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# Georgia Dismayed By The Deployment Of Russia's Railroad Construction Troops In Abkhazia

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## Railroad Landing

Russia deployed its railroad construction troops in Abkhazia. Moscow referred to the necessity to repair a railroad that'll link the breakaway republic to Russia and its Olympic facilities of Sochi. In its turn, Tbilisi regards Russia's maneuvers as "plotting a military invasion." The USA immediately sided with Georgia. Nonetheless, according to the information of Kommersant, the deployment of Russia's units in Abkhazia may be a part of Moscow's preparation for a meeting of Presidents Dmitry Medvedev and Mikhail Saakashvili planned for this week.

## Road to war

"With the pretext of restoring a trunk-railway in Abkhazia, Russia conceals its preparation for a large-scale military operation aiming at annexation and occupation of Georgia," stated Deputy Defense Minister of Georgia Batu Kutelia. "We consider the activity of Russia as another act of aggression directed against the territorial integrity of Georgia. No doubt, the Russian party is consolidating the military infrastructure to start a military intervention," Deputy Foreign Minister of Georgia Grigol Vashadze echoed Mr Kutelia. "No one deploys railroad construction troops on the territory of another state unless a military intervention is plotted." Mr Vashadze reported that due to the recent activity of Russia a 59th note of protest will be handed over to Russia's ambassador to Georgia Vyacheslav Kovalenko. "In spite of the fact that it's hard to find the Russian ambassador on occasions like this, we'll find him, bring to the MFA and hand over the note," Mr Vashadze added with irritation.

It is Russia's deployment of its railroad construction troops in Abkhazia, which Russia's Defense Minister announced Saturday, that aroused the indignation of the Georgian government. "According to the order of the President of the Russian Federation on rendering assistance to the republic of Abkhazia, work on restoring railroad lines and infrastructure has been started, where unarmed units and machines of the Railroad Construction Troops of the Russian Federation are engaged," reported the Ministry's Press-Service. In other words, the military justified their activity with the orders that Vladimir Putin gave to the government in April. By the way, Thursday Commander-in-Chief of the Railroad Construction Troops of the Russian Federation Lieutenant General Sergey Klimets stated that his subordinates are ready to provide aid to Abkhazia "in case a corresponding political decision is made." It means that the decision to send Russian troops to Abkhazia was taken at the top level.

Yesterday Foreign Office Chief of the breakaway republic Sergey Shamba told Kommersant that some 400 Russian military were deployed in Abkhazia. However, Saturday Batu Kutelia stated that, apart from the railroad construction soldiers, 500 Russian commandos landed in Abkhazia. Curiously, on that day Russia's Defense Ministry reported that a routine rotation of its peace-keepers was carried out in Abkhazia from May 25 to May 30, with "the total number of those replaced amounting to 500 people," which equals to the figure given by the Georgian Defense Ministry's experts.

Tbilisi has already promised to rebuff "the Russian railroad landing." "If Russia keeps on with that sort of activity, we'll respond harshly to it," Batu Kutelia threatened and promised that the international community will side with Georgia. A few hours later State Department Spokesman Sean McCormack said, "The United States is dismayed by Russia's Defense Ministry announcement on May 31 that it intends to send more military forces into the Georgian region of Abkhazia without the consent of the Georgian Government. We have expressed our concerns to the Russian government and are in touch with the Georgian government about this latest announcement of a Russian military buildup," emphasized the American diplomat.

#### Road to Sochi

The authorities of Abkhazia explain the activity of Russia's Defense Ministry with purely economic reasons. "There is no malicious intent in it - many people want our railroad system to be restored, mainly from economic considerations," Sergey Shamba told Kommersant. In particular, from the Abkhazian Foreign Office Chief's viewpoint, "one should take into consideration the forthcoming Olympics in Sochi - the railroad can be of use when it comes to transporting cargoes necessary for constructing Olympic facilities."

Interestingly, May 16 Governor of the Krasnodar region Alexander Tkachev also mentioned the need to organize transportation of different materials from Abkhazia by railroad. On that day Mr Tkachev signed an agreement between his region and the breakaway republic about supplies of building materials for Sochi. The governor believes that it's more convenient to supply them from Abkhazia rather than from other regions of Russia because the unrecognized republic is just 40 km away from the area where the facilities are erected.

