

On the motives of RF sanction pressure on Abkhazia

ARVAK Center comment, 24.09.2024¹

Since 01.09.2024, the RF has suspended its social payments in Abkhazia, the beneficiaries of which were teachers, doctors, and employees of law-enforcement structures. In addition, as the head of the Abkhazian Foreign Ministry Sergey Shamba stated on 03.09.2024, Moscow will supply electricity to Sukhum at a commercial price in the fall and winter².

At the end of August this year, the Abkhazian media spread out the text of some protocol that allegedly set the agenda of a meeting on August 19, 2024, in Moscow between the Abkhazian President Aslan Bzhania and the head of the RF presidential administration Dmitry Kozak. According to the document, Kozak informed the Abkhazian leader that the sanctions imposed by Russia would remain in effect until Sukhum fulfills its obligations.

In particular, this concerns the “Agreement on mutual recognition of court and arbitration decisions”, which Abkhazia has not yet ratified. Moscow is also demands that Sukhum provide it with information on Abkhazian oppositionists who have Russian citizenship and act “*to the detriment of the RF interests and development of the Russian-Abkhazian relations, with a view to further consideration of the issue of depriving them of Russian citizenship*”. And finally, Moscow insists on the lifting of Sukhum’s restrictions on the acquisition of real estate in Abkhazia by Russian citizens and ensures the entry into force of the agreement on the implementation of investment projects by Russian legal entities in this partially recognized republic³.

Regarding the last point of the Russian demands, it should be noted that in recent years Sukhum has slowed down the process of liberalizing legislation, which does not allow foreign citizens to acquire land and other real estate in Abkhazia. In particular, in July of this year, the Bzhania administration submitted to the parliament a law “On some measures to improve the level of socio-economic development of the Ochamchira, Tkuarchal and Gali districts of the Republic of Abkhazia”, but under the pressure from the opposition and the public, the project was withdrawn. The law envisaged construction of up to 30,000 apartments and private houses in the east of the republic over 10 years, which were supposed to be sold to foreigners, and Russian citizens were considered the main buyers. The Abkhazian society saw this as a threat in it to the already established fragile demographic balance in the republic. According to some Russian analysts, such negative sentiments were influenced by the so-called “curse of 17%” or “17% syndrome”. The phrase appeared during the collapse of the USSR, when the titular nation, the Abkhazians, made up only one-sixth of the republic's population.

In general, it was the fear of once again finding themselves in the minority that prompted ethnic Abkhazians to protest against the above-mentioned law, but economic motives were

¹ The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 21.09.2024.

² «We all tried our best”: why Russia suspended social payments in Abkhazia? (in Rus.): RBC (04.09.2024), <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/04/09/2024/66d8800e9a79479bd58a8207> (download date: 19.09.2024).

³ Charquiani Nestan, «Russia suspends financial aid to Abkhazia» (in Rus.): P/c «Golos Ameriki» (04.09.2024), https://www.golosameriki.com/a/russia-stops-abkhasia-funding/77711_01.html (download date: 20.09.2024).

also present in the heated debates related the law proposed by A. Bzhania. While the state apparatus as a whole was supposed to benefit from the large-scale construction and sale of apartments, small and medium-sized businesses in the republic see significant threats to their interests in this undertaking. Owners of small hotels and landlords of apartments are afraid that the implementation of the project will lead to a decrease in the flow of tourists to the republic, since many tourists, who have chosen Abkhazia, will prefer to buy their own apartments here instead of renting them each time.

In any case, despite President A. Bzhania's efforts the so-called "Apartments Law", was rejected, causing a negative reaction in Moscow. The Russian business is dissatisfied with the fact that it did not manage to gain a solid foothold in the republic, whose security was completely taken over by the RF after 2008. Russian companies are also unimpressed by the fact that for many years Abkhazia received practically free money from the Russian budget to support its social sector and consumed Russian gas and electricity at minimal prices. In addition, there is a widespread opinion in Moscow that most of the money allocated to the republic has not been used not as supposed to but has been stolen by the republic's state apparatus and its political and economic clans.

There is no publicly available data on the volume of Russian subsidies and state investments transferred to Abkhazia. According to the BBC, over 8 years (2009-2016), Moscow allocated 37 billion rubles (\$616 million) to Abkhazia⁴. In turn, Russian sources mention significantly larger volumes of total financial assistance, which coincides with data from Western research center's: nearly \$300 million annually, provided by the RF to pay the salaries of Abkhazian public sector employees, to support for security costs, construction, and repair of the republic's infrastructure⁵.

All sources agree that Russian subsidies cover more than 50% of Abkhazia's annual budget expenditure. Under these circumstances, sanctions will cause significant damage to Abkhazia, especially on the eve of the winter. Moscow have failed to realize that by taking such steps it was not only plunging its "ally" into a socio-economic crisis, but also triggering a wave of anti-Russian sentiment in Abkhazia, which has traditionally been loyal to the Russian Federation. Nevertheless, Moscow has taken this step, which may indicate that there are more significant goals on the agenda than the demands recorded at the Kozak–Bzhania meeting.

