



Bagapsh tries to preserve independence in politics. Georgian political scientist Mamuka Areshidze in an interview for DespiteBorders

Martin Braxatoris | 19.12.2008

Mamuka Areshidze is Georgian political scientist specialising in the questions of Caucasus. He works as the Director of the Caucasian Centre of Strategic Research. In November 2008, he founded the social organisation the House of Free Opinion. In an interview for the portal Despite Borders he answered questions pertaining to the political situation in Abkhazia.

From the point of view of stability, what is the situation in Abkhazia like today?

Stability is virtual in a sense. Speaking of the north of Abkhazia, we may say that there's a relative calm. As far as southern Abkhazia is concerned, this doesn't hold true. There are conflicts among Georgian police, Russian soldiers and Abkhaz troops under way along the administrative border between Abkhazia and Georgia. There's a peculiar situation along the frontier with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It's similar to Nagorno-Karabakh. There are armed people on both sides who did fight against one another only yesterday. However, there's nothing between them which would ensure their separation. Authorised European control group has been dealing with the situation. In reality, however, the situation is too complicated for an ultimate separation of enemy groups.

With the exception of Malkhaz Akishbaia's Government, are there any authorities which Georgia is willing to negotiate with?

The current Georgian Government has to talk to everybody in order to solve certain problems which the country has been facing. In view of these problems, it simply must negotiate with



them no matter if it wants to or not. Today, there are negotiations under way in Geneva participated in also by the delegations of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgian authorities have no choice but to talk with them.

How did Abkhaz authorities accept the recognition of independence from Russian side?

Abkhazia was in a state of strong euphoria following the recognition of independence. In principle people were satisfied with what had happened and just two or three per cent of the inhabitants thought that it wouldn't go thus much smoothly. Particularly in the south of Abkhazia there are many people who assume that their country is occupied. People in Sukhumi are even of the opinion that Russian soldiers in the Gali region behave as if at home. That's why many Abkhazians say that they didn't expect such behaviour and consider independence to be an ephemeral phenomenon. Nevertheless, there are several positive features: the Abkhazians are hoping that the border with Russia will be opened for them. They also envisage certain economic and financial advantages from Russian side.

In contrast to South Ossetia, authorities in Abkhazia have been established without the direct participation of the Russian Federation. To what degree are these loyal to Moscow?

They're loyal to Moscow, but in contrast to South Ossetia, Abkhaz authorities pursue more pro-Abkhaz policy when compared, shall we say, to Kokoity's pro-Ossetian one. Kokoity is a genuine puppet in Moscow's hands whereas Bagapsh tries to preserve independence in politics. This is seen also as regards latest statements concerning Russian base in Ochamchir. Even during the war, he tried to pursue independent policy and not to attack the Kodori pass unless the situation was clarified. Bagapsh isn't trusted in Russia, that's nothing new.



Moscow supported another candidate in presidential elections. Bagapsh managed to win thanks to the support of the Abkhaz and Georgian nation. The presence of the Russian MP and Deputy Chairperson of the Defence and Security Committee Kolesnikov in Gudauta attests to Moscow's mistrust.

Does Moscow keep on supporting Bagapsh's rival candidate Khadjimba?

No, he's a political figure with whom Moscow was disappointed. If Moscow is to back somebody directly in the future, it will be most probably the Foreign Affairs Minister Shamba. He has been in office for a very long time and has good links also in the West.

They say Bagapsh could bring himself into conflict with Moscow's interests. Can this pertain also to Shamba?

Bagapsh is such a sort of person rather than Shamba. Shamba is a typical Caucasian figure. He's very versatile and acts in "an eastern way". He's capable of behaving like a typical eastern diplomat on the basis of real needs. He does what is necessary. He acts on according to the nature of the given situation. Bagaps is more pro-Abkhaz in comparison with him.

How do you perceive the information on Kolesnikov's possible candidacy for president brought by the media?

I don't think that it's the final stance of the Kremlin. Moscow won't make such a mistake in order to install a Russian as the head of a national republic. After Stalin's death, there hasn't been such precedent in national republics yet. I assume that it's a plan contrived by a part of



Kremlin's elites which is meant to intimidate the Abkhaz political establishment, which, in contrast to the Ossatian one, strives to protect national interests.

What are the principles of unofficial power division in Abkhazia like from the standpoint of the family or confession descent of leaders?

By the time when Ardzinba was the president, the most important clan was Ardzinba. Ardzinba was the President, Ardzinba was the director of the port, Ardzinba was the head of wood industry, Ardzinba was the most famous and most important entrepreneur... Everything mentioned was in the hands of the Ardzinba clan. However, such a clan power division, in terms of which people ruled on the basis of their clan origin, is absent in Abkhazia nowadays. As far as the question of confession descent is concerned, power is constituted by the Christians or the Atheists. With the exception of a small group, there aren't any ardent Muslims in Abkhazia. After their leader was removed last year, this group has grown weaker as well. Muslims don't take first place in Abkhazia, the more so that they are outnumbered by Christian Armenians.

Does it mean that the Islam factor doesn't play such an important role in Abkhazia? Could this been changed by the initiative for the return of the descendants of Abkhaz mujaheddins?

It doesn't represent real power in politics at present. Russia categorically refuses the return of the descendants of mujaheddins because it wants to prevent the strengthening of the Islam factor. There's also a numerous Armenian community in Abkhazia which has always been against this step. When Abkhazia was a black hole, as it were, the Armenians tried to prevent it actively. Now they have possibilities. They have been running small and medium



businesses independently in contrast to the past when exclusively Abkhazians were the top representatives of enterprises. As for the return of the descendants of mujaheddins, Russia backs actively the Armenians referring all the time to the fact that a considerable part of the inhabitants of Abkhazia, i.e. the Russians and the Armenians, disapprove of such a step.

