

Abkhazia on the front line of the Russian-Turkish confrontation

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In late January 2025, international media circulated a document with a request from a close associate of R. Erdogan, Turkish MP and the leader of the radical “Nationalist Movement Party” Devlet Bahçeli, addressed to Turkish foreign minister Hakan Fidan. In his appeal, Bahçeli essentially asks Fidan for permission for his party, in cooperation with Turkish-Abkhaz NGOs and pro-Turkish political figures in Abkhazia, to intervene in the electoral processes in the unrecognized Black Sea republic. Bahçeli’s proposed plans focus on the need to neutralize the Armenian factor in Abkhazia and to undermine the political and economic positions of the strong and numerous Armenian diaspora in Abkhazia, which allegedly supports “*Karabakh separatism*” in Azerbaijan². Thus, the initiative of D. Bahçeli, a politician close to Turkey’s ruling circles, indicates that Ankara intends to take advantage of the unrest in Abkhazia that began after the start of the protest movement in Sukhum on 11.11.2024 and the resignation of president Aslan Bzhania on 19.11.2024³.

Formally, the opposition’s actions began after the republic’s parliament submitted for ratification an agreement on privileges and guarantees for Russian investors, which the Abkhaz opposition considered an attempt by Moscow to unimpededly buy a significant part of the national land fund through its business agents⁴. Protests against the ratification of the agreement led to the resignation of the president and his team. Subsequently, the date of the extraordinary presidential elections (15.02.2025) was set, but despite the manifestation of easing of the internal political situation, tensions in Abkhazia continue.

The pre-election political discourse has already gone beyond the “land issue” and the republic’s economic problems: public opinion in Abkhazia is balancing on the dilemma of “*continuing the friendship*” with Russia or “*breaking all ties*” with it. During their election campaign, the opposition is increasingly radicalizing sentiments towards Moscow, while moderate political forces are urging citizens to be guided by common sense in their choice and not to allow the collapse of the “*Russian-Abkhaz unity*”, which could have catastrophic consequences for Abkhazia. However, the “moderate” camp lacks arguments in favor of its position, as during the years of rule by forces loyal to Russia, the republic failed to overcome poverty, corruption, and the clan system of governance. The economic and energy sanctions imposed by Russia on Sukhum after the forced resignation of A. Bzhania also do not strengthen the positions of pro-Russian political circles in Abkhazia. On the contrary, they only create fertile ground for Russophobic rhetoric and populism of nationalist groups claiming power in the Republic of Abkhazia.

¹ The original (in Rus.) was posted on our website on 01.02.2025.

² “The Turkish attempts to neutralize the Armenians of Abkhazia”. Narod.am (in Rus.), 23.01.2025, <https://narod.am/archives/1518/> (download date: 27.01.2025).

³ “The Abkhazian parliament dismissed the president. The opposition and the authorities managed to reach an agreement”. BBC NEWS (in Rus.), 19.11.2024, <https://www.bbc.com/russian/articles/c2dl8kk8gnoo/> (download date: 27.01.2025).

⁴ “What caused the protests in Abkhazia”. “Vedomosti” (in Rus.), 13.11.2024, <https://www.vedomosti.ru/politics/articles/2024/11/13/1074619-chem-vizvani-protesti-v-abhazii/> (download date: 26.01.2025).

The ARVAK Center has repeatedly [addressed](#) the topic of recent events in Abkhazia, noting the non-coincidence of the latest events with the internal political crisis in Georgia. In these materials, it was expressed that if Moscow is not involved in organizing the unrest in Sukhum, then it has very unsuccessfully chosen the time to bring the “*land issue*” to the Abkhaz internal political agenda.

