifying its efforts for the republic to be recognised by the international community. However, the main content of the treaty is made up by the provisions concerning Abkhazia's integration with the Russian Federation. The document provides for the creation of a "common space" in the areas of: defence, security, social policy, economy and culture. A united Russian-Abkhazian grouping of troops, consisting of Russian and Abkhazian units that will be deployed in Abkhazia, is to be formed

within one year of signing the treaty. In peacetime, the command will rotate, and in wartime the commander will be appointed by the Russian partner. The treaty also provides for a gradual unification of military standards, joint protection of Abkhazian borders (in practice, the border with Georgia) and the free movement of people through the Abkhazian-Russian border. A Joint Information and Coordination Centre of the law enforcement agencies dealing with internal affairs will be created in two years' time in order to coordinate actions aimed at combating crime.

As regards customs policy, Abkhazia undertook to harmonise its legislation with the regulations applicable in the Eurasian Union within three years (it will retain its customs services). It was also obliged to adjust its budget policy to the rules which apply in Russia. The harmonisation of the legal order will also extend to the areas of social policy, healthcare, the pension system and education. The wages of Abkhazian public sector workers will gradually rise to reach Southern Federal District levels. Russia undertook to support the envisaged changes financially and technically. In turn, the Abkhazian side succeeded at barring the provision which would have facilitated Russians being granted Abkhazian citizenship as part of a simplified procedure (this would have allowed them to buy real estate in Abkhazia).

The treaty was condemned by the key actors on the international arena (including the European Union, NATO and the USA). The Georgian government branded it as a step towards Russian annexation of Abkhazia, preventing the normalisation of Russian-Georgian Relations. President Giorgi Margvelashvili appealed to the international community to take all possible measures to contain the Kremlin's "policy of annexation", and the Georgian Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that a motion for convening the UN Security Council would be submitted.

The new (old) imperial policy

The manner in which Moscow has resolved the Abkhazian issue fits in with the new offensive policy (deeply rooted in the Russian imperial tradition) of regaining influence in the post-Soviet area. This policy involves subordinating certain countries and areas to later manage them using flexible, individually selected methods and legal solutions, which provide, for example, for various institutional frameworks and degrees of control. In the case of Crimea, the incorporation model was chosen, while in the case of Donbas it was decided to set up the ephemeral 'people's republics'. In turn, by forcing Armenia to break off negotiations concerning the Association Agreement with the EU and to join the Eurasian Union Russia sealed Armenia's status as a *de facto* Russian protectorate. Meanwhile, Chechnya, which formally remains a subject of the Russian Federation, has gained a significant degree of internal independence (including *de facto* consent to form its own armed forces and to introduce a legal order which contains elements of Sharia and Chechen common law which are incompatible with Russian legislation). The Abkhazian model will most likely be used also in the case of South Ossetia. Although elements of this policy were employed by Russia already following the collapse of the Soviet Union (for example, supporting Abkhazian, Ossetian and Transnistrian separatisms), it did not challenge the international legal order being the legacy of the Soviet Union (above all, the borders of the former Soviet republics) and did not create new integration mechanisms, which equate to

Russian control.

The end of the Abkhazian experiment

This deal on the one hand sanctions Abkhazia's existing dependence on Russia in many areas (for example, the protection of the border with Georgia), but on the other, it brings a new quality, leading in fact to the republic's political, social and economic integration with Russia. This means the loss of internal autonomy as a consequence of the intensified Russian government interference with Abkhazia's internal affairs which has been previously observed (one manifestation of this was the coup in May 2014, which was most likely inspired by Moscow). The treaty also marks the end of the Abkhazian political model which has been functioning since the early 1990s. Although only ethnic Abkhazians, who are a minority in the republic, formed the political nation as part of this model, it did contain essential elements of pluralism and democracy (the separation of powers, relatively free elections and the freedom of speech) and was based on an internal Abkhazian compromise concerning key issues. Abkhazians may also lose their dominant position in the political system (which is not an effect of the ethnic structure), since Russia may use other ethnic groups (for example, Armenians or even Georgians from Gali District) to tighten its grip on the republic.

Since the treaty envisages a high degree of integration, Abkhazia will *de facto* be transformed from a quasi-independent state into a separated part of the Russian North Caucasus, with which it has strong historical, cultural and psychological bonds (and it will also have economic bonds with it partly as a consequence of the planned construction of a road connecting Sukhumi and the North Caucasian Karachay-Cherkessia Republic) regardless of the essential political differences seen over the past quarter-century. This situation may result in the negative elements of political mechanisms being transferred from the North Caucasus, such as resolving problems through the use of force (violence as a political tool, political murders, repressions used against independent circles and the impunity of the law enforcement agencies), Islamic radicalism, the entrenched influence of criminal groups and the already observed increase in crime. The process of Russification of ethnic Abkhazians in linguistic and cultural terms may also deepen.

The consequences for Georgia and the South Caucasus

Considering the fundamental significance of Abkhazia for Georgia's foreign and domestic policy, this deal which seals the loss of this territory may have far-reaching political consequences for Georgia. Above all, it may become a catalyst of a serious internal crisis. Intensified activity from both the pro-Western United National Movement (UNM) and pro-Russian forces (for example, the former parliamentary speaker Nino Burjanadze, the leader of the Georgian Labour Party, Shalva Natelashvili, and Eurasian organisations financed by Russia) have already been observed. Although they base their arguments on different positions, both camps have strongly criticised the government led by Georgian Dream for its failure to prevent Russia from "annexing Abkhazia" due to its overly conciliatory policy towards Russia (UNM) or for provoking Russia through its overly pro-Western policy (the pro-Russian forces). The Russian side may make efforts to deepen the crisis, employing, for

example, the South Ossetian problem for this purpose. One sign of this is the fact that the Abkhazian and Ossetian issues have been separated in time (it was announced that a similar step would be taken towards Ossetia only shortly before signing the treaty with Abkhazia), most probably with the intention of generating and drip-feeding tension inside Georgia. Furthermore, it cannot be ruled out that Russia will take action to reactivate the railroad running through Abkhazia, connecting Russia with Georgia and Armenia, which has been out of service since the early 1990s (both Abkhazians and the Georgian government have opposed its reactivation for years).

Russia's desire to regain influence in the South Caucasus, the flexibility of its policy and its tendency to break the patterns existing so far, are all causing the array of potential Russian moves in the South Caucasus to be very broad (provoking a political crisis in Georgia, unfreezing the conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh or forcing the parties to this conflict to turn Nagorno-Karabakh into a special status area controlled by Moscow, and capitalising on ethnic tensions in Georgia and Azerbaijan). Russia is very likely to activate its policy in the Caucasian direction in the coming months.