
The West and Abkhazia : A New Game

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USA, NATO, Abkhazia, Georgia, North Caucasus The visit to Sukhumi, Abkhazia's capital of the EU special representative Javier Solana on June 6 was unexpected only at the first glance. The contacts between the US-EU and the leaders of the still unrecognised republic that become more and more frequent can be a sign of a new stage of Western Caucasus policies. Unless this country undertakes effective preventive measures, nothing good will be coming Russia's way.

As for the future of Abkhazia in discussions Washington's officials hold they were dropping hints that potential granting to this former Georgian autonomy a "delayed status" or even recognising it in the long run as an independent state on a strictly forwarded condition that on no account Russia would be a part of the negotiations process. The possibility of a visit to Sukhumi of Condoleezza Rice was spoken about. As the propaganda disguise for this many statements have been made about the intention of "establishing a direct dialogue" between Tbilisi and Sukhumi along with behind-the-curtain promises of Western investments, lifting of the transport blockade, etc.

Stanislav Lakoba, the chief of Abkhazia's Security Council said after the negotiations with 15 EU ambassadors that certain changes are evident in the EU approach to the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict¹. Changes are inevitable, so Georgia should accept the fact that Abkhazia will continue speaking in its own voice more and more often. Cooperation between Abkhazia and the EU is also possible.

It is easy to conclude that if this plan begins to be realised, the next logical step of Abkhazian officials would be their reorientation towards Washington and Brussels.

At present the stance of the Abkhazian leaders led by S.Bagapsh looks quite definite. The trip made by Solana, the former General Secretary of NATO that bombed Yugoslavia in 1999 ended differently from that the adepts of Atlantism in Tbilisi expected. Abkhazians continue to count on Russia as a broker in the settlement of the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict (rather than the American envoy Matthew Braiza who visited the Abkhazian capital in company with the US Ambassador in Tbilisi recently visited the Abkhazian capital shortly before Solana), even though Abkhazians welcome the US political activation and Europe: for example S.Lakoba assessed Solana's visit to Sukhumi as positive².

S.Bagapsh's definitions are more fuzzy as he sees the withdrawal of a Georgian military formations from the upper parts of Kodore Gorge as the principal condition of a possible dialogue³. One of the goals Solana had for his visit can be understood from his statement about the "change of the format of [Georgia-Abkhazia negotiations] should be approved by the parties of the 1994 Moscow Agreement." We are ready to see a larger participation in the process of the settlement. I hope that a format with the participation of all the parties would be found in future, however we are prepared to participate in it in any case," Solana said⁴. Similar recommendations as "the change of format" is concerned are suggested by the International Crisis Group that is also showed interest in the "eastern flank" of Russian Caucasus, Dagestan.

"The EU envoy promised Western assistance to the Abkhazian side in the settlement of its problems with Tbilisi, and Tbilisi accepted the European proposal. This means that Russia my soon lose its status of the monopolist

broker in the settlement of the Georgia-Abkhasia conflict", the daily Kommersant enthuses.

But the joy may be premature. The results of negotiations with Solana Sergei Bagapsh said that "there is no alternative to the presence of the Russian peacekeepers in the zone of the conflict." Their replacement with some other force would not be the subject of negotiations with anybody." He thus obliquely confirmed that suggestions of the sort had been made by Western counter agents. Let us remind you that the "orange" Ukrainian leaders have been insistent to become Abkhasia's "peace-keepers". Solana, in turn had to admit that he "sees no solution of the Georgia-Abkhasia conflict without Russia's participation." 5 But while in Tbilisi Mr.Solana could not help indulging in communicating with some figures of the radical opposition, dropping quite a certain hint to Mukhail Saakashvili.

Given that the words of their envoy Europeans de-facto admit that Russia has the decisive role in the settlement of the Georgia-Abkhasia conflict, the omnipresent Matthew Braiza's language is more wanton, as he speaks about "ideas that we are going to work out after negotiations with Abkhasians", putting his "little red flags" to warn Moscow against the prospect of recognition of Abkhasia, after which, as he hints, "many regions of the North Caucasus "can become independent" 6.

Braiza's caveats indicate that this tactics would be resorted to in the event of the plan of the forced drawing of Abkhasia under the NATO (virtually, American) military and political umbrella fails for some reason or other, they would try to make Moscow play by somebody else's rules when its every military and political or diplomatic step would knowingly be abortive; and the new Russian leadership would be given an opportunity "to save the face."

