

A stylized map of the South Caucasus region, composed of a grid of grey dots. Several dots are highlighted in red, indicating specific locations of interest. The map is centered behind the title and subtitle.

The Russian-Abkhaz Treaty

New Tensions in the South Caucasus

DIETER BODEN
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- The crisis developments in Ukraine have turned the spotlight also on the South Caucasus. It seems that Russia's policy of a resolute pursuit of her own power interests in regions of the former Soviet Union is leading to new tensions there as well. A case in point is the treaty concluded on 24 November between Russia and breakaway Abkhazia on redesigning their strategic partnership.
- This treaty will bind Abkhazia to Russia politically, militarily, economically and socially more than ever before. In a public debate which took place in Abkhazia before the treaty was signed complaints came to the fore which expressed concern about a substantial loss of sovereignty. In response Russia agreed to a number of amendments.
- This will put further strain on the already fragile relations between Russia and Georgia. Georgia has called the treaty a step towards Russia's de facto annexation of Abkhazia. Both the EU and the US have voiced sharp criticism.
- Russia is responding to Georgia's intensified pro-Western course, in particular to the conclusion of an Association and Free Trade Agreement with the EU last June. Russia should have tried first to reach a negotiated solution with all concerned parties – not least Georgia – for the still unresolved conflict with breakaway Abkhazia which to date has been recognized as an independent state by only three states. Instead, Russia set out on an opposite course which inevitably will prove a dead-end. Existing tensions and conflicts in the South Caucasus, far from being eased, might grow. The treaty is also a step backwards for any further democratic development inside Abkhazia.

1. Change of Political Climate in the South Caucasus

The political crisis that has shaken Ukraine since early 2014 had profound repercussions on the rest of Europe. At its origin is a revised foreign and security policy pursued by President Putin which clearly intends to bring back the new states emerged from the ashes of the former Soviet Union into Russia's sphere of interest. It is in this context that the South Caucasus has returned into public attention. Due to three unresolved conflicts concerning Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia and Abkhazia this region had been a focus of instability ever since the beginning 90ies.

The Russian-Georgian war of August 2008 provided a first example for what Russia today considers a resolute pursuit of her own power interests in this region. Not accidentally it was Georgia which was targeted as the post-Soviet state that had embarked most demonstratively on a pro-Western course. However, oncoming bad weather clouds have also been discernable elsewhere in the South Caucasus. A case in point is the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan concerning Nagorno-Karabakh. After a protracted period of relative calm the bloodiest clashes for over 20 years took place along the cease-fire line there in August 2014.

However, it is Georgia that is in the focus of a newly emerging crisis constellation in the South Caucasus. Despite undoubted progress in terms of democracy-building and economic development the country remains unstable as long as the two conflicts concerning the secession of South Ossetia and Abkhazia are unresolved. Since 2013 Russia has been engaged in security measures on the administrative border with South Ossetia which amount to a complete separation of two parts of one country. Something similar is occurring on the Inguri border with Abkhazia. It is hardly by chance that these measures commenced at a time when Georgia was involved in crucial negotiations that led to the conclusion of an association and free trade agreement with the EU.

2. The Russian-Abkhaz Treaty of 24 November 2014

On 13 October a Russian draft for a treaty with Abkhazia on »Alliance and Integration« was published in Sukhumi

the objective being to reshape the political relations between the two partners. There had been indications in preceding weeks and months that such a project was under preparation. The draft immediately met with criticism and indignation, not only in Tbilisi, but also – a novelty – in Sukhumi. In reaction the Abkhaz side put forward an alternative draft with substantial amendments on 30 October.

Even the newly elected Abkhaz president Khazhimba who carries a reputation of being Moscow's man in the job, felt that the Russian draft went too far. Although he did not call the project as such into question he made it clear in a public statement that considerable corrections were necessary. An independent commentator from Abkhazia noted: »Under such a treaty, the only thing left from our independence would be the label »Republic of Abkhazia««.

