

## **Synchronous Crises in Abkhazia and Georgia**

**ARVAK Center comment, 30.11.2024<sup>1</sup>**

The almost simultaneous destabilization of the internal political situation in Georgia and Abkhazia cannot help but suggests a close interconnection between these two seemingly autonomous processes. While the opposition protests in Georgia were expected, given the tense atmosphere surrounding the upcoming parliamentary elections, the events in Abkhazia were indeed unexpected, considering Moscow's well-known control over Sukhumi.

In Georgia, events began to heat up in May of this year when the republic's parliament passed the “*Law on Transparency of Foreign Influence*”. This was followed in September 2024, by the adoption in third reading by the parliamentary majority of a package of laws “*On Family Values and the Protection of Minors*” which prohibit LGBT-propaganda, same-sex marriages, gender reassignment, etc.<sup>2</sup> The unrest in the Georgian capital was accompanied by attempts by several Western countries to interfere in Tbilisi's internal affairs and put pressure on the ruling force, the “Georgian Dream” party. This complicated the situation in the republic and led to the government's radicalization of its position and its refusal to compromise on these issues, as well as its complete distancing from Western supervision.

It became clear that the October parliamentary elections would take place under conditions of internal political tension, and regardless of their results, the struggle for power in the country would once again move to the streets. The Georgian opposition had previously stated that the authorities would falsify the election results and allegedly did not even hide it<sup>3</sup>. Following this logic, opposition members, particularly M. Saakashvili, called on their supporters to prepare in advance for street protests in order to overthrow their opponents by force after the elections. For their part, representatives of the “Georgian Dream”, including prime minister I. Kobakhidze, also repeatedly stated that the opposition expected to fail in fair elections and was therefore preparing in advance for street protests, which would also be doomed to failure<sup>4</sup>.

Thus, the active phase of the power struggle in Georgia has been ongoing for about a year, and the street confrontation will continue at least until D. Trump takes office. The Georgian opposition is well aware that Trump's team may withdraw support for Georgian liberal forces and shift its focus away from this South Caucasian republic. This could mean that the radical opposition will have no more than a month and a half left for the last attempt to change power through the streets or force it to hold repeat elections. If the protests

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<sup>1</sup> The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 29.11.2024.

<sup>2</sup> “The Parliament of Georgia passed a law banning LGBT propaganda and gender reassignment.” (in Rus.) Forbes (17.09.2024), <https://www.forbes.ru/society/521374-parlament-gruzii-prinal-zakon-o-zaprete-lgbt-propagandy-i-smeny-pola> (download date: 26.11.2024).

<sup>3</sup> “Possible opposition alliance in Georgia – opponents of 'Dream' on pre-election arrangements.” (in Rus.): Ekho Kavkaza (22.05.2024), <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/32959087.html> (download date: 25.11.2024).

<sup>4</sup> “The Prime Minister of Georgia stated about possible opposition protests after the elections.” (in Rus.): Vedomosti (26.10.2024), <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/news/2024/10/26/1071124-premer-gruzii> (download date: 26.11.2024).

activity is ineffective, the new White House administration will likely shut down the project of liberalizing Georgia and turning it into another “anti-Russia”.

In contrast to Georgia, anti-government protests in Abkhazia erupted relatively recently (11 November 2024) and within just a week led to the resignation of president A. Bzhania and the appointment of early presidential elections within three months<sup>5</sup>. In the case of Abkhazia, the trigger for the unrest was the preparation for the ratification by the republic's parliament of an “*investment*” agreement with Russia without considering public opinion. The agreement provides extensive benefits for Russian investors in Abkhazia. The draft agreement was announced a year ago. Its main provisions included the allocation of land plots to Russian companies, the provision of long-term tax holidays for these investors, the right to duty-free imports of building materials from Russia, and the possibility of unrestricted recruitment of foreign labor in Abkhazia<sup>6</sup>. The Abkhaz public initially reacted negatively to this project, considering it socially dangerous, but did not resort to open protests, hoping that the local authorities would abandon this initiative. However, immediately after the document was submitted to the parliament for ratification, the protesters organized street actions and forcibly seized few government institutions in Sukhumi, forcing A. Bzhania to resign and the parliament to impose a moratorium on the agreement.

Given the rapid and successful culmination of the events in Sukhumi for the protesters, it is hard to speak of phenomenal self-organization of the masses and coordination of these actions by the Abkhaz opposition. It can also be assumed that the social background of the protests was only their external manifestation, while the Abkhazian society is more concerned with the political component of the issue, namely the expansion of Russia's influence over Abkhazia and the attempt to completely absorb it politically and economically. The most notorious opposition leaders in Abkhazia do not hide this. In this case, a reasonable question arises: what external forces does the Abkhaz opposition rely on if it indeed aims to achieve the practically unattainable goal of limiting Moscow's influence on Sukhumi?