These initiatives are supported by the Russian government as well. For example, in March, as Moscow unilaterally lifted the sanctions against the breakaway republic, Head of the Ministry for Regional Development Dmitry Kozak said that Russia saw no hindrance to purchasing building materials and hiring workers from Abkhazia for fulfilling the Sochi project.

Yesterday Sergey Shamba told Kommersant that the Abkhazian authorities hope that the restoration works at the railroad will be completed for the most part in three months. Governor Tkachev planned to begin with building materials supplies from Abkhazia to Sochi right at that time.

#### Road to the South Caucasus

For all that, the restoration of the railroad on the territory of Abkhazia will allow Russia to gain much more than just a cheap transportation route for shipping Abkhazian gravel and sand to Sochi. Moscow has been repeatedly trying to repair the railroad (which was destroyed in the course of the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict) linking it with Georgia via Abkhazia: It will enable Moscow to have a direct railroad communication with its key ally in the South Caucasus - Armenia.

As far back as March, 2003 Moscow made its first attempt to do it - the provided for a smooth transit between Russia and Armenia, and Moscow promised to thrash out with Sukhumi the matter of Georgian refugees' returning to Abkhazia. These negotiations didn't stop even after the Rose Revolution broke out, and May, 2006 the authorities of Russia, Georgia, Armenia and Abkhazia even set up a consortium to restore the railroad. But the escalation of tensions between Moscow and Tbilisi in the autumn of 2006 prevented the plan from being realized.

According to the information of Kommersant, Moscow has been striving to resume the talks about these agreements. For instance, Vladimir Putin ordered

that railroad communications be restored as he suspended his ban on transport links with Georgia in April. Officials with Russian Railways told Kommersant that the matter stalls because a large part of a railroad line is missing from Sukhumi up to the Inguri river that separates Abkhazia from Georgia. Sergey Shamba told Kommersant that the mission of the Russian Railroad Construction Forces is to repair this section - from Sukhumi to Ochamchira. Plenipotentiary Representative of the Abkhazian President in the Gal region Ruslan Kishmaria assured Kommersant that reparation will soon start.

According to Sergey Shamba, the question of the complete restoration of the railroad and resumption of communications from Russia in the Georgian and Armenian direction may be raised in the near future. The sources of Kommersant with Russian Railways and Georgian railways confirm it, too. Russian Railways experts are to go to the site soon to give their estimate of the complexity of works and the investments required. Head of Georgian Railways Irakli Ezugbai assesses the program of restoring the Abkhazian railroad infrastructure at \$241 mln. Sergey Shamba told Kommersant that so far the Russian government sponsors the works, but Sukhumi doesn't rule out the possibility of engaging Tbilisi and Yerevan in the project once devised by the consortium.

The talks about restoring the railroad from Russia to Abkhazia are likely to focus on other issues as well. "The Georgian government can agree to do it only in exchange for significant dividends, say, repatriation of Georgian refugees to the North of the Gal region, or lifting the Russian embargo of Georgian goods," opines Georgian political analyst Nika Imnaishvili. Besides, the agreements must provide for the security of the route, especially at the Abkhazian sector. It means that Moscow, Tbilisi and Sukhumi will have to conclude a package agreement. Head of the Georgian Parliament Committee for the Restoration of the Country's Territorial Integrity Shota Malashhia confirmed it to Kommersant that Tbilisi insists on a package agreement.

According to the information of Kommersant, many issues that are to be included in it have been under discussion, for example, peace guarantees in Abkhazia and repatriation of refugees. A personal meeting of Russia's President Dmitry Medvedev and his Georgian counterpart Mikhail Saakashvili must become a key point in the coordination of the matter. The meeting has been planned for June 6 in the framework of the CIS summit in St.-Petersburg. To make all necessary preparations for it, Deputy Russian Security Council Head Yury Zubakov visited Tbilisi last week. The diplomat is responsible for settling disputes on the territory of the former Soviet Union. Another testimony of the parties' ability to come to an agreement has been Vladimir Putin's unexpectedly high estimate of the Georgian President's plan on resolving the Abkhazian conflict. In his interview to the French Le Monde, Russia's president said, "I hope that the plan proposed by Mikhail Saakashvili will be carried out, slowly but surely. On the whole, it's a good plan."

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