



December, 2023

Project: “Rebuilding Trust between Georgians and Abkhaz”

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Which policies should Georgia pursue against annexation?¹

The weight of the current threats of annexation

It is evident that the formal annexation of the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions by the Russian Federation is likely to make Georgia’s goal of restoring the country’s territorial integrity even more difficult than it already is. Therefore, it is crucial to understand what the Georgian side is able to do in order to prevent this scenario, and to go even further to create a precondition for the restoration of said territorial integrity.

In light of the ongoing war in Ukraine, it must be recognized that the threat of annexation has been heightened. It is a threat that is particularly compelling, coming as it does after Russia sustained a series of grave defeats on the battlefield- seeing a likely scenario created in which Russia tries to cover up its failures in Ukraine by annexing the occupied territories.

The situation on the frontline at present is stable, seeing the parties having reached a stalemate in which neither of them is able to advance. We are thus facing a typical war of attrition, which in reality is a winning hand for Russia, and, as such, the abovementioned likelihood of annexation as a cover-up is somewhat diminished.

Notably, annexation on the part of Russia would be easy enough to execute in the Tskhinvali region, where a referendum has paved the way to “legalization”, however, such an attempt would undoubtedly be met with fierce protest. Moscow, busy waging its war in Ukraine, is not likely to want to add to its headaches. Meanwhile, the Russian authorities have frowned upon the Abkhazian’s stubbornness with regard to a number of issues, among them a ban on selling land to foreign nationals, which creates barriers for Russians to

¹ The paper was prepared within the frame of the project “Rebuilding Trust between Georgians and Abkhaz” implemented by the Levan Mikeladze Foundation. The arguments and opinions expressed in the article belong to the author and may not coincide with the position of the Foundation.



acquire real estate there. However, Moscow has so far remained patient, and for obvious reasons, as time is not on the Abkhazians' side: In addition to other grave issues, they are facing the risk of a demographic disaster, meaning their capacity to stand against Russia is dwindling ever more with the passing of time.

The threat of an “intermediate” scenario, which implies the integration of the occupied territories into the emerging union state of Russia and Belarus, should not be allowed to slip our attention. This is the alternative which may well be approved by the Abkhazians, since their so called “independence” will be maintained, and it is a concept that has been strongly supported by Inal Ardzinba, the most pro-Russian representative of the Abkhazian authorities.

It should be noted that in spite of Moscow's actions, there has been no signal from Moscow as yet to suggest the Russian authorities are to set this scenario into motion in the near future. Such an assumption is based upon the fact that Belarus is in no rush to recognize Abkhazia's independence, without which Abkhazia's joining the union state will be impossible. It seems that the Russian authorities are well aware of the possible ramifications of this act; that, by annexing Abkhazia and Tskhinvali, or even by integrating them into the union state, Russia will be left with close to nothing to bargain with Tbilisi with.

Based on the above said, the threat of annexation seems to have faded somewhat; in its turn, leaving Georgia a window with which it can develop and implement actionable and consistent policies to avert annexation, and make steps forward toward the restoration of the country's territorial integrity. This is a must-do, considering the notoriously unpredictable nature of Russia, which could see the existing situation changing at any time for the worse (heightening the risks of annexation or the integration of the occupied territories into the union state), or for the better, bringing with it the opportunity for the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity. In short, the country needs to prepare itself. Preparedness here implies the building of relations with communities on the other side of the lines of occupation to an extent which will make it possible to achieve peaceful resolution of the conflicts through negotiation.

Georgia's policies in relation to the recent developments

Georgia has no current leverage with which to influence the course of the Russian authorities. Moreover, since the war began in Ukraine and the Western sanctions were introduced, Georgia's partners have also been left without any serious clout against Russia- all instruments at the West's disposal have already been set in motion. As such, Russia will have to overcome almost no barriers should it pursue the formal annexation of Georgia's occupied territories.



The Georgian authorities continue to work with their partners on the non-recognition policy. However, “non-recognition” and actually preventing Russia from annexing the occupied territories are two very different things. The first implies working to dissuade those countries who might be more likely to incline towards recognition, while the second focuses more on working with the communities residing in the occupied territories (and working with Russia cannot be excluded from this second strand). Preventing annexation also includes working with the West, whose focus now is on Ukraine. Clearly, developments unfolding in and around Ukraine have almost completely overshadowed the issue of Georgia’s occupied territories. Therefore, it is safe to assume that Georgia’s partners are less aware of the looming threats of annexation and are paying little attention to the issue, even more so when they lack influential leverage over Russia.

