



Project: "Planning steps towards a peaceful future"

Tornike Sharashenidze

The Impact of Developments in Ukraine on the Prospects for Settlement of Georgian Conflicts

(Policy document)

The full-scale war waged by Russia in Ukraine is a major geopolitical event that will inevitably change the balance of power in the region and affect the situation in Georgia, including in its occupied territories. It is still difficult to say whether this war will eventually create new opportunities for Georgia or, conversely, new threats. The purpose of this document is to analyze the situation in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region in the context of the ongoing war in Ukraine; to discuss the attitude there at the level of both the ruling elites and ordinary citizens; and to determine what has changed over the past two months and what this promises the Georgian side.

Attitudes towards war

In both Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region, most of the population supported Russia starting a war in Ukraine. This is not surprising, given the fact that both regions receive information mainly from Russian media. The war, in their opinion, was morally justified, on the grounds that "NATO and the United States left Russia no other choice" and that "Russia was defending itself in Ukraine." In addition to the fact that Russian propaganda did a good job of promoting this

idea, one should not forget that Russia is perceived as a "defender of the oppressed and the truth" for the residents of both regions. [Distinct views on the war](#) were more prevalent in Abkhazia due to the relatively developed civil society there.

There were also pragmatic reasons for justifying starting this war. Residents of both regions are clearly accustomed to the fact that every new war waged by Russia recently, as a rule, makes it even stronger (the war with Georgia in 2008, the conflict with Ukraine in 2014, the military campaign in Syria in 2015-2017). Further strengthening of the "ally and protector" is widely welcomed by most of the population of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region.

To compare the ruling elites, the Abkhaz side was relatively more skeptical of Moscow's actions in relation to certain issues, one of which was the recognition of the Donetsk and Luhansk regions as independent states. In Abkhazia, this was not well received at either the level of the ruling elite or of the ordinary citizen, with the emergence of new separatist regions recognized by Russia in the post-Soviet space being less than desirable. For the Abkhaz, this means a loss of exclusivity,

the emergence of "competitors," and, as a result, a possible reduction in funding from Moscow. Yet, the recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk did not cause a special reaction in the Tskhinvali region, where the ruling elite and most of the population are less enthusiastic about being considered an independent entity and, unlike the Abkhazians, do not claim any exclusivity. There, the economy of the region is largely dependent on the local Russian military base and, therefore, it is unlikely to face a particular decline.

[Fear of Georgian revenge](#)

The failures of the Russian armed forces during the war have apparently changed the perception of events in both regions to some extent. The fear of "Georgian revenge" has resurfaced, confirming the fact that Tbilisi still appears in the image of "the enemy" for both regions. At the same time, there was clear dissatisfaction in Sokhumi and Tskhinvali with Moscow's request to send Abkhazians and South Ossetians to the front in Donbas. However, in the Tskhinvali region, this dissatisfaction is unlikely to change anything, since the ruling elite is sharply oriented towards Moscow. This was confirmed during current events, when Tskhinvali once again raised the issue of uniting with Russia. This time, among others, the threat of revenge from the Georgian side was named to justify this step. In addition, the reanimation of the issue coincided with the "presidential" elections in the Tskhinvali region and, therefore, it can be considered as part of an internal political game. It is also possible that Tskhinvali may have received a corresponding signal from Moscow. This is indicated by the fact that the issue of Tskhinvali region joining the Russian Federation, raised by the ruling elite, coincided with the expression of a sharply negative position from Abkhazia on the same issue. In other words, it may well be that this issue was simultaneously raised by Moscow with the leaders of Sokhumi and Tskhinvali. Sokhumi's statements once again made it clear that the Abkhaz side, as before, is still capable of maintaining some autonomy. And their [rather tough position about the unacceptability of the](#)

[South Ossetian choice](#) indicates that the Abkhaz ruling elite had some questions for Moscow from the outset of the war, although it did not dare to openly declare this, as did some ordinary Abkhaz citizens.

