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HOW RUSSIA'S WAR AGAINST UKRAINE WILL AFFECT ABKHAZIA AND THE TSKHINVALI REGION

BADRI BELKANIA

177

EXPERT OPINION





საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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Introduction

On February 21, 2022, Russian President, Vladimir Putin, signed the document recognizing independence of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (Lenta, 2022) which was officially supported by the de facto leaders of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region. The de facto leadership of the Tskhinvali region, which recognized the DNR and LNR back in 2014, hailed President Putin's decision of February 21 as an «expected, reasonable and justified» step (RIA Novosti, 2022). Russia's move was also lauded by the de facto President of Abkhazia, Aslan Bzhania, who said the decision was «fair, geopolitically adequate» and in line with modern challenges and threats (TASS, 2022). In a few days, the de facto leader of Abkhazia signed the document recognizing independence of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics (Ekho Kavkaza, 2022).

The recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk is in itself a remarkable geopolitical step on the part of Russia which also brings significant changes in terms of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region. However, within days of its recognition, it became clear that Moscow needed the move as a launch pad for war in Ukraine. Consequently, the recognition of the de facto republics was accompanied by a Russian military aggression in Ukraine which, from the prospective of Sukhumi and Tskhinvali, changes even more than just the recognition of the Donbas region. As the domestic and foreign policy characteristics of Sukhumi and Tskhinvali differ, both will be discussed separately in this article.

Abkhazia

So-called parliamentary elections were held in Abkhazia on March 12 (Apsnypress, 2022) but the pre-election fever in the region was overshadowed by the war in Ukraine. As Abkhaz political commentators wrote a few days before the elections (Chania, 2022), the people of Abkhazia were so involved in the news about Russia's war against Ukraine that local elections now «concerned only candidates and their entourages.» The Abkhaz segment of international social networks actively discusses the war against Ukraine (Sharia, 2022) while politicians, analysts and civil society activists often comment on it.

In the absence of objective sociological polls, it is difficult to comment with any certainty on Sukhumi's support of the Russian military intervention

in Ukraine; however, it is clear that attitudes are not uniform. Politically, the unrecognized Republic of Abkhazia is forced to support Moscow as its only solid partner in the international arena. In this sense, Sukhumi has no other choice - the options are limited. This political support for Russia is also backed by the political elites - a position that is difficult to defend from a moral point of view is often justified by the fact that a Ukrainian unofficial detachment fought on the Georgian side during the Abkhazian war (Abkhazskoe Narodnoe Dvizhenie, 2022). Authorities also organized a pro-Russian rally in Sukhumi on March 11 where the de facto leader of the region, Aslan Bzhania, delivered a speech in support of the Kremlin (Apsny Today, 2022).

However, the Russian invasion of Ukraine also has critics within the population and politically active people who often refrain from expressing this opinion due to political pressure. One of the rare exceptions is an Abkhaz historian, Yuri Anchabadze, who has openly expressed a negative position on Russia's «military special operation» in Ukraine and who has called the Kremlin's war «devastating and destructive» (Anchabadze, 2022). Anchabadze also called upon the Abkhaz side not to equate the cases of Abkhazia and Donbas as the struggle for the independence of these two regions has a completely different history.

Thus, in Sukhumi, there are different views about the Russian invasion of Ukraine but one thing is clear for the de facto republic - the war will inevitably affect the future of Abkhazia. The region is directly linked to the socio-economic and political events in the Russian Federation and the dramatic change there will inevitably yield visible consequences. One such direct negative impact is the rapidly rising prices for fuel in recent weeks and part of Abkhazian society connects this to the current events in Russia (Gogoryan, 2022). The increase in fuel prices even caused a small rally in the center of Sukhumi (Sputnik Abkhazia, 2022). However, it is clear that the price of fuel is only one small issue that to which the de facto government of Abkhazia will have to respond.

First of all, Russia's recognition of the de facto republics of Donetsk and Luhansk in the context of international politics deserves special attention. Even though a few days after the de facto leader of occupied Abkhazia also signed a document recognizing the regions and endorsed Moscow's decision, it is questionable whether this fact contributes to Sukhumi's foreign policy of acquiring international recognition. It is often said in

Abkhazia that the historical development of the Abkhaz nation and the struggle for independence differ from all other cases and should be considered as a separate event in the international arena. This view is affirmed in Sukhumi even when external actors compare the cases of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region. From the declaration of independence to the present day, the case of the Abkhaz nation in the foreign arena is seen by the de facto government as a small, repressed nation's struggle for self-determination and independence while its recognition by Russia in 2008 is perceived as the restoration of historical justice (Bagapsh, 2008).