In light of the absence of relevant information, it is difficult to ascertain the extent to which Tbilisi has estimated the threat of annexation, or the measures that the Georgian authorities have undertaken thus far to prevent it. Considering the caution that Tbilisi has demonstrated in the recent past, it can be assumed that what the Georgian authorities fear most is provoking Russia, so much so that they are even afraid to remind Moscow of their existence - remaining convinced that the existing status quo holds fewer risks (including

those relating to annexation) than Tbilisi’s efforts to change that status quo would.

This belief likely rests on the following assumptions: According to the first assumption, Russia is busy in Ukraine, and does not seem to want to change anything in the South Caucasus. In addition, since the war broke out in Ukraine, Tbilisi has acted in a rather reserved manner, plodding along with the hope that Moscow will appreciate this reservation. Yet, by annexing the occupied territories, Moscow will lose all leverage for bargaining with and influencing Tbilisi’s actions.

Based on these circumstances, the Georgian authorities have resorted to a more passive course of action. It is evident that inaction, in certain instances, might be the best choice, especially in light of the complicated situation that the region has found itself in since the war broke out in Ukraine. On the other hand, this means that the authorities will not be ready for either improved or worsened circumstances, especially when the implementation of a new, actionable and consistent policy would do no harm or deter the same peaceful and appeasing policies in relation to Moscow.

This line of reasoning leads us to the extremely important question as to whether the authorities will be able to do so without support from the public. Even if the government succeeds in developing an effective strategy for dealing with the occupied territories, will they be able to implement it? Assuming that the



strategy will contain bold, original, and controversial decisions, we can also assume that its implementation will not be possible without the support and trust of the general public. Therefore, it will be critical to actively engage with as many as possible in the process of developing such a strategy, especially with civil society.

The attitude of the Georgian public towards the aforementioned issue

Sadly, issues related to the occupied territories are almost always overshadowed by internal political struggles. Media rarely covers developments taking place in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and when it does, such coverage fits the context of internal political confrontations and is used for speculation and mob oratory, rather than analyzing the situation and finding solutions.

The occupied territories resurfaced in the public discourse after the war broke out in Ukraine. Following Russia's initial fiasco of an attempt to conquer the country, many had hoped that Russia would sustain defeat not only in Ukraine, but would in turn have to withdraw from the South Caucasus. This aspiration eventually snowballed into an internal political confrontation, seeing representatives of the Georgian opposition party making prognoses about Russia's upcoming dissolution, the opportunity to reclaim lost territories, and accusing the authorities of inaction and a missed historic chance.

The majority of ultra-optimists do not shy away from explicitly saying that Georgia should resort to use of force to restore its territorial integrity. It is evident that they cannot imagine who is going to stand up to the Georgian military forces with the Russian troops having left the region. Surprisingly, the grave developments of 1992-1993, which saw not only mercenaries but also volunteers from the North Caucasus arriving in Abkhazia in droves to fight off the Georgians, somehow skips their memory. It is difficult to predict what could prevent North Caucasus communities from doing the same a second time, but it is safe to assume that the Russian authorities will not care the least if others, instead of them, obstruct Georgia's efforts to reclaim its territorial integrity.

Proponents of regaining independence through the use of force have not given due consideration to the fact that Georgia, an aspirant country for EU membership, must refrain from pursuing violent solutions and take all possible measures to resolve the problem solely through peaceful means.

Such unrealistic expectations, in addition to other factors, are born in a context which lacks both contacts with the Abkhazian and Ossetian sides, and sufficient knowledge about those sides' perceptions and attitudes. Concurrently, the Georgian media has been promoting a narrative according to which the Abkhazians (and even more so, the Ossetians) have blindly



played along with Moscow. This narrative, in turn, further cements a negative disposition towards the Abkhazians and South Ossetians in the mind of the Georgian public, and cultivates the idea that these problems can be resolved only through the use of force. Obviously, this is coupled with the influence of Russian propaganda within the occupied territories, which helps to promulgate negative sentiments about Georgia. However, the Russian propaganda would have had a harder time achieving this had there not been threats and militaristic appeals on the part of the Georgian side.