Fearful reactions from both Abkhazians and South Ossetians have reaffirmed that trust in the Georgian side is still lacking. They believe that Tbilisi will resort to force as soon as the first opportunity arises to restore its territorial integrity. That fear was caused not only by irresponsible remarks made by some Georgian citizens, but also by [similar calls](#) made by the Ukrainian authorities. All this means that Abkhazians and South Ossetians not only do not trust the Georgian state, but also consider it an entity which is overly dependent on external forces (in this case, Ukraine). Russian propaganda has long been trying to establish the image of Georgia as an American and NATO puppet in the eyes of the people in the occupied territories. Concurrently, the same propaganda portrays America and NATO as aggressive actors who do not care about the fate or rights of the citizens of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region.

These reactions also prove that there is no hope for full protection from the Russian side in Sokhumi and Tskhinvali. The deployment of military bases in both regions after 2008 seemed to allay their fears, but the very first stumble of Russian troops in Ukraine has caused considerable doubts. Russia has emerged as a not-so-stable or strong partner because it not only failed to achieve its stated goals, but even needed to call Abkhazians and Ossetians to the front. The latter move may have been a purely political-symbolic act on the part of Moscow, but it did not really make a good impression on Sokhumi or Tskhinvali. Opposition politicians in the Tskhinvali region even made [statements](#) about the threat of "destruction of the gene pool," which is clearly backed by the attitudes of the population. In the meantime, members of Abkhazian civil society have come out openly [calling for an end to the war](#).

The policy of non-recognition and the threat of annexation of Georgian territories

As already mentioned, it is difficult to say that Moscow has decided to annex the Tskhinvali region and Abkhazia, but this possibility is real as much as it is logical, because in the light of a defeat in Ukraine, such a step could be one way for Moscow to save face. Nor should one forget the fact that if Moscow is indeed thinking about annexing these regions, a more favorable time is hard to imagine: the maximum possible sanctions have already been introduced, and Moscow is trying to adapt to them in various ways, including with the help of third countries, by creating so called "black holes." Also, according to its calculations, sanctions that are particularly damaging to the economy (for example, a full embargo on Russian oil) are not being threatened soon. As such, Russia is already isolated and has little to lose. Against this background, it makes no sense to spend time gaining additional recognition for Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region from other states. First, for Moscow, this issue is no longer relevant. Secondly, in conditions of such isolation, gaining recognition of Abkhazia's and the Tskhinvali region's independence will be extremely difficult, except for Belarus, which has recently become the de facto satellite of Russia. The annexation of the occupied territories during a time of even more closure and internal mobilization will probably be supported by the majority of Russian citizens, and this will increase Putin's rating in the run-up to the 2024 presidential elections.

Annexation of the Tskhinvali region will not be difficult for Russia, given the widespread mood there. Abkhazia will be a much more difficult case, however, seeing Moscow likely to use financial leverage. Compared to the Tskhinvali region, the population of Abkhazia is larger and less dependent on employment at the Russian military base. So, cutting down funding there, according to Russia's calculus, would be both easier and more efficient. Moscow has long been irritated by the stubbornness of the Abkhaz on issues such as the ban on the sale of real estate

to foreign nationals. Years go by, and this question is never solved. Although Abkhazia receives much more funding than the Tskhinvali region, it successfully tries to maintain its autonomy in comparison. This cannot but irritate Moscow.

While the likelihood of developing an adverse event scenario around annexation at this point is high, some think the opposite. If Moscow needs the annexation of Georgian territories to make up for its failure in Ukraine, the annexation of the Tskhinvali region alone would not be enough to achieve this goal (Tskhinvali is not Kharkov, let alone Kiev). Therefore, at this stage, annexation would likely be postponed because there is no such readiness in Abkhazia yet. Further, it is quite possible that relatively more pragmatic views will prevail in Moscow's political circles over time, according to which the annexation of Georgian territory will have a very negative impact not only on relations with Georgia, but will also set a bad example for all countries pursuing a cautious policy towards Russia.