Does the influence of the members of the Ardzinba clan linger up to the present time?

This clan has been destroyed. Levan Ardzinba, the best known Abkhaz entrepreneur, has been killed. In Moscow, also Aka Ardzinba was shot. He was the former chief of anti-terrorist centre known for his bloodthirstiness in relation to the Georgians in times when he fought against Georgian partisans. This clan was executed in political sense although economic influence still lasts to some extent.

What are the most important representatives of the so-called Gudauta clan?

First of all it is Bagapsh, naturally, but also Ankvab and Shamba. Khadjimba plays certain minor role too. Lakoba and some other persons can be regarded as important persons as well. In the present situation, this clan has been internally consolidated in spite of the fact that these people are of different family descent. This happened because they were forced by Russian authorities to appoint people of Russian nationality to important posts in the country. If they weren't internally organised, the Russian would push them away. There are too many of them in the Government. Abkhaz ethnic minority has been losing its positions year after year. The Abkhazians have been struggling for consolidation now in order to save themselves from Russian humanitarian aggression.



The establishment of the movement Aruaa was backed by Shamba as well as Khadjimba. In this year's June, however, this organisation criticised the Government's policy voicing distrust of it. Is it an opposition organisation?

It's an organisation created artificially for the purpose of upholding Khadjimba in presidential elections. We may say that it's a kind of opposition force, but I don't think that it has such a substantial influence that it could change the situation radically given that the influence of Russia has been growing radically in Abkhazia.

Then how shall we perceive the recent designation of the leader of this organisation as the president's adviser? Does it mean its reinforcement?

I wouldn't say so. I think that Bagapsh is to attract people who are in relative opposition at the moment through the designation. As for Bagapsh, it's important that all similar organisations unite the people around him. Therefore I consider it a quite normal, logical step. The winning of new members for this organisation is one of Bagapsh's primary goals.

Four MPs of the Abkhaz Parliament are considered to be the representatives of the Opposition. What are their objectives like and what does their opposition character consist in?

I'd prefer not to speak about these people. But I can say that in the Abkhaz political establishment a part of predominantly young politicians, who see that the current situation in Abkhazia leads to the erasing of Abkhaz ethnic minority, has been crystallising. They're convinced that the wavering Abkhaz authorities make too many concessions to Russian soldiers and the Kremlin. Nonetheless, I have to say that the opposition remains a



conventional concept. I don't think that it is a real opposition. But in my opinion, such an opposition will appear in Abkhazia soon. It's not ruled out that also people, who you are inquiring about, will be involved in it.

The representatives of Gali Georgians in the Abkhaz Parliament shape themselves neither as pro-governmental politicians nor as opposition ones. According to himself Levan Ubiriya is a citizen of Abkhazia and will do everything so that this state prospers. Is the Georgian community in Abkhazia loyal to Sukhumi?

A part of Georgian community is really loyal to Sukhumi. Those mentioned are inconspicuous people who don't mean practically anything. They are prominent officials of Abkhaz authorities. In post-Soviet states it's a kind of practice that national minorities are allowed to enter parliament where their representatives are rooted to the spot. By the way, such minority representatives are also in the Georgian Parliament. In connection with loyalty, I have to mention that these people are forced to live there. What they are saying before the Abkhazians is one thing, but what they are saying behind their back is something completely different. Obviously, there are people who are thus much tired of perpetual tension that they are forced to be loyal to current Abkhaz authorities. But there are also people who haven't reconciled with this idea and find the contemporary Abkhaz regime unacceptable.

Aside from Abkhaz and Russian entrepreneurs, who else has prominent position in Abkhaz business? In what way do, for instance, Turkish entrepreneurs penetrate Abkhaz market?

The Turks, of course, are active there despite certain protests of the Georgian side. It is mainly private companies owned by the Turkish Abkhazians. As far as I'm concerned, the

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Bulgarians, who constructed a tobacco plant in Gudauta, worked in Abkhazia in the 1990s. After the death of Levan Ardzinba, however, they left.

Some time ago, Ankara stated that it wouldn't prevent the restoration of sea connection between Turkey and Abkhazia. To what extent is the restoration of sea transport on official level probable?

It's ruled out on official level. Nevertheless, there used to be sea connection and there will be sea connection. In my opinion, the level of private freight traffic or another sea communication won't be changed in any way.

We may expect that Georgia will protest as regards further entry of foreign investors into Abkhaz market. Can we also expect certain Russian steps which are to prevent the entry of foreign companies into Abkhaz market?

Obviously, Russia will make effort so that Abkhaz economy remains closed for foreign companies. If the economy crisis allows it, it will try to invest in Abkhazia such an amount of financial means that there will be simply no place left for the others. Russia plans to deploy its fleet and two military bases in Abkhazia. I think that Abkhazia will be completely occupied by Russian capital. Predominantly on the eve of the Olympic Games, the Russian won't allow in anybody.

As for the fact that Georgia is going to defend itself against the entry of foreign companies into Abkhaz market, an act aimed against such companies is being prepared at the moment in terms of which the companies' activities will be unlawful. Of course, these companies will find a way how to circumvent the law. They will found subsidiaries in tax heavens. Anyway,



there's also another problem. Russian banks dealing with laundering dirty money will be opened in Abkhazia. This was the case also in the past, however, it will be under way on a semi-official level now.

What makes the current situation really different?

That time we were successful. Today, however, Georgia as a state, which has lost the war, has rather limited possibilities how to intervene in this process. Unless western financial structures pay thorough attention to the problem, Abkhazia will turn into a country of unlawful financial operations.