Georgian civil society maintains contact with the communities residing in the occupied territories, and, therefore, the vision and the antidotes of civic actors are more impartial. However, neither a vision nor a strategy are shared as to how to prevent annexation. In addition, in spite of their contacts across the divides, Georgian civic actors have not yet been able to utilize this capital.

Key directions within the anti-annexation policy

As mentioned above, the West, alongside Georgia, has run out of effective leverage to influence Russia's actions. However, at the same time, Russia's attempts to annex Abkhazia will, by all means, be met with a fierce protest from the Abkhazians.

This is perhaps the major precondition and grounds for the anti-annexation policy. It is obvious that the Abkhaz nationalists are Georgia's situational allies by resisting Moscow's attempts to further consolidate control over Abkhazia.

The Georgian side is in a position to further support and empower the Abkhazian resistance- first and foremost by debunking the latter's fear of Georgia seeking retaliation. In other words, Abkhazian society must be instilled with the idea that Georgia will never resort to the use of violence to reclaim its territorial integrity. If such a campaign of reassurance is carried out, the incentive to get closer to Moscow will further wither in Abkhazia, since Moscow is primarily perceived by the Abkhazians as a safeguard rather than a development partner, especially with Moscow now suffering isolation and under sanction since it began its war in Ukraine – it is due to Russia and these sanctions that most Abkhazians are no longer able to travel to European countries, let alone seek prospects of doing business or receiving an education in the EU.

One has to admit that this goal is not an easy one to attain, since a considerable part of Georgian society is not yet ready. Among the potential opponents are not only politicians, but also internally displaced persons (IDPs) who believe that Georgia has a legitimate right to use force to reclaim its lost territories, even more so considering the fact that ethnic



Georgians were forced to flee from their homes. In light of these challenges, serious endeavors need to be undertaken with regard to a rather considerable part of the Georgian public. Peace rhetoric promoted by Georgian civil society will not suffice to estrange Abkhazian society from Russia unless politicians and prominent public figures stop making statements appealing to the use of force. Every hostile statement will be leveraged by the Russian propaganda machine to kill any desire within communities residing in the occupied regions to get closer to Tbilisi, and instead will push them closer to Moscow.

Peace rhetoric must grow stronger and become more persuasive, alongside Georgia's European integration processes. The Georgian authorities and civil society must reach out to Abkhazian society with the message that a country aspiring to join the EU has to be peaceful; looking toward the future and abandoning any thoughts about vengeance and retaliation. This message is likely to gain traction within the South Ossetian communities in particular.

The second direction within the anti-annexation policy should aim at breaking through the information blockade in the occupied territories. To this end, the Georgian side should create Russian-language content in order to positively display Georgia and, therefore, weaken the aspiration for joining the Russian Federation among communities of the occupied territories. The content must be created through talks shows depicting the

situation in Georgia, and should demonstrate the aspirations of the Georgian state and Georgian society, including those related to the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions. Popular Georgian TV shows should also be translated into Russian (or dubbed in Russian) and made available on YouTube. This content, as an instrument of soft power, can compete with Russian TV series. In addition, Georgian TV shows portray the Georgian reality, which is little known about (as mentioned above) in the occupied territories.

Development of economic cooperation should be yet another direction within the anti-annexation policy. Certain works have already been launched, though, alas, without being able to achieve any alteration in the attitudes of those communities residing in the occupied territories, or being able to compete with Russia's economic influence on the localities. This direction requires more rigorous engagement and the export of joint Georgian-Abkhazian (and where possible, Georgian-Ossetian) branded products to foreign countries with support from Georgia's Western partners. As mentioned above, the West has all but used up its leverage against Russia, however, they can help by exporting Abkhazian products. The European integration process, in general, should whet Abkhazia's appetite to cooperate in the economic domain even more so in light of the strict isolation that Russia has found itself in due to the economic sanctions placed on it.



The Georgian authorities must further encourage the West involved in the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian reconciliation. However, one has to take into consideration the circumstances attached to Russia's political influence on the occupied territories and make sure that such an engagement does not cause any harm, first and foremost to local communities. The engagement of the West should be limited to the economic and humanitarian domains which, together with the aforementioned goal, is necessary so as to debunk negative perceptions towards NATO and, hence, potential skepticism about the West - a view induced by Russian influence over the occupied territories.