It is possible that the tension in Russian-Abkhaz relations contributed to the victory of the party loyal to Russia, the “Georgian Dream” of B. Ivanishvili, in the parliamentary elections in Georgia on October 26, 2024. It is also very likely that for Moscow, the success on the Georgian track was the most important in the context of constructing a new situation in the Caucasus region, and the escalation in Abkhazia was initiated by it for the sake of the “Georgian game”. In any case, the situation in Abkhazia has taken an unexpected turn for Moscow. Moreover, the situation with the extraordinary presidential elections in Abkhazia threatens to get out of Russia’s political control, leaving it with only forceful means to influence the ongoing processes. There is a high probability that a third party, which has so far remained in the shadows, will become involved in the Abkhaz agenda. In particular, there is an unprecedented activation of Ankara in the Abkhaz internal political agenda through NGOs and socio-political structures that have been building and maintaining close ties with Turkey for many years. In the pre-election rhetoric of Abkhazian opposition forces, Turkey’s name is gradually appearing in a positive manner from radical nationalist positions. Turkey is presented to society as an alternative to Russia, and it is noted that orientation towards it will guarantee prosperity, economic growth, and security for Sukhum. In fact, this is an attempt to ideologically reformat Abkhazian society with the aim of changing the republic’s geopolitical vector toward Ankara.

A review of Russian media allows us to conclude that at the initial stage of the Sukhum events, Russia was skeptical about the possibility of third-party intervention in these processes. The events were presented as spontaneous, related to the objective dissatisfaction of the Abkhaz population with the behavior of local elites, their ineffective work, and the inappropriate distribution of financial aid coming from Russia⁵. The narrative was actively spread in the Russian media that the agreement on the privileges for Russian companies to acquire Abkhaz lands, which has triggered the public protests, was actually primarily beneficial to Abkhazia. Allegedly, the problem is that the authorities in Sukhum did not bother to thoroughly inform their citizens about the advantages of the agreement, which stimulates multi-billion Russian investments in the republic’s economy. Thus, there was no political assessment of what was happening, and even more so, there was no thought voiced about the possible organization of the Sukhum events from outside or the involvement of any third party.

It can be assumed that competent Russian circles could not help but suspect the possible presence of a Turkish trace in the protest actions but carefully tried not to touch on this issue, obviously based on the requirements of the general context of Russian-Turkish relations. However, as the situation developed in connection with the resignation of the

⁵ “Black hole near Sochi: State Duma names the reason for anti-Russian protests in Abkhazia”. RTVI (in Rus.), 12.11.2024, <https://rtvi.com/news/chernaya-dyra-ryadom-s-sochi-v-gosdume-nazvali-prichinu-anti-rossijskih-protest-ov-v-abhazii/> (download date: 25.01.2025).

Abkhaz authorities and the introduction of sanctions against Abkhazia, the “Turkish version” began to be increasingly voiced in the media by individual politicians and experts.

Despite the fact that the Russian authorities at the official level are still trying to avoid commenting on Turkey’s involvement in the events in Abkhazia, it is becoming increasingly difficult for them to hide their concern. The fact is that Turkish support is already being openly declared by the radical Abkhaz oppositionists themselves, as well as by the Turkish authorities, including R. Erdogan. His statement in early January 2025 about “*Abkhazia’s path to Europe via Turkey*” only confirms Russia’s fears that what is happening in Abkhazia should be considered an organized coup or putsch by Turkey, but not a spontaneous event with exclusively internal political roots⁶.

Another question is how Russia, given its comprehensive military and political presence in Abkhazia, could allow such a situation to develop. After all, if even the introduction of the “*apartment case*” was initiated by Moscow in order to “play along” with the “Georgian Dream” and cause some controlled unrest in Abkhazia, this plan should have taken into account the degree of Turkey’s influence on Abkhazia and its ability to turn the social discontent of the republic’s population into a phase of political confrontation against RF’s “*dominance*”.

But these questions are beyond the scope of this publication. Here, it should be noted that the Turkish factor in the Abkhaz events, one way or another, occupies much more space than previously assumed. It cannot be confidently stated that Ankara is the main organizer of the “*coup*” in Abkhazia, but there is every reason to believe that at a certain stage of the Abkhaz events, it could have intervened and is currently trying to steer them towards its geopolitical ambitions. Consequently, Turkey has thoroughly prepared for a similar situation, accumulating levers of influence on the Abkhaz agenda year after year, in parallel with processes that have consistently undermined Russian-Abkhaz relations, despite Russia’s comprehensive presence in Abkhazia.

The history of Abkhaz-Turkish relations in the 20th century dates back to the 18th–20th centuries when a significant part of the Abkhaz ethnic group moved to Turkey and organized their communities there due to the political collapse and war engulfed Russia. With the beginning of the USSR’s collapse, ethnic Abkhazians, referred to as “*muhajirs*” in Turkey, were captivated by the idea of repatriation, and the Turkish authorities decided to exploit these sentiments and turn them into a tool of struggle against Russia for dominance in the Black Sea and the Caucasus.