It is unlikely that Russia would have created additional problems for itself through problems with the Abkhazian opposition and the misuse of Russian subsidies, the volume of which is not significant for the RF, even under war conditions. What is more questionable is that Moscow has now resorted to sanctions against Abkhazia, when there is a long history of dissatisfaction in Russian financial and political circles with the state of affairs in this republic. The Abkhaz opposition press, which predicted a radicalization of Moscow's position on Sukhum, is inclined to think that the RF's desire is to absorb the republic both politically and economically⁶. However, the Abkhaz media assessments of Russia's motives are made in

⁴ Kozlovsky Sergey, «How much money Russia allocates to Abkhazia and how it is spent» (in Rus.), BBC NEWS (08.08.2017), <https://www.bbc.com/russian/features-40862115> (download date: 18.09.2024).

⁵ «Abandoned towns are dying in Abkhazia» (in Rus.), Current time (02.10.2018), <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/29519257.html> (download date: 20.09.2024).

⁶ Alexandrov Alexei, «Abkhazia feels the suffocating grip of Russia» (in Rus.), Наша Абхазия (20.02.2024),

general terms, “*without opening the parentheses*”. Meanwhile, according to some estimates, there are at least two factors that suggest that the RF steps are conditioned by more ambitious plans than “absorbing” the republic.

Firstly, it is worth mentioning the pre-election processes in Georgia, in which Russia already openly supports the ruling “Georgian Dream” party and its informal leader Bidzina Ivanishvili. The ARVAK Center has already [written](#) about Georgia’s being at the epicenter of a global confrontation, and that the outcome of the autumn round of domestic political struggle in this country will largely determine the logic of further events in the region, which is vital in the context of the geostrategic rivalry between the West and Russia. Given the RF limited tools in the matter of supporting its “favorites”, Moscow, highly likely, is trying to create a favorable political and informational background for the “Georgian Dream” in the context of the sensitive issue of “*territorial integrity*” for Tbilisi. The crisis in relations between Abkhazia and RF is intended to revive hopes in Georgian society for the restoration of sovereignty over Sukhum, whose final departure from Tbilisi in 2008 was facilitated by precisely those forces that are now seeking to challenge the power of the ruling party. Thus, the prospect of resuming dialogue with Abkhazia, which has found itself in a tricky situation, could become, in the eyes of Georgian voters, a significant contribution to the ruling party’s political coffer.

Secondly, it can be assumed that Moscow has plans to restore and reopen the Georgian-Abkhazian railway line, which has been closed since 1992. After the Georgian-Abkhazian war in the 1990s, Russia repeatedly tried to persuade Georgia to revive this key logistical artery. Moscow’s attempts were also supported by Sukhum, but the negotiations on the issue always reached an impasse end due to Tbilisi’s reluctance to establish any format of cooperation with the “*Abkhaz separatists*”. Now Moscow, apparently, again hopes to implement this project in order to escape the economic isolation caused by sanctions. On the other hand, the RF may feel that the time has come to launch the railway line, which has not been used for over 30 years, since the current Georgian authorities, having practically broken with the West, may meet Moscow halfway in the event of their victory in the October elections, provided that the RF continues to adhere to the policy of weakening the authorities and economy of Abkhazia. In turn, Sukhum itself is unlikely to refuse the opportunity to revive the project, the transit revenues from which could somehow compensate for the reduced Russian subsidies.

It is noteworthy that the news about Russia’s “anti-Abkhazian” sanctions came somewhat unexpectedly for the Georgian authorities, as evidenced by the cautious reaction of Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze. On September 4, 2024, in an interview with journalists, he called this information “*interesting*”. Kobakhidze also noted that the issue was too sensitive. “*There will be no further comment,*” – he added, “*I repeat once again that the processes we are observing are of some interest*”⁷.

Russia’s actions have thus introduced an intrigue into the Georgian socio-political space. The news gained even more resonance, as it was announced against the backdrop of a lively

<http://abkhazeti.info/today/> (download date: 21.09.2024).

⁷ «Russia suspends financial aid to Abkhazia» (in Rus.), Golos Ameriki (04.09.2024), <https://www.golosameriki.com/a/russia-stops-abkhasia-funding/7771101.html> (download date: 19.09.2024).

election campaign, which apparently managed to make certain adjustments in the tactics and rhetoric of the rival forces. For example, Georgian citizens were surprised by B. Ivanishvili's statement on September 14, 2024, at a pre-election rally in Gori that if the “Georgian Dream” party won the elections, it would find the strength to apologize to its “*Ossetia brothers and sisters*” for the suffering and pain caused to them by the previous Georgian authorities⁸. South Ossetia itself responded to this statement with skepticism, linking it to the elections. However, Abkhazia, with which it had no direct relations, responded positively⁹. It can be argued that Sukhum's response would have been identical to Tskhinvali's reaction (Abkhazia and South Ossetia usually coordinate their statements regarding Georgia), where if not for the current crisis in Russian-Abkhazian relations. Thus, Sukhum tried to demonstrate to Moscow that it has freedom of action and a wide range for foreign policy maneuvers. The question is whether Abkhazia admits the possibility that the RF, with its steps, is deliberately facilitating the resumption of dialogue between Sukhum and Tbilisi?