All of the above-mentioned measures will not suffice unless societies on the other side of the divide acknowledge that the events of 1991-1992 were a tragedy, not only in terms of loss of territories and the forceful displacement of ethnic Georgians from their homes, but also because of the fratricidal nature of the war induced by all parties' mistakes. Confidence building and reconciliation will not be achieved solely through economic leverage or soft power instruments: It requires open and fearless reflection about the past. More specifically, Official Tbilisi could reasonably initiate the launch of a joint Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian commission to look into the 1991-1993 events. Even if Sukhumi and Tskhinvali do not respond to this initiative, this will nevertheless give the

Georgian side the moral advantage and it will have positive bearing on public opinion across the divide.

In parallel to all these measures and initiatives, the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian informal dialogue should be further scaled up. Civil society representatives have long been participating in the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian meetings held abroad. However, it is evident that these informal meetings have not been enough for mutual confidence building, something which requires these meetings to be more frequent, lengthy and more outcome-oriented. They should not depend only on the support provided by donor organizations, who, in spite of their noble intentions, have limited capacity, and whose course of action is shaped by specific organizational agendas. The Georgian authorities, with sufficient resources at their disposal, should be involved in organizing these meetings. The engagement of the state authorities, signaling greater interest on part of the latter, is likely to incentivize donor organizations to become more actively engaged in this process.

During these dialogues, along with other issues, participants should discuss annexation threats coming from Russia and highlight the disastrous effects that such a scenario will bring about for both parties. There should be an exchange of views and opinions around these matters, as well as certain coordinated efforts.



Both the Abkhazian and Ossetian sides can reach out with ideas and share their visions in this regard. However, there is a long road to take before the process reaches this point. Meaningful engagement from the Abkhazians and Ossetians will become a reality only when the Georgian side is able to launch successful works in the above-mentioned directions.

Recommendations

To the Government of Georgia

1. Invigorate peace rhetoric with relevant statements containing messages of peace made by those with political offices in the executive authorities, as well as those in the legislature. Such statements should be voiced within and beyond Georgia's borders using international venues (including those of the EU) for greater credibility.
2. Work with IDPs to explain the importance of peace rhetoric.
3. Develop a series of specific initiatives, including setting up a commission looking into what unfolded in 1991-1993.
4. Run surveys among the broader public to specify that the majority of the country's population side with an exclusively peaceful way of restoring the country's territorial integrity.

5. Support and promote the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian dialogue. In the presence of the relevant political will, legal ways and, importantly, resources will be made available to attain this goal. Support for this could be leveraged from Georgia's Western partners, more specifically, through brand names of their donor organizations, in parallel with Georgian governmental resources.

6. Support the creation of Russian-language content about the recent developments and the existing context in Georgia for those communities residing in the occupied territories. In this regard, the funding of films dedicated to the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian wars is a commendable measure. However, translating or dubbing Georgian film productions into Russian is no less important. Creating Russian-language talk shows could also serve this purpose.

7. Actively support Georgian business in Abkhazia (and where possible, in Tskhinvali) to set up joint ventures for branding and exporting local products to foreign countries, including EU member states, leveraging support from Western development partners in this process.

8. Launch a series of discussions on media platforms (in the first place, on the Public Broadcaster) on issues pertaining to the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions, so as to



cultivate interest and support among the broader public for implementing the relevant policies.

To civil society organizations

1. Work with political parties to help them understand the importance of peace rhetoric and the harm brought about by statements with militaristic messaging. This is an endeavor which cannot be undertaken by the state authorities or representatives of the ruling party in light of the persisting political polarization. Nor will it be an easy task for civil society actors. However, without achieving this objective, the anti-annexation policy will be near impossible to implement.

2. Work with the IDP communities with the same purpose.

3. Work with foreign donors to create Russian-language content about Georgian affairs. This might include talk shows, short

videos (for TikTok, for instance) and other materials.

4. Work with foreign donor organizations to mobilize support for the creation of media products in cooperation with those Georgian media platforms dedicated to issues pertaining to the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions, in order to draw the public's attention to these issues.

5. Revive and re-activate contacts with the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions to implement informed policies in the aforementioned direction.

6. Engage more actively with representatives of political parties in deliberation on issues related to the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions.

7. Hold a series of meetings with influencers and public figures, including prominent scientists, writers, actors, etc., on issues relating to the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions.

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