On August 23, 1992, the Georgian-Abkhaz war began, and just 9 days later, in the initiative of leaders of the Abkhaz diaspora, the “*Caucasian Committee of Solidarity with Abkhazia*” was formed in Turkey, headed by Atai Tsushba. Later, the committee was headed by Arfan Argun, under whom the organization significantly intensified⁷. Officially, the committee aimed to strengthen the national-cultural ties of the diaspora in Turkey with their

⁶ “Turkey is just waiting for Russia to quarrel with Abkhazia”. “Moskovskiy Komsomolets” (in Rus.), 10.12.2024, <https://www.mk.ru/politics/2024/12/10/turciya-tolko-i-zhdet-cto-rf-possoritsya-s-abkhaziev.html> (download date: 27.01.2025).

⁷ Vladimir Popov, “Would the ‘Turkish coast’ turn into the ‘Abkhazian coast’”. Soyuzniki ODKB (in Rus.), 23.03.2020, <https://odkb-info.org/news/tema-nomera/960/> (download date: 26.01.2025).

compatriots in Abkhazia and promote the preservation of the *Muhajirs'* identity. In reality, Ankara used this structure to launch a multi-level penetration campaign in Abkhazia and to form pro-Turkish sentiments in Abkhazian society. The committee operated under the aegis of the “Turkish Directorate of Religious Affairs” – a state structure known to have close ties with Turkish intelligence services. Subsequently, the “*Caucasian Committee of Solidarity with Abkhazia*” closely cooperated with the Fethullah Gulen’s “Hizmet” movement, which promoted Turkish interests abroad by establishing Islamic schools, Turkish-Islamic cultural centers, mosques, etc. Among the public structures created and maintained in Abkhazia with Turkish money, *Sadakatasi* the “philanthropic organization” gained widespread recognition. It financed the work of Turkey-oriented cultural and educational centers and conducted various humanitarian actions. For example, the structure provided aid to Abkhaz orphans and families of militia members who died during the Georgian-Abkhaz conflict.

Thus, in a relatively short period of time, active work was carried out in Abkhazia to instill the image of a “*friendly and caring*” Turkey, ready to support the small nation’s aspirations for freedom and independence.

Such active work would not have been possible without close cooperation with Abkhazian political circles and their loyal attitude towards Turkish initiatives promoted under the guise of the activities of the Abkhazian diaspora in Turkey. As early as 1993, the Representation of the Republic of Abkhazia was opened in Turkey. The presidents of Abkhazia Vladislav Ardzinba and Sergey Baghapsh visited Turkey with the assistance of the “*Caucasian Committee of Solidarity with Abkhazia*”.

The ties of Turkish NGOs and Abkhaz diaspora organizations with politicians in Sukhum, in turn, expanded, opening the door for the economic penetration of Turkish capital into the Abkhaz market. Trade, construction, and tourism became the main areas of economic interaction between Ankara and Sukhum. According to official data, by 2015, the trade turnover between Turkey and Abkhazia reached ₺2.6 billion, accounting for 18% of the total trade turnover of the Black Sea republic. However, according to some Russian sources, this figure does not reflect the real state of affairs and is significantly underestimated, given the widespread “gray” export-import schemes in Abkhazia.

It is obvious that the growing interaction between Turkey and Abkhazia could not fail to alarm Georgia, with which Ankara had established “*especially friendly relations*” after Mikheil Saakashvili came to power in 2003. Despite this, Ankara continued to play “on two boards,” assuring Tbilisi that its relations with Sukhum had no political implications and that it was only cultivating the cultural and humanitarian component, as Turkey remained true to the official statements recognizing Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity. However, after the August 2008 war in South Ossetia, Tbilisi could no longer ignore Ankara’s increasingly frequent calls for the recognition of Abkhazian sovereignty. Given Turkey’s strong economic and political influence on Georgia, official Tbilisi could not afford an open *demarche* against Ankara, which, through political circles close to the power, was increasingly signaling its readiness to raise relations with Sukhum to a qualitatively new

level. Officially, the Turkish authorities continued to insist that Georgian sovereignty over Abkhazia was indisputable⁸.