Either way, Moscow's steps have caused a wave of discontent with Russia in Abkhazia. While President A. Bzhania is trying to find a solution to the problem, to balance the interests of the parties and lift sanctions, the Abkhaz opposition has received *carte blanche* to radicalize anti-Russian sentiments in the republic. Society is systematically instilled with the narrative that Moscow is “*getting rid*” of Abkhazia and finally aiming at “*bringing it to its knees*”. The idea that it is necessary to find another “senior ally” that can be confidently relied upon in economic and security matters is also widespread. Various information leaks and outright provocations are taking place within the framework of this process. Thus, on September 16, 2024, a statement appeared on the official website of the President of the Republic of Abkhazia Aslan Bzhania announcing that the Abkhaz leader allegedly sent R. Erdogan a proposal to sign a bilateral “Agreement on friendship and partnership” with the Republic of Turkey. The statement said that Sukhum was counting on cooperation with Ankara in the economic, military, and cultural spheres. It was also reported that A. Bzhania allegedly terminated the agreement on the “Deployment of the Russian Navy on the territory of Abkhazia”. Later, the page was removed from the presidential website, and the administration reported about a hacker attack¹⁰.

This incident shows that the forces that are trying to use the moment to destabilize the situation and take the Russian-Abkhazian crisis beyond Moscow's control have become more active inside and outside the republic. In this context, the playing out of the Turkish factor is of particular importance. Ankara is becoming Moscow's main competitor in Central Asia, the Caucasus, and the Black Sea basin. This fact is obvious, no matter how much the Russian Federation tries to veil the problem with references to large-scale projects of interaction and trusting and friendly relations with Ankara. Abkhazia's inclusion in the zone of Turkey's expansionist projects is by no means a hypothetical threat to Russia, given the scale of both

⁸ «Abkhazia saw in the words of the Georgian Dream founder a path to peace» (in Rus.), RBC (16.09.2024), <https://www.rbc.ru/politics/16/09/2024/66e860c29a79470a7f888177> (download date: 20.09.2024).

⁹ «Ivanishvili's statement about apologizing to “Ossetia brothers and sisters” was reacted to in occupied Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region» (in Rus.), Civil Georgia (17.09.2024), <https://civil.ge/ru/archives/624702> (download date: 18.09.2024).

¹⁰ «Separatists from Abkhazia “declared” the expulsion of the Russian fleet» (in Rus.), UKR. NET (17.09.2024), <https://www.ukr.net/ru/news/details/world/106826491.html> (download date: 19.09.2024).

legal and shadow economic interaction between Sukhum and Ankara. Combined with the practiced “soft power” (the Abkhaz community in Turkey, cultural and educational programs, charity, etc.), Turkish investments in the Black Sea republic have already created a serious basis for capitalizing Ankara's achievements into a political resource¹¹. Given these circumstances, the mentioning of Turkey in the information-political sabotage around the Russian-Abkhazian crisis adds even more tension to the situation. Moreover, it is very much possible that the “Turkish card” can be used not only by the forces opposing Abkhazia’s “Russification”, but also by the Abkhaz authorities themselves, thereby trying to hint to Moscow about the risks of the sanctions policy against Sukhum.

And so, considering the analysis of the situation, we can assume that by toughening its position on Sukhum, Moscow is playing along with the ruling political forces in Georgia, trying to create favorable conditions for them to prolong their mandate for power. In addition, it is preparing the ground for the revival of full-fledged relations with Tbilisi, which in the future should compensate for its image and political losses in Armenia and Azerbaijan, as well as contribute to the diversification of the exit from economic isolation by restarting the Georgian-Abkhazian railway. At the same time, Moscow is playing “*too close to a foul*” and is facing the prospect of losing the trust of the overwhelming majority of Abkhaz society and political circles, which are still loyal to it, against the background of the already existing “*reputational losses*” after the well-known events in Nagorno-Karabakh. In this light, this RF initiative resembles a game of *va-banque*, not only because of the complicated state of its affairs in the Caucasus, but also because of the generally challenging situation in the context of its confrontation with the collective West.

¹¹ Simavorian Arestakes, «Modern Georgian-Turkish relations» (in Arm.), ARVAK Center (14.10.2023), <http://surl.li/etmxlu> (download date: 19.09.2024).