In this regard, hypothetically, only two centers can be named that are capable of generating political sentiments in Abkhazian society and forming an anti-Russian vector. These are Ankara and, strangely enough, Moscow itself.

Regarding Ankara, it can be noted that although its presence in Abkhazia is “obscure” in political life, but quite noticeable in the economy. The ARVAK Center has already [written](#) about Turkish investments in the construction, tourism, trade, and other sectors of the Abkhaz economy. There has also been talk of numerous joint programs in the cultural and educational spheres, as well as ties between Turkey and Abkhazia through religious organizations and diaspora structures. However, this multi-level interaction is not often mentioned either in Turkey or in Abkhazia. It is not advertised, but it exists and is expanding

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<sup>5</sup> “The Abkhazian parliament dismissed the president. The opposition and authorities managed to reach an agreement.” (in Rus.): BBC (14.11.2024). <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/c4gx9g4n72p> (download date: 26.11.2024).

<sup>6</sup> “Subsidies are good, investments are bad. Why the agreement with Russia worries the Abkhazians.” (in Rus.): BBC (14.11.2024). <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/c4gx9g4n72p> (download date: 26.11.2024).

every year. Nevertheless, given the scale of the Russian (including military) presence in Abkhazia and the control of the country's socio-political sphere by Russian special services, Ankara does not have sufficient resources to independently create similar crisis situations in Abkhazia. However, it has enough resources to attempt a soft reorientation of Abkhazian society towards Turkey in the event of a deepening crisis. Moreover, if the issue of Russian subsidies to Sukhumi is not resolved, Turkey will remain Abkhazia's only hope for vital financial injections.

Given the above, it seems more plausible that Moscow itself can be considered the initiator of the Abkhazian political crisis, determined to create a background of widespread public dissatisfaction with Russian policy in the republic, seems more plausible. It is unlikely that by insisting on the ratification of the mentioned agreement by the Abkhazian side, the Kremlin did not foresee the manifestation of mass discontent or would not have dared to give Aslan Bzhania *carte blanche* to forcibly suppress street protests. It turns out that Moscow deliberately initiated the crisis in Abkhazia and in Russian-Abkhazian relations as a whole. The main question is what are the goals of this step and whose interests in the Russian establishment are they stem from?

According to a number of experts, the Abkhazian events are not related to the Kremlin's big politics and reflect the rivalry of clans in the Russian elite for control over the subsidies allocated to Sukhumi and the future investments that will be directed to Abkhazia in the event of the ratification of the aforementioned agreement<sup>7</sup>. According to this point of view, the change of power in Abkhazia is dictated by the interests of certain groups in Moscow, each of which has its own nominees in the power structures of the small republic, while the Abkhaz people mistakenly believe that the outcome of the unfolding struggle depends on their will. According to the assumptions of other experts, Russia is initiating a crisis in Abkhazia to eliminate the formal sovereignty of Abkhazia, annex its territory<sup>8</sup>, appropriate its resources, and change the demographic balance.

The aforementioned versions may have the right to exist, but there is one significant factor that casts doubt on them. This is the timing, which is extremely unfortunate both for the Russian inter-clan struggle for Abkhazian investments and for the operation to “*liquidate and annex*” the Republic of Abkhazia. It is unlikely that the political-financial groups around Putin would dare to fight for Abkhazian resources at the very moment when, on the eve of a major confrontation with the West, V. Putin least needs “*money squabbles*” with unpredictable political consequences. After all, it is not a Russian region at stake, that the redistribution of spheres of influence in which would not affect the state of affairs on the Russian Federation’s foreign policy front. It is a geopolitical entity that Russia, after the events of August 2008, transformed into an additional tool for ensuring its security in the Caucasus and an element for implementing its geostrategic goals on the international stage.

The assumptions that Moscow plans to “*annex*” Abkhazia also seem unconvincing. The military presence of the Russian Federation in Abkhazia is already extremely significant.

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<sup>7</sup> “Is Putin losing Abkhazia?” (in Rus.): Radio Liberty (15.11.2024), <https://www.svoboda.org/a/putin-teryat-abhaziyu-/33203501.html> (download date: 25.11.2024).

<sup>8</sup> “How Russia took a course towards absorbing Abkhazia.” (in Rus.): European Pravda (27.03.2024), <https://www.eurointegration.com.ua/rus/news/2024/03/27/7182482/> (download date: 26.11.2024).