In practice, Turkey's actions indicated the opposite.

On December 15, 2019, a large delegation of political, business, cultural, and educational figures from Turkey visited Abkhazia. The delegation was led by a Turkish political figure and the leader of the “Vatan” (“Homeland”) party, Doghu Perincek, known for his support of Erdogan's policies and allegedly being a proponent of closer rapprochement between Turkey and Russia. The visit was aimed at achieving Abkhazia's independence and freeing it from “*the imperialism in the Black Sea*”. Perincek then stated that Abkhazia needed Turkey's help and promised that the Turkish government would recognize Abkhaz sovereignty in the foreseeable future⁹.

At first glance, Perincek's rhetoric of, backed by the Turkish authorities, could not fail to satisfy Russia, which, after its own recognition of Abkhazian independence in 2008, needed like-minded supporters on this issue. However, the emphasis placed by the pro-government Turkish politician and the formulations used in numerous interviews on the Abkhazian case suggest that the structures advising Perincek in Turkey do not aim to rid Sukhum of the “*Georgian threat*”. The narrative of “*Georgian imperialism in the Black Sea*” would be a nonsense, and Perincek certainly did not mean Tbilisi. Most likely, he was referring to Russia, whose recognition of Abkhazian independence is considered by Turkey to be purely formal. In reality, Ankara equates the Russian presence in Abkhazia with “*occupation*”, and this narrative is persistently generated by it in the Abkhaz environment. Thus, Ankara's intentions, superficially beneficial to Moscow, have over time acquired an ambiguous content.

Initially, Russia responded positively to Turkish signals of Erdogan's willingness to recognize Abkhaz independence. It was for this reason that after 2008 – the time of the final establishment of patronage over Sukhum – Moscow decided not to restrict the activities of Turkish organizations in Abkhazia, ignoring, among other things, the intensively growing economic ties between Ankara and Sukhum. Moscow considered the tolerant attitude towards the growth of Turkish “soft power” in Abkhazia as the price for Ankara's political support on the Abkhaz issue, hoping that Turkish influence would not affect Russia's multi-level military-political presence in Abkhazia. However, after the downing of a Russian plane was shot in Syria fall of 2015, when, and the murder of Russian Ambassador Andrei Karlov in Ankara a year later, Russia temporarily restricted the activities of Turkish structures in Abkhazia in line with its sanctions against Turkey,. In particular, Moscow targeted the interests of Turkish construction companies operating in Abkhazia with Russian budget funds¹⁰.

⁸ “Turkey is interested in Abkhazia and South Ossetia becoming integral parts of Georgia – Ambassador”. Nasha Abkhazia (in Rus.), 01.03.2016, <http://abkhazeti.info/news/1456891425.php> (download date: 27.01.2025).

⁹ “Doghu Perincek: We will make efforts for Turkey to recognize Abkhazia”, Nuzhnaya Gazeta (in Rus.), 19.12.2016, <https://abh-n.ru/dogu-perincek-prilozhim-usiliya-chtoby-turciya-priznala-abxaziyu/> (download date: 27.01.2025).

¹⁰ “Surkov: Turkish companies are unlikely to build facilities in Abkhazia with Russian funds”. TASS (in Rus.), 29.12.2016, <https://tass.ru/politika/2564433/> (download date: 27.01.2025).

Subsequently, the “normalization” of Russian-Turkish relations also affected the Abkhaz agenda. Ankara regained access to Abkhazia and continued its intensive efforts to integrate itself into all areas of life in the republic. The results of this activity became evident during the days of the presidential coup in the republic, as well as in the current pre-election period, when manifestations of national radicalism, Russophobia, and Armenophobia became distinctly noticeable in Abkhazia.

