

Abkhazia: the parastate's leader steps down

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On 19 November, the president of internationally unrecognised Abkhazia, Aslan Bzhania, stepped down and – according to some sources – left for Russia. His resignation came after negotiations between government representatives and the opposition, which had protested for several days against the ratification by the parastate's parliament of an investment agreement with Russia. This agreement envisaged, for example, that entities investing in Abkhazia, transferring at least 2 bn roubles (around \$20 mn, or approximately one-sixth of the parastate's budgetary revenues expected in 2024) – could receive plots of land with ownership rights to facilities built on them.

In their final stage, the protests, supported by a significant portion of the population, escalated into the occupation of government buildings. Opponents of the agreement feared it could lead to the collapse of the Abkhazian small business sector and, more importantly, to the takeover of valuable land by wealthy foreigners. The leader of the protests was Adgur Ardzinba, who had been defeated by Bzhania in an early presidential election in March 2020 (the next election is planned for spring 2025).

Although during the rallies the protesters effectively targeted Russian interests, they emphasised that their demands were not anti-Russian and were directed against the local authorities, who allegedly acted to the detriment of the republic. Protesters at rallies and meetings chanted 'Russia, Russia!', while Ardzinba firmly distanced himself from statements of support for the protests made by Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili and representatives of the Georgian opposition. Moscow initially condemned the Abkhazian opposition for escalating the conflict but, after Bzhania stepped down, expressed hope that the situation would be normalised promptly. Russia's concern over the events in the parastate was underscored by a communiqué published on 15 November by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, calling on Russian citizens to leave Abkhazian territory.

Although Moscow fully controls Abkhazia in the political, military, economic, and, to some extent, social aspects, unlike South Ossetia (officially the Tskhinvali region of Georgia), the Abkhazian parastate still maintains political pluralism. Elections are held under genuine competition, and society retains some degree of agency, reflected in its strong culture of political protests and demonstrations. In 2014, President Alexander Ankvab was forced to step down due to protests (he recently served as prime minister under Bzhania but stepped down following Bzhania's resignation), and in 2020 the supreme court annulled the results of an election in which his successor, Raul Khajimba, sought re-election.

Tbilisi lost control of Abkhazia after the 1992–1993 war. Subsequently, following the 2008 Russian-Georgian war, Russia recognised the independence of Abkhazia (and South

Ossetia), with Nicaragua, Venezuela, Syria, and several other countries following suit.

Commentary

- Due to Abkhazia's systemic socio-economic issues, such as corruption and structural unemployment, any politician governing this parastate is likely to face growing public dissatisfaction. Additionally, the parastate is heavily influenced by clan and business elites, including organised crime rings, which control its few profitable assets – particularly in the tourist sector – and divert a portion of budget funds provided by Russia. For many years, Moscow has been either unwilling or unable to address this issue.
- Since Abkhazia's effective separation from Georgia, the parastate has been alternately governed by politicians from two broad political camps. The first, known as the Gudauta camp, includes members of families originating from western Abkhazia; Ardzinba belongs to this camp. The other, known as the Ochamchira camp, represents the republic's eastern region and includes figures such as Bzhania and Ankvab. Following this pattern, Ardzinba is likely to become Abkhazia's next president.
- Russia has yet to issue a definitive response to the events in Abkhazia. Although Moscow generally supports the forces in power across the post-Soviet region it has repeatedly accepted Abkhazian politicians who rose to power following street protests (the parastate's politicians are not anti-Russian, although they differ in their levels of loyalty to Moscow). The call for Russian citizens to leave Abkhazia may have been tied to potential preparations for suppressing the protests (Abkhazia hosts a Russian military base, Russian border troops, etc.). However, at present, there are no indications that such a pacification campaign is being planned.
- It is possible that the future of Abkhazia (and South Ossetia) is being discussed in secret talks between Georgia and Russia. One indication of this involves statements by leading politicians in Georgia's ruling party, who, prior to the recent parliamentary election (held on 26 October; when the Georgian Dream party secured its fourth consecutive victory; see '[The fourth term of Georgian Dream: a questionable victory](#)'), confidently announced plans to restore the country's territorial integrity in the near future. A return of some form of Tbilisi's control over the parastates could be the price Moscow pays for normalising relations with Georgia and, most importantly, for Tbilisi's withdrawal from its Euro-Atlantic aspirations. While it is difficult to imagine Russia reversing its recognition of the parastates (as recently suggested), a more plausible scenario could involve the parastates forming a confederation with Georgia while retaining their independent status (as perceived by Russia) and validating the agreements Sukhumi and Tskhinvali signed with Moscow. This speculation, which has been circulating in independent Georgian and Abkhazian media for several months, intensified following a statement by Georgian Dream's leader, Bidzina Ivanishvili, regarding the need to 'apologise' to the population of South Ossetia for the 2008 attack; Russia had used this attack as a pretext to invade Georgia (see '[A journey into a glorious past: three terms of Georgian Dream](#)'). However, in all scenarios, it should be expected that any attempt by Georgia to reassert control over Sokhumi would provoke armed resistance in Abkhazia.