

Elections in Abkhazia – Illegal but Meaningful

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Introduction

Considering the global COVID-19 pandemic and the measures Georgia has taken to fight it, few Georgians have paid much attention to the presidential elections in Abkhazia, a region which many usually only remember thanks to the road signs installed along Georgia's main motorway.



Image 1: Banner across Georgia's E60 motorway ('Let us remember Abkhazia')



Image 2: Road sign giving directions to Sokhumi

This is an issue concerning which emotions, on one hand, and pragmatic and rational approaches on the other, should co-exist. However, the latter require at the very least more information on ongoing events in Abkhazia, and preferably a regular analysis of developments in the region. This article aims to meet the minimum standard, i.e. to provide some basic information on the extraordinary presidential elections which took place in Abkhazia on the 22nd of March 2020.

To keep it simple, we must clarify that, as far as Georgia and the international community are concerned, Abkhazia is an occupied region of Georgia, an unrecognized (or barely recognized) republic governed by an occupier with the participation of a *de facto* government. Any election in Abkhazia, including the one considered here, is therefore illegal—yet the illegality of these presidential elections does not render them politically and socially irrelevant, nor does it mean that

Georgian society and politics should simply ignore them. As representatives of Georgian society, we believe that they should be considered very carefully.

The Path to the 2020 Extraordinary Elections

Until now, Abkhazia has had four presidents. The first was the (in)famous Vladislav Ardzinba, who governed the region for over 10 years until 2005. The second, Sergey Baghapsh, led Abkhazia from 2005 to 2011, and was succeeded by Alexander Ankvab, who headed the region until he was forced to resign in 2014. The last president, Raul Khajimba—the least desirable of the four, if Georgia may express any preference in the matter—was subsequently re-elected for a second term in 2019 but was forced to leave office early in January 2020. His terms in office were rather unstable, mainly because the 2019 elections were held without the participation of the most popular candidate, Aslan Bzhania, who was allegedly poisoned on political grounds and was undergoing treatment in clinics in Russia and Germany. He was replaced by opposition leader Alkhaz Kvitsinia, who did quite well in the elections: in the first round, Kvitsinia was barely 2% behind Khajimba, and only 1% (fewer than 1,000 votes) behind in the second round.



Image 3 – Campaign poster of Alkhaz Kvitsinia



Image 4 – Raul Khajimba

Despite Kvitsinia's appeal against the legitimacy of the election's results, Moscow clearly indicated that it supported Khajimba's presidency: Russian president Vladimir Putin immediately congratulated Khajimba on his victory, and Russian financial assistance to Abkhazia (which had been withheld until then) was suddenly made available. Despite this, however, the validity of the 2019 elections continued to be disputed and appealed against (under *de facto* Abkhazian law); local courts were subsequently unable (or unwilling) to resolve the matter until January 2020.

Disregarding these legal actions, the *status quo* was maintained—i.e. despite the numerous violations that marred the 2019 elections, Khajimba remained in power—but Abkhazia's economic difficulties and a drive-by shooting in Sokhumi in November led the opposition to launch a campaign of protest against Khajimba on the 9th of January 2020. This campaign was mounted by the 'Amtsakhara' and 'United Abkhazia' opposition parties and was led by Akhra Avidzba (who, suspiciously, was awarded the title of 'Hero of the Donetsk People's Republic') and Aslan Bzhania, who returned to Sokhumi that very morning.

In short, on January 9-10, Alkhaz Kvitsinia requested that the judge who had been given the task of ruling on the legitimacy of the 2019 presidential elections (which Kvitsinia had lost by 1% of the vote) be dismissed; members of the opposition broke into the presidential administration building; the *de facto* minister of defence declared that the army would not take action against the people; Khajimba considered the possibility of organizing a counter-rally, but changed his mind, influenced by Vladimir Putin's personal advisor on relationships with Abkhazia, South Ossetia and Ukraine, Vladislav Surkov, and by the deputy secretary of the Security Council of the Russian Federation, Rashid Nurgaliyev, who had both immediately travelled to Sokhumi; Abkhazia's highest court invalidated the results of the 2019 presidential elections; Khajimba began to appeal against this ruling, but his Russian 'guests' once again made him change his mind; and it was announced that extraordinary elections would be held on the 22nd of March 2020; elections in which Khajimba refused (or was made to refuse) to participate.

Before we discuss these extraordinary presidential elections and their candidates, we should point out that one more thing happened before the 22nd of March: Aslan Bzhania was poisoned (again), but managed to recover in time to take part in the elections.

The So-called Candidates

Abkhazia's 2020 presidential elections officially had three candidates, but only two of them stood a real chance of winning. Leonid Dziapshba's presidential prospects were considered nil: his political career had never met with any success, and his reputation had been damaged by allegations of corruption. He could expect to win between 3 and 6 per cent of the vote. The two main candidates were thus Adgur Ardzinba and Aslan Bzhania.