It should be noted that several Russian-language media outlets had been warning for a long time that Turkey’s influence on Abkhazia had reached a level that would allow it to explode the republic from within on the grounds of national contradictions and overturn Russian patronage. According to the published data, since 2015 Turkey had been implementing a plan to expel Georgians and Armenians from Abkhazia, with the aim of subsequently organizing the mass repatriation of *muhajirs* – Islamized Abkhazians from Turkey, estimated at between 400,000 and 500,000 people. Ankara had certain hopes for a new round of the Georgian-Abkhaz war, which, however, the Georgian authorities did not pursue. After this, Turkey persuaded the Abkhaz authorities to tighten the living conditions for the Georgian minority, compactly residing in the Gali and, partially, in the Ochamchira districts of Abkhazia. By 2017, obstacles had already been created for people of Georgian descent to obtain Abkhaz passports, register land ownership rights, and conduct business in the agricultural sector. Two out of three checkpoints on the Georgian-Abkhaz border were closed, limiting the connections of the Georgians in Gali with their relatives in Georgia. Artificial emergency situations were created at the Inguri HPP, and power outages were constantly carried out to deprive the Gali and Ochamchira districts of electricity. Thus, the local Georgian population was deliberately squeezed out of these territories, most likely for their subsequent settlement by Islamized Abkhaz repatriates from Turkey. It should be particularly noted that the areas where the “*Caucasian Committee of Solidarity with Abkhazia*”, operating under the aegis of the Turkish intelligence services, plans to settle repatriates almost completely coincide with the territories that were the first to fall under the land purchase program by Russian companies after the ratification of the scandalous agreement. In this light, the mass protests of the Abkhaz opposition in Sukhum clearly indicate the motivation of the protest organizers.

At the same time, the issue of expulsion of Georgians from their places of compact residence was not considered as the only measure for the unhindered repatriation of Islamized Abkhazians from Turkey. As early as 2017, information circulated among experts that Turkey was preparing measures to create unbearable living conditions for Abkhaz Armenians, the second largest and most significant ethnic group in Abkhazia. According to published data, the “Georgian question” in Abkhazia should be solved by 2025, after which it would be the Armenians’ turn¹¹. Interestingly, the open anti-Armenian rhetoric among Abkhaz radical nationalists emerged just before 2025, as indicated in the data published 8 years ago. D. Bahceli’s request to H. Fidan, which was obtained by the media, highlights

¹¹ "Araik Sargsyan, “Geopolitical Interests of Turkey in Abkhazia”, Noyan Tapan (in Rus.), 13.04.2017, <https://www.nt.am/ru/news/237251/> (download date: 26.01.2025).

Turkey's involvement in the interethnic destabilization of Abkhazia and its efforts to distance the republic from Russia's sphere of influence.

The action plan proposed by Bahceli to the Turkish foreign minister and former head of the Turkish intelligence service, H. Fidan, contains classic methods of preparing for violent actions against a national minority. This includes the usual references to the need to combat terrorist elements within the Armenian community, which directly indicates the desire to neutralize the civic activity of the Armenian community and suppress its influence in cooperation with Abkhaz nationalists. Considering that Abkhaz Armenians are inherently opposed to the idea of Turkish orientation and are considered an obstacle to the mass resettlement program of *muhajirs*, it should be understood that Turkish authorities and their allies among Abkhaz radical nationalists view Abkhaz Armenians as potential supporters of Moscow, who could sway further political processes in Abkhazia in favor of Russia. Therefore, the presumably planned anti-Armenian violent actions are primarily directed against Russia and its influence in Abkhazia.

Nevertheless, it cannot be ruled out that the document signed by Bahceli and obtained by the media, was deliberately disseminated by Ankara itself. This could have been done to divert Moscow's attention from the excessive activation of Turkish emissaries in Abkhazia ahead of the extraordinary presidential elections. Allegedly, the "Abkhaz hubbub" of the Turkish intelligence services, which could hardly have gone unnoticed by their Russian counterparts, is exclusively related to "*Armenian terrorist elements*", that once caused problems for Ankara's ally Baku. At the same time, the mention of Azerbaijan in the document, according to the Turkish authorities' plan, could create additional motives for worsening Russian-Azerbaijani relations, which could be beneficial for Turkey at this stage. Otherwise, it should be considered as a significant oversight of the Turkish authorities that the secret document fell into the hands of the media, which rarely happens in the usually meticulous work of Turkish politicians.

In any case, it should be noted that Abkhazia has been drawn into the confrontation between Russia and Turkey, no matter how both sides officially try to avoid acknowledging this fact. Events are brewing in Abkhazia that could be fatal for the republic itself and its ethnic groups. However, populist circles in Sukhum mistakenly interpret the fierce competition between the two powers as a convenient opportunity to achieve full independence for the Black Sea republic.