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# Moscow Weighs Escalation Options in Abkhazia Depending International Actions.

by Vladimir Socor

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Georgia's response to the Russian helicopters' attack on the upper Kodori Valley reflects a balance of four imperatives: prevent a possible recurrence or escalation of such attacks; avoid being drawn into armed conflict with Russia or its proxies; ensure unambiguous international support for Georgia; and continue showcasing the successful pacification and post-conflict reconstruction in the upper Kodori as an example to the rest of Abkhazia and beyond.

President Mikheil Saakashvili cut short a visit to Kazakhstan on March 12 (the morning after the attack) to return to Tbilisi and take charge of crisis management. Saakashvili set down the guiding ideas for policy in his statement to the March 12 emergency session of the National Security Council, his March 14 speech to Kodori residents at one of the scenes of attacks, and as part of his annual address to parliament on March 15. The assessment of the situation and main guidelines are as follows:

An attack on upper Abkhazia [Kodori] amounts to 'an attack on Georgia itself. Any attempt to capture the area would cause the whole of Georgia to rise as one.' The attack is traceable to 'the same barbarians who destroyed Sukhumi in 1993.' Incidents of this type aim to instill fear in the local population and, beyond that, perpetuate the fragmentation of Georgia. They also aim to drag Georgia into a military conflict so as to derail the country's successful development -- a scenario that Georgia cannot allow to unfold. Georgia will react with moderation, counting on the international community's condemnation of the attack, so that such incidents are never repeated. The government will accelerate civilian construction and investment programs in the upper Kodori (Civil Georgia, The Messenger, Rustavi-2 and Imedi televisions, March 12-17).

During the NSC's emergency session, Minister of Internal Affairs Vano Merabishvili announced that he has ordered Georgian police in the area to shoot down any intruding helicopters, if these fire their weapons. Georgia cannot expose its citizens and state authorities to the danger of such attacks, Merabishvili warned. He is in charge of security arrangements in the upper Kodori Valley inasmuch as Georgia is stationing only police, not military units there.

Minister of Foreign Affairs Gela Bezhuashvili telephoned his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, on March 12, 'demand[ing] an immediate explanation' about the attack while also noting that 'both sides should be interested in an objective evaluation, so as to prevent a recurrence of such incidents.' However, ensuing statements by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs chief spokesman Mikhail Kamynin and deputy minister Grigory Karasin blamed the incident on Georgia's sheer presence in the area and seemed to imply that more incidents could follow for that reason (Interfax, March 13-17).

The leaders in Sukhumi are commenting on the situation in strident tones, possibly conditioned in part by their 'parliamentary elections,' the second round of which was held on March 18. 'President' Sergei Bagapsh's statements seem to be the most vituperative, possibly because his past reputation for moderation may compel him to prove his value to his Russian handlers and fend off similarly handled local rivals. Most of Bagapsh's

comments during this crisis have been aired by his spokesman, Kristian Bzhania, rather than by Bagapsh himself.

As stated by Bagapsh or on his behalf, by 'foreign minister' Sergei Shamba, and top military leaders, Sukhumi takes the following positions: Georgia 'itself carried out the attack in upper Kodori.' The 'incident demonstrates the necessity of Georgia's withdrawal from the upper Kodori' -- a claim contradicting the first one. Tbilisi is interested in 'stoking tensions so as to discredit Russia's peacekeeping operation' -- a claim ignoring the fact the 'peacekeepers'' area of responsibility does not include the upper Kodori. Finally, 'the Abkhaz side warns all sides that they will be responsible [for the consequences] if they ignore Georgia's provocations' -- a swipe at the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) (Apsnypress, Interfax, March 12-17).

Some of the same Abkhaz officials who accuse Georgia of staging the incident are claiming simultaneously that local Svans were responsible for the shooting. Abkhaz officials such as Shamba and 'defense minister' Sultan Sosnaliev portray the one-time Svan chieftain Emzar Kvitsiani as a guerrilla leader-in-waiting and predict attacks by that purported group in the upper Kodori Valley during the spring. For his part, the unpredictable Kvitsiani has announced from an undisclosed hideout that he 'had never and would never fire on Georgians' (Regnum, March 12).

The risk of attacks in one form or another seems real. The attack by Russian helicopters seemed intended to damage, rather than destroy those buildings, so as to calibrate the level of provocation to Georgia and internationally. This apparent calculation suggests that Moscow may be considering the possibility of escalating to the next rung -- for example, by attacking with intent to destroy next time, or by orchestrating a guerrilla operation after the onset of spring.

The investigative report on the March 11-12 night attack is due shortly under a UNOMIG imprint; and the UN Security Council is also due shortly to debate the conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia. If the investigative report turns out to be evasive and if the UNSC resolution takes Russia's side against Georgia, as was the case in October 2006, then Moscow may feel emboldened to go for the next rung on the escalation ladder, in Kodori or elsewhere in Georgia.

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