In this sense, the efforts of the de facto government of Abkhazia have always been aimed at presenting the case of Abkhazia independently in international politics and not through the prism of Russian foreign policy interests. This is an aspect where the foreign policy of Abkhazia has suffered a significant blow by Russia's recognition of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk regions. Their recognition and the immediate incursion into Ukraine made it clear to the international community, including many of Russia's partner countries, that the Kremlin's series of recognition of the de facto republics across the post-Soviet space has been entirely an instrument of Moscow's foreign policy and had nothing to do with protecting the Abkhaz or any other independence-seeking nations.

Due to the support for the territorial integrity of Georgia on the part of the international community, especially that of the West, most of the attempts of the de facto government of Abkhazia to acquire focus in the international arena have failed to yield tangible results. In this regard, Russia's foreign policy of recognizing Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region was largely unsuccessful, something which was eventually replaced by Russia's emphasis on a policy of a greater integration of the regions into the Russian space. The document on the «harmonization» of legislation signed with Sukhumi in 2020 was an indication of this policy shift (Kvakhadze, 2021). Given the fact that attracting international attention to Abkhazia and convincing UN member states has already proven to be an arduous mission, Russia's recognition of the Donbas regions makes it even more difficult. Moscow's military aggression in Ukraine, condemned by the entire international community with a few exceptions, has completely incorporated the issue of Abkhazia's independence into the prism of Russia's aggressive foreign policy. There is a growing sense in the international arena that the independence of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region is simply a part of the paradigm of Russia's international interests

and most likely it will be even more difficult for the de facto Abkhaz authorities to alter this deeply entrenched notion.

The next important issue is Russia's international image - both political and reputational. There has always been a negative perception of Russia's aggressive foreign policy in the West, including towards Georgia, although Russian military aggression in Ukraine has finally cemented this attitude. According to the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, the West's inappropriate response to the actions in Georgia in 2008 and then in Ukraine in 2014 led to greater violence from Russia (Agenda, 2022). The increase in such statements in the light of the current events in Ukraine is a sign that the still skeptical parties in the West have clearly seen Russia's real strategic plans as well as the scale of aggression with which Ukraine and Georgia had to cope. Moreover, no war has ever been so well documented in the history as Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Social networks are full of photos, videos, audio recordings and countless pieces of evidence of Russian military aggression and crime. Anyone can see this material with the naked eye anywhere in the world which irrevocably taints Russia's reputation, not only in the eyes of politicians, analysts and journalists but also in the opinions of ordinary people.

In such a reality, Russia's reputational and political damage has a direct dual impact on Abkhazia as well. First, the de facto government of Abkhazia, in the absence of any other alternative, has to fully support Moscow whose political and reputational image in the international arena has been significantly shaken. Russia's discretization and international isolation also directly impacts Abkhazia's reputation as its partner. This isolation will also apply to those Abkhazians for whom the already limited opportunities to travel to other countries beyond Russia (especially in Europe) will be further reduced. There are educational programs through which Abkhaz students study abroad (Kanashvili, 2022), although the prospects for Abkhaz students in this domain are also expected to decrease against the backdrop of the Russian isolation. Secondly, despite the power of Russian propaganda in the region, the people of Abkhazia, who actively use the Internet and social networks, are well aware of the Kremlin's aggressive actions in Ukraine. It is too early to say how much Russia's image will deteriorate in the eyes of the people (also due to the lack of relevant studies, it will be difficult to determine this with any high degree of certainty in the future as well) but Moscow's inhumane aggression will inevitably have some impact on Abkhaz society's perceptions.

The next issue, which probably concerns Abkhazia the most, is the sanctions imposed on Russia and the dire economic situation that these sanctions will inevitably produce. According to *The Economist*, the scale of the sanctions imposed on Russia has never before been seen by the world (2022). The removal of Russia from the world financial system, its complete economic isolation, the mass exodus of private businesses from the Russian market, the devaluation of the ruble and many other economic problems that plagued Moscow after the invasion of Ukraine will continue to deteriorate the Russian economy in the estimation of the majority of economists (Kakulia, 2022). This means that Russia is facing a rather severe economic crisis which will directly affect Abkhazia as it is largely dependent on Russian financial assistance.

Russia has already voiced specific messages in this regard - on March 10, Russian Deputy Minister of the Economy, Dmitry Volvach, who was visiting Sukhumi, told the Russian news broadcaster TASS that Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region should be less dependent on Moscow's funding (TASS, 2022). Volvach announced that financial assistance from Russia will be significantly reduced in the coming years and the regions should start attracting investments themselves. It is also a kind of pressure from Russia to force Sukhumi to make the necessary legislative changes for Russian investors - including permits to buy real estate by foreigners, the privatization of energy resources, dual citizenship and other fundamental issues that Abkhaz society opposes (Civil Georgia, 2021).

