

Abkhazia: a new leader from the old establishment

Wojciech Górecki

On 1 March, the presidential runoff in Abkhazia – a breakaway republic on Georgian territory – was won by Badra Gunba, the acting head of the parastate and former vice president. According to unofficial results, he secured 54.7% of the vote, while his opponent, opposition leader Adgur Ardzinba, received 41.5%. Georgia, along with numerous other states and international organisations, including Poland and the EU, protested the election as de jure illegal. The election was originally scheduled for the spring but was brought forward following the resignation of former President Aslan Bzhania. He stepped down on 19 November last year after days of mass protests against an investment agreement with Russia (see '[Abkhazia: the parastate's leader steps down](#)'). Gunba, who had served as vice president for nearly five years, was the ruling camp's candidate but sought to distance himself from his predecessor. He stated, among other things, that the agreement in question should be revised.

Moscow has openly and unequivocally supported Gunba from the outset. His victory ensures that the parastate's full dependence on Russia will remain at least at its current level. At the same time, the election process confirmed that political pluralism persists within Abkhazia, the elections remain competitive, and society continues to assert its agency.

Commentary

- **Given Gunba's significant lead over Ardzinba – by Abkhazian standards – the election outcome itself is not in dispute.** However, the scale of his victory may have been influenced by his use of the so-called administrative factor and Moscow's open support. This backing suggested that if Gunba won, Abkhazia could expect an increase in Russian aid, which in recent years had declined significantly due to Russia's own economic crisis and corruption within Abkhazia. In the weeks leading up to the election, Moscow provided school buses, launched a convenient rail link between Abkhazia and cities in southern Russia, and sent an aircraft from the Russian Ministry of Emergency Situations to Sukhumi to transport patients requiring specialised medical care. These efforts intensified between the first and second rounds of voting. Regardless of Russian support, Gunba established a reputation as an effective administrator while serving as acting president. His decisions helped mitigate the impact of the winter energy crisis, and his criticism of the original terms of the Russian investment agreement further boosted his popularity. The deal had envisaged granting large Russian investors land plots and ownership rights to any structures built on them – sparking fears among Abkhazians that wealthy Russians could buy up prime real estate in the parastate.

- **Abkhazia has no significant anti-Russian political forces, and its politicians differ only in the degree of their loyalty to Moscow.** Opposition supporters emphasised that the autumn protests were not anti-Russian but rather directed against the local authorities. They also distanced themselves from the support expressed by the Georgian opposition. Accusations from the ruling camp that Ardzinba sought a 'geopolitical shift' to align the republic with Turkey were unfounded. However, they may have swayed voters concerned about the potential suspension of Russian aid into backing Gunba instead. His victory marks a break from the three-decade-long tradition in which power alternated between politicians from western and eastern Abkhazia. The camp of Bzhania and Gunba represents the latter, while Ardzinba comes from western Abkhazia. This shift suggests that clan divisions are becoming less influential in the parastate, giving way to a more substantive political contest.
- **It cannot be ruled out that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are the subject of behind-the-scenes negotiations between Georgia and Russia.** This possibility is suggested by statements from Georgian politicians in the ruling camp, who, even before the parliamentary elections on 26 October 2024, pledged to restore the country's territorial integrity. Meanwhile, Bidzina Ivanishvili, leader of the ruling Georgian Dream party, spoke of the need to 'apologise' to the population of South Ossetia for the 2008 attack, which served as a pretext for the Russian invasion of Georgia. Speculation about Georgian-Russian talks on Abkhazia faded after Bzhania's resignation but has resurfaced as Georgia's relations with the West continue to deteriorate. Moscow could conduct such talks – and is suggesting that it might be willing to 'return' some form of control over the parastates to Georgia – in order to further draw Tbilisi into its orbit and ultimately block its integration with the West. At the same time, Abkhazia's internal political dynamics and its sense of agency suggest that any attempt to subordinate the parastate to Tbilisi would likely trigger armed resistance from the Abkhazians.