The treaty on »Alliance and Strategic Partnership« finally signed on 24 November by presidents Putin and Khazhimba takes Abkhaz criticism into account on a number of important points. First, the goal of integration originally contained in the Russian draft has been dropped. In contrast to the Russian draft Abkhaz participation rights are now defined with the creation of joint defence structures. There is a new clause committing Russia to supply modern weaponry. Competences for an envisaged joint coordination center for organs of internal security have been curtailed. A clause which would have made it easy for Russians to obtain Abkhaz citizenship has disappeared. However, provisions on close coordination of foreign policies and harmonization of both legislations on budgetary and customs with a view to their implementation in a future Eurasian Union remain in the text.

That this treaty text replicates to some extent the association and free trade agreement concluded between Georgia and the EU on 27 June is confirmed not least by a series of textual correspondences. Article 6, which concerns the two signatories' obligation to assist each other in the event of an attack replicates Article 5 of the NATO Treaty.

In sum, the treaty of 24 November could lead to a substantial reduction of Abkhaz sovereignty. One might argue that provisions laid down here reflect realities which are already practised on the ground, such as monitoring

of the current administrative borders between Georgia and its breakaway parts which Russia took over after the August war of 2008. However, the new treaty goes beyond that, particularly in its provisions on internal and external security, but also with regard to Abkhazia's foreign policy. This pill is somewhat sweetened by considerable financial pledges made by Russia amounting to some 200 million USD, intended primarily for social purposes, wage increases for public employees and military personnel, and for pensions.

3. Russia's motives

What are the motives which possibly have inspired Russia to initiate such a treaty? First of all it is the association and free trade agreement with the EU which Georgia signed on 27 June, despite Russia's warnings. Among other things it contains far-reaching provisions on integration. At the NATO summit in Wales of 5 September followed a substantial package of measures to prepare for Georgia's accession to NATO agreed in principle in April 2008. The measures include the establishment of a military training centre in Georgia and the holding of joint military exercises. Both steps are clearly aimed at giving new impetus to the process of binding Georgia to the European-Atlantic community.

Russia's security policy has always been conceived in terms of zero-sum games, coupled with the perception of an encirclement by external enemies at her borders. From this viewpoint Georgia's intensified Western course looks like a deliberate attempt to infringe Russian security interests in a geopolitically particularly sensitive region to the south of Russian territory. Thus, the new treaty sends two signals: (i) Georgia's »punishment for ignoring Russian security interests, and (ii) a reminder to the outside world that it is Russia's firm intention to resolutely defend these interests by securing her strategic apron in Abkhazia.

At the same time the treaty makes it clear that Russia is determined to implement this policy even against the resistance of her Abkhaz partners. Such resistance has been noted on other occasions recently: for example, in the case of growing Russian tourism to Abkhazia when demands were articulated that Abkhazia change her legislation in order to facilitate the acquisition of citizenship by foreigners and thereby make it easier for


Russians to purchase real estate. Both Abkhazia's government and parliament have staunchly opposed this commemorating an old trauma: the trauma of an ethnic inundation threatening national identity. The Abkhaz are still well aware of the 1930ies and 1940ies when Stalin gave orders for a massive relocation of Georgians to Abkhazia shifting the ethnic balance at the native Abkhaz' expense.

The new treaty tends to revive such grievances towards the Russian partner. Abkhazia has come to realize that in its bilateral relations it is Russia's priority to take care of her own security interests which are not necessarily in line with those of Abkhazia. The numerous professions of friendship in recent years are seen in a new light. The two diverging drafts for the treaty submitted by both sides have made it manifest that differences of interest do exist between the two partners. It is worth noting that Russia showed readiness to debate these differences in the public arena which is without precedent and could set a new level of transparency for others to emulate.