The Georgian side has no leverage to strengthen the position of pragmatic politicians in Moscow. Following the start of the war, the already closed circle of political decision-makers in Russia became even narrower and could no longer be influenced by rational-minded political analysts or journalists who maintain contacts with their Georgian counterparts. Georgia has long pursued a rather cautious and measured policy in its relations with Moscow. Against this background, more compromises will not be allowed due to the sharply negative attitude towards Russia in Georgian society, which has intensified in the wake of the war in Ukraine. Consequently, it is almost impossible to influence Moscow's stance on the annexation of Georgia's occupied territories. But, in the end, it is still better to maintain and develop contacts with those healthy and rational forces left in Russia, in the hope that they may someday have a chance to influence politics. The Georgian side must be prepared for such a moment and, in this regard, the existence of human contacts will be very important.

Readiness of the Georgian side to stop the annexation

In the short run, the Georgian side does not have its own leverage to prevent such a decision from Russia. Had relations been less confrontational between Georgian and the Abkhazian / South Ossetian societies, and had there been no growing alienation, Tbilisi would have been in a better position to prevent annexation. Today, unfortunately, we are dealing with a different reality. This issue is especially acute in the Tskhinvali region, where there is virtually no resource or readiness for Tskhinvali to resist the Kremlin. In the current situation, the only, and, at the same time, necessary way is the mobilization of diplomatic support from the international community, even if its final effectiveness is doubtful for the reasons mentioned above.

In this regard, the situation in Abkhazia gives grounds for relatively more optimism. Even if Moscow manages to persuade the local ruling elite, an attempt at annexation will inevitably lead to protests from a large part of the population. Given that Abkhazia is a fragile political entity, it is dangerous for any government to provoke a wave of protests. Therefore, it will be necessary to persuade not only the ruling elite, but also Abkhazian society to join the Russian Federation. It would be most logical for Moscow to appeal to the "increased threat of aggression" from Tbilisi and to convince the Abkhazian community that otherwise Russia cannot (or will not) protect the region from the Georgians.

Therefore, in the short run, the task of the Georgian side should be, first, to crush this propaganda myth. As already said, it is obvious that so far neither Sokhumi nor Tskhinvali trust the declared policy by Official Tbilisi that aims to restore territorial integrity only through peaceful means. Consequently, there is a need to intensify the peaceful rhetoric, especially at the government and official levels. It is one thing for the Abkhazian or South Ossetian societies to hear relevant statements from Georgian non-

governmental organizations, and another when they hear it from the Georgian government itself. Both Sokhumi and Tskhinvali believe that non-governmental organizations express the mood of only a part of Georgian society and that their statements may be inspired by the order of Western donor organizations. Yet, while the residents of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region may not fully trust the statements of the Georgian government, such statements will at least have the effect that local ruling elites (more realistically, of course, Abkhazians) will, if they wish, step into relations with Tbilisi. More so as the current ruling elite of Abkhazia is relatively loyal to Tbilisi and may even expect similar steps from the Georgian side. The government will also need to respond immediately to all public calls for armed revenge and disassociate from them. In Sokhumi and Tskhinvali, one should not be left with the impression that the government agrees with or incites such calls with its silence.

Prospects for relations with Tbilisi as Russia's isolation deepens

Russia's international isolation does not change much for the Tskhinvali region, but it is undoubtedly an unpleasant fact for Abkhazians, many of whom are open to relations with the outside world. With the expected reduction of funding from Russia, its isolation from the West presents an opportunity for part of the Abkhazian community (primarily the youth) to start looking for alternative ways in Georgia. Added to this is the **pressure** that Russia has long exerted on Abkhazian civil society to discourage it from cooperating with Western organizations. In the face of isolation and growing confrontation with the West, this pressure will likely increase, something that will not be welcomed in Abkhazia. Against this background, the Georgian side should try to increase the involvement of Western organizations in Abkhazia and, thus, in the medium term, not only neutralize the pressure of the Russian side, but also show Abkhazians the benefits of cooperation with the West via Tbilisi. Pure economic leverage will also have to be activated, which, with the consent of the Abkhaz side,

could serve to open the door for Georgian businesses to work in Abkhazia (obviously, after finding the necessary legal form). Against the background of Russia's economic isolation, this will be all the more profitable and attractive for the Abkhaz side.

