



May 2020

Georgian Institute of Politics

EXPERT COMMENT

Issue #10

Election of the dialogue-minded Bzhania - nothing new or turning point in Abkhaz-Georgian relations?

On March 22, 2020, opposition candidate and former chief of the Abkhaz security service Aslan Bzhania won the so-called 'snap presidential elections' in Georgia's breakaway region of Abkhazia. The elections constitute the culmination of months-long political turmoil characterized by heated street protests, the alleged poisoning of Aslan Bzhania, the resignation of Putin-favorite Raul Khajimba and heavy Russian involvement in the process.

On the one hand, it looks as though the recent elections and its outcome pose an interesting opportunity for the Georgian central government, as so-called 'president-elect' Aslan Bzhania calls for dialogue between Sokhumi and Tbilisi. More specifically, he has argued that "there should be a dialogue between Sokhumi and Tbilisi. In which format and in what form does not matter - what is important is that it should deliver positive results."

On the other hand, it is doubtful as to what extent Bzhania's statements can potentially trigger a real change in Abkhaz-Georgian relations. Supposedly, it was the media that brought the topic of dialogue with Tbilisi to the fore and nudged Aslan Bzhania into expressing a stance supportive of dialogue. Moreover, Russia has no interest in a normalization process and the Abkhaz have a palpably negative attitudes towards relations with Georgia. These two factors further undermine already limited prospects of progress in Abkhaz-Georgian relations.

At the request of the Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP), a selection of experts from Georgia, the United States, and Belgium responded to the following questions:

1. To what extent does the election of Aslan Bzhania constitute an opportunity for the Georgian central government to initiate a new dialogue?
2. Given the incompatible stances on the issue of Abkhazia's status, what concrete steps could the Georgian central government and local authorities in Sokhumi take?
3. Since the existing geopolitical conjuncture seems rather unfavorable to trust-building, how far could Tbilisi and Sokhumi go?



Dr. Bruno Coppieters,

Professor emeritus at the Department of Political Science of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel

One of the main conditions for productive talks in secessionist conflicts is the readiness of the parties to talk as equals. The principle of equality has to be mutually accepted even when the parties are entirely at odds regarding the status of the disputed territory. Equality can take various forms, although it does not mean sovereign equality, as such equality only exists among authorities that recognize each other as states. It could mean, for example, that the parties' representatives each have the authority to sign mutually binding agreements, as in the OSCE-led negotiations on the conflict over Transdniestria. It can even mean political equality, as in the UN-led negotiations on the future of Cyprus. So long as they are not then enshrined in a final settlement, such forms of equality only exist for the duration and within the framework of the respective negotiations. Outside these negotiations, equality should not be acknowledged by the international community of states, as this would contradict the policies of non-recognition of many states or – as in the case of Abkhazia – of the vast majority of states.

Georgia has, however, refused to attribute equal status to Abkhazia within the Geneva International Discussions. This position is

unhelpful. Equality in negotiations should not be interpreted as an enhancement of the status of de facto authorities as it is only a general condition for a fruitful outcome of the talks. Thus, conferring equal status does not contradict non-recognition policies because these policies refer to the recognition of statehood which is a separate question. Let us hope that Georgian and Abkhaz authorities are able to address this issue in preparing their future dialogue.



Dr. Mamuka Tsereteli, *Senior Fellow, Central-Asia Caucasus Institute at American Foreign Policy Council*

There is a low chance that Mr. Bzhania's election will fundamentally change the nature of Georgian-Abkhaz relations. It is obvious that Mr. Bzhania has his own agenda, however the facts on the ground have not changed: the Abkhazian leadership still claims independence from Georgia, and the region remains under Russian military control. In general, Russia has no interest in the resolution of this, or any conflict in its neighborhood, as they use these conflicts to maintain leverage over the participants.

The fact that Mr. Bzhania won the recent election, despite not being supported by

Moscow, is a strong indicator that local politics matters. This is the third time that Moscow's preferred candidate has been defeated, demonstrating that independent minded Abkhaz politicians have more support locally than their pro-Russian counterparts.