Ardzinba had been appointed minister of the economy by Khajimba, and could be described as a young and talented person with quite extraordinary economic initiatives. His surname and the clan he represented gave him a certain popularity as a candidate, but, essentially, if Bzhania participated in the elections, then his rivals would only have a slim chance of success. This was probably the reason why the Ardzinba clan did not put forward a more serious political figure to oppose Bzhania, as the losing candidate would be demoralized and would stand to lose some of his popularity.

Bzhania is indeed a more interesting figure. Of Abkhaz origin from the Ochamchira district of Abkhazia, he represents the Abzhua community, and like many of Abkhazia's other former presidents or presidential candidates, he has a KGB background. In 2014, Bzhania lost the elections to Khajimba, and had been waiting for his chance ever since. He did business in Russia from time to time, and was engaged in Abkhaz public affairs. From the Georgian perspective, there are several things that should be mentioned while speaking of Bzhania: Firstly, he represents the group assembled around former president Alexander Ankvab, who was considered to have been

one of the most loyal presidents towards Georgia (i.e. the least anti-Georgian) and is due to become Abkhazia's new prime minister. The second aspect is his attitude towards the population of Abkhazia's Gali district. Ankvab, Bzhania's ally, was the president who issued Abkhazian passports to the Georgian population of Gali (which was also positive in current circumstances). And lastly, Bzhania has clearly spoken of the need to establish a dialogue with Georgia's central government, irrespective of the format. This statement was received with interest in Tbilisi and is considered quite positive, but Bzhania was not the first to mention the possibility of such a dialogue; both Sergey Shamba (a veteran Abkhaz politician and former *de facto* foreign minister) and Ankvab expressed a similar wish.

Elections and Figures

Despite many potential obstacles, including the COVID-19 pandemic and the absence of 'electoral observers', Abkhazia's 2020 extraordinary presidential elections were duly held. Their result was easily foreseeable: Bzhania won the elections in the first round with almost 57% of the vote, while Ardzinba trailed 21 points behind. Bzhania was duly congratulated by his competitors, by Putin and by the breakaway regions of various post-Soviet states.

As geography, figures and statistics are of great importance to the question of Abkhazia, some key data should be considered. Firstly, a turnout of 76% of Abkhazia's electorate generated 97,000 votes, indicating that the region is home to around 131,000 voters—a rather low figure compared to Abkhazia's claim of a total population of around 245,000. In other words, having only 131,000 citizens aged 18 or over is unrealistic. Researchers working to elucidate this discrepancy also point to the fact that the number of ethnic Abkhazians mysteriously increased by 27,000 between 2003 and 2011 (i.e. from around 95,000 to 122,000), whereas figures for all the other ethnic groups decreased or remained stable. Another question this discrepancy raises concerns the political activity of voters in Abkhazia's Gali district, whose turnout was apparently 69%; this high figure seems strange, as the district's inhabitants are predominantly ethnic Georgians and not that interested in Abkhaz politics. But the interesting point here is that a turnout of 69% in Gali amounted to only 800 voters: any informed observer would initially think that a zero is missing, as Gali should definitely be home to more than a mere 1,200 voters. The district is approximately home to 30,000 people, but only a few of them have Abkhazian citizenship (i.e. hold an Abkhaz passport). This is why the high turnout of Gali voters represented a mere 800 votes. The fate of 98% of the district's Georgian inhabitants and the degree of their participation in Abkhazia's political and economic life is, however, a separate subject, but it is nevertheless one that played an important role in these elections given the fact that Bzhania's attitude towards this question is one of the defining features of his politics.

What is expected of Bzhania?

Abkhazia (including its Georgian inhabitants), the Russian Federation and Georgia all have their own expectations of Bzhania's presidency. Let us briefly describe these, each in turn:

Abkhaz expectations are mostly a decrease in the levels of crime and corruption and an improved economic situation. The latter goal, to a certain extent, implies the region becoming less dependent on Russia, developing its own manufacturing and agriculture sectors, and diversifying its economic relations (including efforts to strengthen economic relations with Tbilisi and restoring transport and logistics networks passing through Georgia, etc.).

The Georgian population of Abkhazia is primarily interested in being granted equal status to the *de facto* state's other citizens, as this would to some extent improve their security, help protect their rights and increase their representation in public life. In order to achieve this, however, they need to be allowed to obtain citizenship of Abkhazia without having to renounce their Georgian citizenship, particularly as this would also give them the right to freely cross the administrative border, thereby resolving most of the problems they face (economic, humanitarian, education etc.). Any other goal than dual citizenship, however, seems less realistic at this point.

Russia has one main interest in Abkhazia at this stage: stability and maintaining the *status quo* (for the time being at least). Russia considers it unlikely that pro-Georgian forces will emerge in Abkhazia and will shape politics there, especially given the fact that the Russian occupation regime maintains effective control over its territory, nor does Russia expect that any Abkhazian governor will express interest in uniting with Russia. Considering this, Moscow did not bet on their favourite, Khajimba, whom they could have saved had they wanted to, but instead respected the free will of Abkhaz society, which replaced Khajimba with a less pro-Russian politician. Russian interests may of course change over time, however, and Moscow might one day be convinced of the need to directly annex Abkhazia, but until that happens Russia will have to continue to pursue her sometimes complicated balancing act.