4. Consequences for Georgia and the South Caucasus

The conclusion of the treaty has put Georgian-Russian relations under further strain. Anti-Russia street demonstrations which took place in Tbilisi in mid-November testify to this. Bilateral relations had already sunk to a low point in the wake of the Russian-Georgian war of August 2008; however, after President Saakashvili was voted out of office in 2012 a process of cautious harmonization had set in, particularly in the economic domain. This process is now in jeopardy and Georgia finds itself in a situation where it would have to square the circle: maintain a consistent course of still closer alignment with her Euro-Atlantic partners and, on the other hand, keep up a dialog with Russia however limited, for the sake of promoting trade and be ready also to discuss issues pertaining to the unresolved secession conflicts. In concrete terms this will apply first of all to the Geneva talks, the only international forum left for direct negotiations among all parties concerned including the two breakaway provinces.

All this does not forebode well for a further peaceful development in the South Caucasus. With the new



treaty, existing tensions and conflicts in this region, far from being eased, tend to be exacerbated, new stability is not gained, but existing instability is heightened. Russia should have tried first to reach a negotiated settlement with all parties concerned – not least Georgia – on the unresolved Abkhaz conflict. Instead, Russia has set out on an opposite course which will inevitably prove a dead-end. Now existing political and military dividing lines will be reinforced which will subsequently also harm Russia, considering the enormous expenses which she will have to shore up for Abkhazia's budget.

There is still another aspect which raises concern: Georgia, and with it the whole region, may be dragged deeper and deeper into a still worsening political confrontation between Russia and the West. Not least the EU should feel challenged to counteract such a development. In this respect, an active commitment of the EU appears more appropriate than ever.

As for Abkhazia, the treaty is also a step backwards. This certainly applies for the international recognition as Abkhazia's prime policy goal which will foreseeably become not easier, but more difficult to achieve. But the treaty may also have an adverse effect on Abkhazia's internal development in terms of restricting those who have tried in recent years to bring democratic elements to bear in public life.

The treaty is obviously based on the premises of a permanent rupture of relations between Georgia and Abkhazia. Indeed, this relationship has been fraught with mistrust, enmity and hatred, particularly since the Georgian-Abkhaz war of 1992-03. However, history shows that this is not irreversible. In the nineteenth century the Abkhaz were among those in the Caucasus who resisted Russian conquest longest and with the greatest resolve. It took several generations to overcome the resulting enmity.

This could be the starting point for a far-sighted policy on behalf of Georgia, a policy which would have to be directed at reconciliation and trust-building *vis-a-vis* the Abkhaz neighbors. What is needed here is a long-term and sustained effort. Not only would this policy improve the near-term prospects of the Geneva talks, but over time Abkhazia would be enabled to relieve the pressure of being solely dependent on Russia as a partner. Looking further ahead, a democratic and

economically prospering Georgia could develop into an attractive partner for Abkhazia which could ultimately also pave the way towards Europe.



About the author

Dieter Boden has a Doctor's degree in slavic literatures and is a retired German diplomate with many years of experience in Russia, Eastern Europe and the Caucasus. He was posted repeatedly to diplomatic missions in Russia and the former USSR, i.a. as Consul General in St. Petersburg. As an Ambassador he headed the German OSCE Representation in Vienna from 2002 to 2005. Before, he was at the helm of the OSCE mission in Georgia (1995/6) and acted as the UN Secretary General's Special Representative in Georgia and Head of UNOMIG (1999 to 2002). He was in charge of OSCE/ODIHR election observation missions to observe the municipal elections in Moldova (2007) and presidential elections in Georgia (2008). In 2009/10 he was Special Advisor to the Government of Kazakhstan in Astana. From 2006 to 2013 he served as an Adjunct Professor at the University of Potsdam, Department of International Relations.

Dr. Boden has published extensively on international affairs and Russian literature.

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Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung | Division for International Dialogue
Department of Central and Eastern Europe
Hiroshimastraße 28 | 10785 Berlin | Germany

Responsible:
Dr. Reinhard Krumm
Head of Department of Central and Eastern Europe

Tel.: +49-30-269-35-7726 | Fax: +49-30-269-35-9250
www.fes.de/international/moe

To order publications:
info.moe@fes.de

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