To reinforce the reconciliation process, the authorities in Tbilisi and Sukhumi should seek to expand the process of providing health care services to the population of all ethnic groups in Abkhazia, as well as supporting small scale trade and economic projects. The Georgian government should maintain its offer to expand the economic and educational benefits from the Association Agreement with the EU to the population in Abkhazia, and Mr. Bzhania should seek to normalize the humanitarian situation for ethnic Georgians in the Gali region. A bold step would be the easing of the border-crossing process to facilitate greater economic, healthcare, educational and social exchange. Finally, the development of the energy sector should remain a top priority for both sides.

In the short term, little is likely to change, but it is in the long-term interests of both sides to build more trust and avoid the escalation of tensions. Improving the basic human rights of the Georgian population in the Gali region, increasing trade, business and social interactions between the population in Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia will contribute building greater trust between both sides.



Lawrence Scott Sheets, *Independent Analyst*

The forced resignation of Raul Khadjimba, who had always been close to the present Russian authorities, and the election of Aslan Bzhania, who is seen as more skeptical of the Kremlin's effective control over Abkhazia, indeed illustrates the continuingly difficult real state of relations between Moscow and Sukhumi. Anyone who has spoken directly with Abkhaz officials or Russian government officials knows well that these relations have been increasingly problematic for a decade, despite official platitudes issued by both side about "brotherly relations".

That being said, of course Tbilisi should attempt to enhance contacts of by sort – social, economic, or political. This is best done through relatively modest steps to ease the movement of people and goods over the ABL, without which any move towards even a relatively minor improvement would be impossible.

However, it would be wishful thinking to imagine any major change given the present Russian leadership and its position towards Georgia. Though Bzhania may have left the door open a wee bit, Russia exerts near total effective control over Abkhazia and has invested a lot of

money in establishing a permanent military presence there.

Abkhazia's dependence on Russia is now near total. Russia controls all Abkhazia's borders and thus, effectively, trade. It provides more than half its budget revenues. Though it did not resort to propping up Khadjimba by force, it will use all its economic and political levers to limit Bzhania's room for maneuver, or that of any leadership in the entity for that matter.



Paata Grapindashvili, *Director, Georgia's Reforms Associates (GRASS)*

As a political solution to the conflict does not appear possible in the short term, other issues should become the focus of Georgian-Abkhaz dialogue. A status-neutral approach should be the modus operandi of this process as it can be successfully applied to trade, agriculture, humanitarian, educational and healthcare programs.

Sokhumi's ongoing cooperation with Tbilisi continues to become a necessity rather than a luxury as Russia's aggressive stance becomes ever more worrisome. While a fear persists

among the Abkhaz elites that deepening ties with Tbilisi would contribute to their "de-sovereignization", the election of Mr. Bzhania's shows there is support for economic relations with Tbilisi.

Tbilisi should respond to this opportunity by implementing and expanding upon a wide range of programs; while Sokhumi should openly engage with Tbilisi and apply a status-neutral approach. As the authorities in Sokhumi are increasingly realizing, such cooperation could help Abkhazia ease some of its most urgent problems. The Abkhazian government should try to think beyond a "recognition first" formula and first address their isolation by making real steps towards lifting restrictions on trade, and ensuring freedom of movement for people and goods across the administrative boundary line.

In the immediate term, Tbilisi and Sokhumi can cooperate bilaterally to counter the spread of Covid-19 and treat the infected; while additionally expanding the Hepatitis C Elimination program to Abkhazia as well.

It must be taken into consideration that Russia is always able to derail, if not completely terminate, the dialogue process between Sokhumi and Tbilisi; however, as long as Russia does not annex Abkhazia, opportunities for cooperation still exist. In the long term, as the best international practices show, developing multiple lines of cooperation today may lead to discussions about political solutions in the future.

Georgian Institute of Politics (GIP) is a Tbilisi-based non-profit, non-partisan, research and analysis organization. GIP works to strengthen the organizational backbone of democratic institutions and promote good governance and development through policy research and advocacy in Georgia.

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HOW TO QUOTE THIS DOCUMENT:

“Election of the dialogue-minded Bzhanian – nothing new or turning point in Abkhaz-Georgian relations?”, Expert Comment #10, Georgian Institute of Politics, May 2020.

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