Local economists have already called upon the government to take economic measures appropriate to the new reality (Aristava, 2022). Russia is running the Investment Program for the Socio-Economic Development of Abkhazia which is of particular importance for Abkhazia's infrastructure development and business support. Russia is also helping Abkhazia to fill its budget and pay salaries and pensions. In this situation, it becomes unclear whether Russia will have the ability or political will to provide the same amount of assistance to Sukhumi as it did before the war in Ukraine. It is likely that Russia had decided to reduce aid in this area even before the war against Ukraine - and the war reinforces this decision.

From an economic point of view, tourism is an important component for Abkhazia - this sector also relies mainly on Russian tourists (Ministry of Economy of Abkhazia, 2020). It is obvious that Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the impending economic crisis that awaits Moscow will have an

impact in this domain as well. However, it is difficult to predict whether this impact will be negative or positive for Abkhazia in the case of tourism - both options have arguments in favor. The downside, in general, is the deteriorating economic situation of Russian citizens which will reduce their financial capacity and, therefore, opportunities to spend their vacations abroad - mainly middle and lower-class Russians travel to Abkhazia and their financial situation will be affected the most by the economic crisis.

However, on a more positive note for the Abkhaz tourism segment, the restrictions on Russians moving abroad (including Europe) may outweigh this negative factor. The sanctions imposed on air travel and visas for Russians conversely may increase the flow of Russian tourists to Abkhazia and those who have previously preferred to travel elsewhere may also arrive in the region. This view is supported by the fact that after blocking Mastercard and Visa cards for Russian banks (Reuters, 2022), a large number of Russian tourists will be forced to travel to places where Russian Мир Cards operate - Abkhazia is one such region. Consequently, some travel companies in Abkhazia expect an increase in tourist flows from Russia during the summer season (Sputnik Abkhazia, 2022b). Which factor will prevail - the complicated economic situation in Russia or the possible growing influx of Russian tourists - can only be assessed in the fall.

Finally, in the wake of the Russian intervention in Ukraine, the de facto leader of the region, Aslan Bzhania, ordered the «military readiness» of Abkhaz troops (Sputnik Abkhazia, 2022c). The official reason for this was to «avoid provocations by Georgia.» Georgian Foreign Minister, Davit Zalkaliani, responded to the decision by saying that the Abkhaz and the Ossetians were «in no danger» from Tbilisi and Tbilisi does not intend to use force to resolve the conflicts (Radio Tavisupleba, 2022). Despite Tbilisi's position, there is some fear in Abkhazia that Georgia may use force to restore its territorial integrity amid weakening Russian military and international positions (Sharia, 2022). How much this fear will increase depends more on Russia's military success or failure in Ukraine than on Tbilisi's statements (about which there is little trust in Sukhumi).

The weakening of the sense of security is also conditioned by the reports Russia's possible decision to engage the armed forces and volunteers of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region in the war in Ukraine (Kvakhadze, 2022). Russian President, Vladimir Putin, has already agreed to involve fighters from the Middle East in the ongoing hostilities (RIA Novosti, 2022b).

This decision clearly shows that Russia's military campaign in Ukraine is not going according to plan. There are already reports that the process of sending troops from Abkhazia and Tskhinvali to Ukraine has begun; however, the exact number is unknown. The region's de facto Defense Minister, Vladimir Anua, also affirmed the fact that the so-called Abkhaz Armed Forces will assist Russia in Ukraine. A similar statement was made by Anatoly Bibilov, the de facto leader of the Tskhinvali region (Regnum, 2022).

If the Russian intervention in Ukraine ends in failure, it will further worsen the sense of security in Abkhazia since Moscow's support, Russian military units stationed in Abkhazia and the Russian military potential in general is perceived as the main guarantor of the «sovereignty» of the de facto republic. The consequences of the ongoing war in Ukraine and the corresponding geopolitical changes will inevitably affect the Georgian-Abkhazian dialogue as the parties will have to speak from significantly altered starting positions. It will be possible to discuss this topic more thoroughly after the end of the war.

Tskhinvali Region

The previously stated discussion and the factors identified in the case of Abkhazia also partially apply to Tskhinvali, although the ongoing war in Ukraine will have an impact on the region to a lesser degree. First of all, this is due to the main difference between Sukhumi and Tskhinvali - the de facto republic of Abkhazia desires independence while Tskhinvali has officially stated that it wants to join Russia. The region's de facto President, Anatoly Bibilov, has made it clear that the ruling party's goal is to «unite the Ossetian people» as the «main national idea» (Sputnik Ossetia, 2019).