Liquidating the republic's state bodies, even if they formally exist, as experts insist, is an absolutely irrational step. After all, it is the presence of its own government in Abkhazia that can legitimize the absorption of this republic by Russia. At one time, during the preparation and implementation of the invasion of Ukraine, Moscow relied on the formal sovereignty of the DPR and LPR. The anti-Russian front of the Western countries was finally formed when the DPR, LPR, Zaporizhzhia, and Kherson were proclaimed part of Russia. It is unlikely that it is in Moscow's interest to repeat this experience with Abkhazia, which would lead to an even greater escalation along the RF–West axis.

As a result, it can be assumed that the events in Abkhazia are unfolding with the Kremlin's sanction, but with completely different intentions. In this regard, it is worth taking a closer look at the widely spread version of Moscow's intentions to establish strong partnership with Georgia at the cost of either handing over Abkhazia or creating prerequisites for Georgian-Abkhazian reintegration in the future. It is noteworthy that the most skeptical about this version are the members of Georgian opposition and the experts serving their political agenda. This suggests that the pro-Western opponents of the “Georgian Dream” fear this possibility and consider it an undesirable factor in the context of their struggle for power in the republic. These fears are quite understandable, given that the Georgian opposition itself has been imposing the idea on society that the ruling party of B. Ivanishvili keeps clandestine ties with Moscow and is ready to start a new phase of friendly relations with it. In this case, it turns out that the statements of the Georgian opposition are indeed true, and Russia is ready to pay a high price to the Georgian people in the form of Abkhazia for the normalization of Georgian-Russian relations. The West, which supports the Georgian opposition, has nothing to offer the republic anything other than the previous 20-year-old promises to accept Tbilisi into the EU and NATO if the Georgian people manage to oust the “dreamers” from power.

It is obvious that Moscow has sensed the fears of the hostile liberal forces in Georgia and has begun to play on this. The “Abkhazian crisis” initiated by it signals to the Georgian society that, in the case of the “correct” choice of the foreign policy vector and the appropriate power, Georgia will have a chance to reintegrate the region that is becoming Russia's “fifth wheel” in its Caucasian-Black Sea policy. Russia is making it clear that Abkhazia can be presented to Georgia on a “silver platter” – economically and financially weakened, deprived of Russian support, completely disoriented, and torn apart by internal clan conflicts. In fact, Moscow is now announcing favorable opportunities for Tbilisi and the prospect of returning the seceded republic under its control by revising subsidies to Sukhumi, cutting off its electricity supplies, and tightening control on the Abkhaz-Russian border.

In many ways, this is similar to the scenario of the actual surrender of Nagorno-Karabakh to Azerbaijan in exchange for the loyalty of the Aliyev regime and the limitation of its relations with the West. It is unlikely that the Georgian opposition will be able to oppose such a proposal, while the ruling force, in the case of successfully retaining its positions, will have no more obstacles to establishing relations with Moscow. It is noteworthy that the day after the October parliamentary elections, Georgian Prime Minister I. Kobakhidze named the fact of the occupation of 10% of the republic's territory, i.e. Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as

the only obstacle to resumption of diplomatic relations with Russia<sup>9</sup>. Two weeks after this statement, Moscow actually made it clear to Tbilisi that it could count at least on the prospect of returning 6%: the issue of South Ossetia is obviously not included in the game initiated by the Kremlin.

Given this analysis, it can be stated that the synchronicity of the Georgian post-election protests and the Abkhazian political crisis is not accidental. Moscow initiated the events in Sukhumi almost on the same day of the beginning of the mass demonstrations of the Georgian opposition in Tbilisi and will obviously continue to adjust them according to the processes in Georgia and D. Trump's reaction after his return to the White House.

However, in connection with the described paradigm of the Russian Federation's actions, the following and, obviously, the most important question arises. Why should the Russian Federation continue to support the “Georgian Dream” through the Abkhazian agenda when it has already effectively severed ties with the West, confidently won the elections, and successfully coped with the desperate attempts of the radical opposition to manifest itself on the streets? In this case, the “Abkhazian concession” may be considered a too high price for Russia. The answer to this question may lie in Moscow's long-standing desire to unblock the Georgian-Abkhazian railway, which could potentially provide a connection between the Russian Federation and the Near East and the African continent. In the context of the war in Ukraine, sanctions, border isolation, and other challenges created for Moscow by the West, the aforementioned route has significantly increased its importance for the Russian Federation. Perhaps this is why the Kremlin decided to demonstrate its willingness to pay dearly for Georgia's favor.

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<sup>9</sup> “The Prime Minister of Georgia excluded the restoration of diplomatic relations with Russia.” (in Rus.), RBK, (27.10.2024), <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/27/10/2024/671e4c7f9a7947b65e13d4d3> (download date: 27.11.2024).