In addition, Russia also has other wishes, interests and demands at other, less strategic levels. First among these is obtaining the right for Russian citizens to purchase land and immovable property in Abkhazia: currently, Russians are not allowed to own any substantial property in Abkhazia, which hinders them from doing business there. A second interest might be the development and construction of the so-called 'Sokhumi Military Road project linking Karachay-Cherkessia to Abkhazia over the Caucasus range, as this would integrate Abkhazia more firmly within the Russian Federation. A third priority involves ensuring that Russian companies are able to access Abkhazia's natural resources, especially along the region's Black Sea continental shelf.

As for Georgia, Tbilisi's interests luckily align with those of the *de facto* government in Sokhumi, particularly as they both seek to confront Russian ambitions. That said, Moscow's desire to maintain its 'big brother' status prevents it from taking coercive measures against Abkhazia in pursuit of its aims; Russia has been testing the waters for three decades now, waiting until the Abkhaz are ready to obey.



Image 5 – The Sokhumi Military Road Project

Despite this apparent alignment, however, in our opinion it would be very difficult to define the expectations of Georgia's central government. Neither the previous nor the current Georgian government are ready to talk directly to Abkhazia, arguing that the region's *de facto* independence is illegal under international law and that nothing can therefore be discussed with them. Georgia's official position is that Abkhazia is an occupied territory (which is obvious) and that the only actor present there is the Russian Federation, which effectively occupies and controls the region. But this approach, however principled, also has some disadvantages: like it or not—and regardless of whether or not the region is fully, substantially or partially controlled by the Russian Federation—Abkhazia has existed for almost thirty years now. It has its own complex, heterogeneous society, whose interests and views cannot be disregarded. Nor should one forget that this small, diverse and traumatized region should be given credit for trying to be democratic despite its occupation. Ironically, Abkhazia, which lives in parallel but separate from us, maintains a higher level of democracy than many post-Soviet countries, including its occupier.

Well or badly, Abkhaz society manages to: change government through elections (or bloodless coups); maintain a local *de facto* judiciary which plays a role in the political process; maintain a relatively strong political opposition; guarantee freedom of expression (to a certain extent); maintain a relatively strong ombudsman (whose administration is quite active in observing the rights of the inhabitants of the Gali district, by the way); maintain an atmosphere in which the

newly elected *de facto* president was congratulated by his political rivals; and create obstacles capable of preventing Russia from fully intervening.

The fact that the Abkhaz enjoy a working civil society makes it possible for Georgians to speak to them, and will make cohabitation easier if the region is ever reintegrated; in this regard, the real problem would have been discovering that there is nobody to talk to besides Russia. However paradoxical it may sound, Abkhazia, even at the level of the *de facto* government, protects Abkhazia from full-scale Russian domination (e.g. by forbidding Russians from purchasing land), and Georgians and Abkhaz are therefore ultimately in the same boat with common goals and security concerns. A recent example of undeclared mutual support took place when the Russian Federation attempted to annex the village of Aibga, located on the border between Abkhazia (i.e. Georgia) and Russia. The *de facto* Abkhaz government attempted to settle the matter through direct communication and resistance, whilst the Georgian government brought the issue to the attention of the international community (which the *de facto* authorities in Sokhumi were not in position to do).

As Bzhania explained in various interviews he gave after his election, he supports a more sensible approach to sensitive matters. He obviously has his own agenda, which includes seeking greater international recognition of Abkhazia's independence, but he understands that this cannot be negotiated with Georgia. He also realizes why Tbilisi does not want to talk with him directly, and that the Georgian government will continue to try to prevent any kind of legitimation of the *de facto* authorities in Sokhumi.

In response, Bzhania believes that the question of Abkhazia's status should be set aside, and that Sokhumi and Tbilisi should instead discuss other, more negotiable issues. He confirms that, whether some parts of Abkhaz society like it or not, the region has important economic, humanitarian and human ties with the rest of Georgia, and that they cannot escape this reality. Equally, Georgia cannot escape the fact that Abkhazia has its own society and its own wishes, interests and positions, ignoring which would jeopardize any prospects of future cohabitation and integration. Such a risk cannot be mitigated by empty declarations referring to 'our Abkhaz brothers and sisters', a phrase which we have been hearing for ages.

In conclusion, following Bzhania's election (and especially after Khajimba's term as president), it seems that Georgia now has a more sensible interlocutor with whom to discuss matters. But the real question is whether or not Georgia will be able to overcome various challenges on the path to defining an effective forum and a clear agenda for dialogue in a way that does not damage Tbilisi's policy of denying international recognition of its occupied regions while seeking recognition of their occupation instead— a central and largely successful axis of Georgian foreign policy for the past 12 years.