In this sense, the geopolitical shifts that will result from the ongoing war in Ukraine will affect the occupied Tskhinvali region more economically than politically. The de facto government of the Tskhinvali region has no ambition to convince the world of the need to recognize its independence and its main aim is direct integration into the Russian space. Tskhinvali has far fewer resources than Abkhazia for conducting foreign policy and the international recognition of the region is largely based on the 2008 Russia-Georgia war and not on the «struggle for the independence» of the Ossetian people. Consequently, from a political and foreign policy point of

view, neither the positive nor the negative outcome of the war will make any particular difference for Tskhinvali - in both cases, Tskhinvali 's vector and goal will remain unchanged.

Since Tskhinvali is even more economically dependent on Russia than Sukhumi, the war in Ukraine will affect this domain of the region the most. Sanctions related to the Russian aggression and the economic recession forecast by experts (Sonin, 2022) will directly affect the economic situation in the Tskhinvali region. As noted above, Russian Deputy Minister of the Economy, Dmitry Volvach, said on March 10 that the economic dependence of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali on Russia's financial subsidies should be reduced. In this regard, he even named specific percentages which indicates that there is a direct plan in Russia to reduce financial assistance to the regions. If earlier this plan could have been adjusted, the war in Ukraine and the related sanctions have increased the chances of its realization.

Tskhinvali's GDP is estimated at RUB 6.1 billion (USD 51.6 million) while Russia's financial assistance is equivalent to RUB 7.2 billion (USD 60.7 million) (Civil Georgia, 2022). The fact that Russia's financial assistance exceeds the region's GDP is a good indication of the importance of Moscow's subsidies. Unlike Abkhazia, Tskhinvali has neither the ability to diversify its economy nor does it have such a direct source of income as tourism. Therefore, it is expected that the socio-economic situation in the Tskhinvali region will significantly deteriorate with the Russian economic recession and reduced aid. The deterioration of the economic situation may lead to further internal political shifts and changes in the already tense political situation (OC Media, 2020), although the emergence of a force in Tskhinvali that will drastically alter the foreign policy vector is remote.

One of the important issues related to the relations between occupied Tskhinvali and Donbas is the illegal banking activities between the regions (Gukemukhovi, 2019). The de facto government of Tskhinvali recognized the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics in 2014 and established economic ties with them. Through the recognition of the regions by Tskhinvali, an offshore was created with which Russia finances the Donbas region and annexed Crimea while Donbas itself sells minerals to Europe and Turkey. This is an additional income for Tskhinvali which receives funds through banking transactions without any direct intervention in the process. Vladislav Surkov, a former adviser to the Russian president who actively oversaw the affairs of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region, said in

2018 that «South Ossetia’s recognition of Donetsk and Luhansk is vital for the regions continuously under the blockade by Ukraine» (TASS, 2018).

The development of the war will show the extent of the impact the current events in Ukraine will have on Donbas and the Tskhinvali region. As long as Russia controls the Donbas region, nothing threatens financial activities between Donbas and Tskhinvali. However, the deterioration of Russia’s political, economic and military positions may also lead to negative shifts in this domain. First of all, it will precipitate the reduction of banking transactions, directly affecting the Tskhinvali region, while more dramatic developments for Russia will stop this banking activity altogether. Consequently, the fate of this particular source of income for Tskhinvali will be directly linked to the final outcome of Russia’s war against Ukraine.

Primary Conclusions

- Russia’s military aggression in Ukraine and the related sanctions will mostly affect Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali economically. Both regions, as they depend on Russia, should anticipate a sharp deterioration in the socio-economic situation.
- Russia’s military failure in Ukraine directly affects the perception of security in both regions. Sukhumi and Tskhinvali consider Russia as the main guarantor of “sovereignty” and the weakening of Moscow will directly affect them. The expectations of danger in the populations of both regions will further rise if Russia continues calling in local military forces in the war with Ukraine.
- The recognition of the so-called Donetsk and Luhansk People’s Republics by Russia negatively affects the chances of the international recognition of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region. This action by Moscow and the subsequent military intervention reinforced the feeling in the international community that the unrecognized regions were part of Russia’s aggressive foreign policy towards its neighbors and should not be considered as independent events.
- The collapse of the Kremlin’s international image and the restrictions imposed on Russia will directly affect Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region as its partners. These restrictions, including on movement, will further isolate the de facto republics whose main window to the outside world was through Russia.

- Russia's well-documented inhumane crimes against the civilian population of Ukraine, which violates the internationally recognized norms of war, are expected to lead to a deterioration of Russia's image in the regions. It will be difficult to substantiate this assumption with sociological research, although external observation on social networks already allows us to detect a certain trend.
- A drastic change of the foreign policy vector is unlikely in the political classes of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region which are forced to support Russia in all possible situations. However, Russia's military aggression will dramatically change the world's geopolitical situation which will have a direct impact on Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region. If Russia succeeds in Ukraine, their positions will be strengthened, including in the dialogue with Tbilisi, while the opposite may occur in case of failure.

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