Yet, there is a danger that Georgia may find itself unprepared for the opening up of such a window of opportunity. A number of measures beyond the economic and humanitarian aspects will be needed to sort out relations with the Abkhaz side. More daring steps in the medium term will be needed, which will be more difficult for the government to implement if it does not have a mandate from a large part of the population. Therefore, it is necessary to work with the public not only in Sokhumi, but also in Tbilisi. Georgian citizens must be made aware not only of the inadmissibility of the use of force, but also of the need for bilateral compromises for reconciliation. This requires a public debate and discussion on these issues to rethink the conflicts more pragmatically and comprehensively. One has to be aware that if a window of opportunity emerges, it may be the last, because time is working against reconciliation and, therefore, against Georgia. Compromise and concession will create many new opportunities for Sokhumi and Tskhinvali. If the Georgian state has a future, then it is in no way dangerous to make concessions that would allow us to coexist with Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region in some way - over time, as the country strengthens, the two regions may become more integrated simply because they have no other choice.

Recommendations

Based on the above, the following recommendations can be made:

- **Intensify the peace rhetoric towards the Abkhaz and South Ossetian communities, primarily at the official and governmental levels.** Expanding and revitalizing contacts through all sorts of channels, not only with civil society but also with the de facto ruling elites. Otherwise, it will be very difficult to take

countermeasures against the backdrop of pressure from Moscow and anti-Georgian sentiments among the population.

- **Strengthen the information campaign on the Public Broadcaster and social networks for the Abkhaz and South Ossetian communities, presenting Georgia as a developed country, an independent player, and the quickest way to access the Western world.** This will require the development of an appropriate communication strategy at the state level, according to which Russian-language Georgian resources will be created on TV and the Internet. Such resources may include modern Georgian films and a TV series translated into Russian, or video blogs and talk shows with relevant content in Russian.

- **Work with Western partners to increase engagement and influence in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali.** The partners should be made aware that the Georgian side is rethinking the conflicts, including towards prevention of annexation, and that this time the resources will be spent much more efficiently on the transformation of the conflicts.

- **Intensify work with Western partners to prevent annexation, primarily in the Tskhinvali region.** It is necessary to develop an emergency plan with Western partners, which, among other things, will provide for imposing a noteworthy political and economic cost on Russia. Partners should be convinced that it is necessary to immediately announce a special package of sanctions on this issue.

- **Revitalize work in Georgian society for a new understanding of the conflicts, so that the government can take active and bold steps towards achieving peace with Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region at the earliest opportunity.**

Part of the above communication strategy should be about breaking down the stereotypes, such as, for example, that the conflicts in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region are only part of the Georgia-Russia confrontation and the local population has no role to play there. Further, bold talks need to be encouraged about

the mistakes made by the Georgian side since the late 1980s regarding the policy towards the breakaway regions. This should create a willingness to compromise.

- **Increase the attractiveness of the "Step to a Better Future" initiative.** First, it is necessary to eliminate the reasons that hinder the full realization of the initiative. In this regard, it is important to reduce bureaucratic barriers and substantially increase funding to facilitate both trade and business, as well as to expand access to education for Abkhazian and South Ossetian youth in Western colleges and universities. At the same time, Russian-speaking sectors should

be opened in Georgian higher and vocational schools to master the specialties in demand.

- **Maintain and develop contacts with healthy and rational forces inside Russia.** This refers mainly to political scientists affiliated with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who well understand the value of normal relations with Georgia and are ready to talk about restoring territorial integrity. Well-known representatives of electronic and print media, and of art and intellectual circles, have similar views. Many of them are censored; some have already left the country. It is necessary to identify these people and in various ways involve them in the process of forming public opinion.

About the author

Tornike Sharashenidze is a professor at the Georgian Institute of Public Affairs.

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