A possible Georgia's attack on Abkhasia (aiming to accelerate a transition to a "new format" of the settlement with the participation of the USA and NATO) would dramatically destabilise the political situation in the subjects of the Russian Federation in North Caucasus. There would arise a mass volunteer movement would, which Russian authorities would try to suppress in order to avoid Western accusations of unleashing "aggression against a sovereign independent state." The threat of "if not sanctions then at least of diplomatic isolation of Russia and creating problems with the Sochi-2014 Winter Olympics (which can find proof in the political drift of the present-day UN Organisations and the pressure on Chine in connection with the events in Tibet).

Attempts would be made to channel the inevitable dramatic aggravation of "nationalist movements" in the North Caucasus along a wanted route, against "Russian colonisers" who suppress "peaceful Muslims" and supporting "the corrupt" local authorities.

Instability in the North-Western Caucasus where ethnic Adyg groups kin to Abkhasians live, would be also felt in its eastern parts, laying to rest the first signs of pacifying Chechnya and a resemblance of stabilisation in Dagestan. The risks of massive investments in the region that will be involved in holding the Sochi Olympics and planned investments in the development of North Caspian fields (Dagestan) would grow many times over thus aggravating the region's hard social and economic situation.

The projects that construct the "would-be Caucasus" as anything but a part of Russia would again be retrieved from the archives of the services that cater for this. The adamant John McCain, potentially the next US president who would agree to the possibility of "recognition of the North Caucasus as an independent country" will fit in the picture all right. And finally the goal of goals: any dramatic conflict in the Caucasus would result in the destruction of the domestic political stability in Russia, the breakup of the

current structure of power (and someone would inevitably have to be held responsible...)

With the current hurly-burly mess in the north of the Big Caucasian crest the current Georgian leadership so strenuously armed by its western allies would find it much easier to resolve the tasks of capturing the unrecognised states.

It is evident that with that in mind the former Georgian president E.Shevardnadze supported his current successor at the top government's posts, who clearly chose in 200-2001 the course towards bringing his republic to NATO.

According to the "gray-haired fox" "if negotiations do not bring us the result we wish to have, the Abkhasian problem can be solved by force.". To quote him again: "Those speaking about Abkhasia's independency should not forget Chechnya that was made a part of Russia by force. Chechens ill become more active in the near future, and this should be taken advantage of by the Georgian leadership to return of Abkhasia," and Shevardnadze had experience in things like that "to recollect the raid Gelayev's band made in Abkhasia in 2001). Given the timing is right, to return Abkhasia would not be hard." 7 But this must be Abkhasia without Abkhasians, but with NATO military bases some 30 kilometres away from Adler. What does that mean to Moscow? Just one thing: the need to be proactive so that we are not again playing the role of someone who hopelessly tries to catch up with others.

In the last several months the Russian leadership made a number of political, diplomatic, economic and military steps that gave the West to understand that there would not be the surrender of Abkhasia to "the winner's grace". We should continue to move along to form the Russian-Abkhasian relations at least at the level of intergovernmental agreements.

Regardless of friendly handshakes and smiles in St.Petersburg it is hardly possible to have constructive cooperation⁸. The statements the Russian transport minister made about Russian railway troops leaving Abkhasia within two months⁹ should on no account sound as excuses after a menacing bark of NATO's general secretary. The prevention of a military conflict is Russia's priority, but it is not a priority for our "partners". This should not be forgotten.

Nothing but firm connection with Russia would ensure the nations in Abkhasia (including Georgians) a serene existence. As for experiments undertaken by the United States that acted so "perfectly" in Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan, they do not spell any good.

1 <http://www.rbcdaily.ru/2008/06/07/focus/350547>

2 <http://www.yuga.ru/news/125767/index.html>

3 <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc-y.aspx?DocsID=900971>

4 <http://www.rbcdaily.ru/2008/06/07/focus/350547>

5 <http://www.rian.ru/analytics/20080607/109457748.html>

6 Interview to the agency Regnum, June 5,2008,
<http://www.regnum.ru/news/1011080.html>

7 The newspaper Alia (Tbilisi) quoted from : <http://www.kommersant.ru/doc-y.aspx?DocsID=892264>

8 Presumptions of Georgian officials that a meeting with the Georgian leader in Russia's northern capital was "an excellent chance for Medvedev to finally come out from under Putin's shadow, trying to resolve the problem of the conflicting regions on his own," is rather an evidence of the predominance of wishful thinking. Similar proposals from Tbilisi are overflowing the horn of Amalthea (see, for example <http://www.rbcdaily.ru/2008/06/07/focus/350547>).

9 http://rus.postimees.ee/080608/glavnaja/za_rubezhom/35659.php. This statement by A.Serdyukov was edited by Abkhasia's Foreign Minister S.Shamba, still causing a great deal of unnecessary and ungrounded rumours and guesses.
