

The Presidential Elections in Abkhazia

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There is a joke circulating in Abkhazia about the presidents of Abkhazia and South-Ossetia, the independence of which was endorsed by Russia in 2008 – they fulfil the same roles as Belka and Strelka, the Soviet space dogs whom scientists sent to orbit the Earth in order to find out whether living creatures could actually survive out there.

The first major survival test for Abkhazian President Sergey Bagapsh will come on the day of presidential elections, December 12, when he will fight for re-election. Bagapsh became the leader of Abkhazia in 2004 against Russia's will but, in the end, via a Moscow-mediated compromise. His main opponents are Raul Khajimba, his rival from the 2004 elections, who was then backed by Moscow and who became vice president under Bagapsh after the compromise, and Beslan Butba, who represents the new pro-economic opposition.

The team of the current president: Its problems and programme

President Sergey Bagapsh was somewhat hesitant to stand for re-election. Several reforms and changes that had been planned during the 2004 election campaign had not been implemented. Since then, his team has undergone a transformation which, however, has not improved it. The developments of August 2008 were, indeed, of historical importance, pushing the president's popularity temporarily to new heights. At the same time, these events greatly restricted his freedom of choice in terms of foreign policy. The fact that he was not the Kremlin's favourite in 2004, when the candidate who had Russia's backing won the elections, had also its role to play.

Sergey Bagapsh was born in 1949. Having graduated from a secondary school in Sukhumi, he continued his studies at the Georgian University of Subtropical Agriculture. He completed his military service. Since 1972, he led the Abkhazian agronomical department of an essential oils factory in Moscow. At the same time, he launched his career in the Komsomol. In 1976–1978, he was an instructor of the Abkhazian regional committee of the Komsomol; in 1978, he was chief of the information department of the central committee of the Georgian Komsomol; in 1979, he headed the department of working and country youths; in 1980, he became first secretary of the Abkhazian regional committee of the Komsomol. In 1981, he joined the Georgian Communist Party; in 1982, he became Secretary General of the Communist Party in the Ochamchira district. Even before the active phase of the armed conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia began, he had formed a group of voluntary fighters in Ochamchira. He got a neck wound in the first days of the war. In 1992, he was appointed First Deputy Prime Minister of Abkhazia, which had declared itself independent from Georgia. He participated in an attack on Sukhumi in the autumn of 1993. In 1995, he was again appointed Deputy Prime Minister; in 1995–1999, he was Prime Minister. In 1999–2004, he was Director General of the Abkhazian energy company ChernomorEnerg. Since 2005, he is President of Abkhazia.

Despite all that, Bagapsh announced his candidacy soon after Khajimba's resignation from the post of vice president in May 2009, as this step, together with Khajimba's intention to run for president, would have allowed the old elite to regain the power position that it had lost in 2004. In addition, Bagapsh had attracted a circle of sympathisers, who would have had a lot to lose, if other forces came to power, and who

were therefore quite interested in his candidacy and possible election victory.

It should be pointed out that under Bagapsh's rule, the political culture in Abkhazia has become much more transparent and open than before, allowing opposition parties and the media to operate freely. This suggests that even if Bagapsh loses, the nation will not be faced with a similar crisis as in 2004.

Although Bagapsh's popularity allegedly grew to as high as 80% after the events in August 2008, his success has started to decline slightly because people have realised that he did not play a significant role in securing the recognition of Abkhazia's independence and in other developments as well. Still, it is the current president's political baggage that gains him several plus points in the eyes of the public.

Similarly, the upturn of the economic situation is one more feather in his cap: Abkhazia's budget has grown by more than four times (4 billion roubles in 2010), together with a tenfold increase in the number of Russian tourists (about 800,000 in 2009). The key driving force behind this surge in economic activity has been the relationship with Russia. The conclusion of strategic agreements with two Russian corporations is under way: one with Rosneft, which will grant Rosneft oil prospecting rights on the Abkhazian coast of the Black Sea and will allow it to establish a chain of petrol stations in the country (one noteworthy feature of Rosneft is that one of its leaders is Igor Sechin, who is a very close ally of Russian Prime Minister Vladimir Putin), and another with Russian Railways, which will make it possible to restore the railway network in Abkhazia that partly has not functioned since the war in Abkhazia, thus giving a boost to transit flows from Armenia through Georgia and drawing more Russian tourists to the country. In recent months, active preparations have been made to launch a grand-scale privatisation campaign, which is hoped to attract significant investments.

On the other hand, the passport issue in the Gali region works to Bagapsh's disadvantage. In addition to Kodori, this region still has a large population of Georgians. The official reason for handing out passports to the residents of the region was the integration of the population of the whole republic, but critics point to the fact that Gali residents were Bagapsh's ardent supporters in 2004. (It is typical of Abkhazians not to award citizenship to people who fought against their country in the 1992–1993 war. Moreover, an Abkhazian citizen may not hold the citizenship of any other country, especially Georgia. There is one exception to this rule – Russia.)

According to different estimates, passports are to be handed out to 40,000–80,000 people. Bagapsh's critics emphasise that like the war in 1992–1993, this step could lead to a radical change in the country's citizenship balance; the more so as it is taken to appease Georgia, thus supporting the allegations, which surfaced already in 2004, of him being pro-Georgian. The fact that his wife is Georgian provides further proof to the allegations, but nonetheless they should not be taken too seriously. So, the issuing of passports in the Gali region has been postponed until next year, i.e. after the elections, which has disproved some of the allegations, but decreased the number of Bagapsh's potential supporters in the region as well: there were 14,000 people

eligible to vote in the 2004 elections in Gali, but today their number has fallen to 3,000–3,500.

In addition, Bagapsh has been reproached for his conduct in 2006, when the Georgian armed forces established their control over a part of the Kodori Gorge. This move was followed by negotiations between Abkhazian and Georgian authorities, which were held to regulate the situation. However, taking into account the fact that as a result of the events in August 2008 the entire Kodori Valley has been rendered to Abkhazia, these allegations have lost their credibility.

The positions of Bagapsh and his vice presidential running mate – current Prime Minister Alexander Ankvab – have become slightly less secure due to Abkhazian-Russian relations: although the relationship has improved significantly under their rule, it is still not completely reliable and solid for the reason that Bagapsh has ousted Russia's candidate from power. Moscow is especially suspicious of Ankvab, who is former Deputy Interior Minister of Georgia. From Bagapsh's point of view, it was a wise move to engage Ankvab as his vice presidential candidate because Bagapsh and many other members of the current elite come from the eastern part of Abkhazia, while Ankvab represents the western part where he is, however, not very popular.

Moreover, the leaving of several prominent supporters has weakened the Bagapsh camp. His team is currently led by Ankvab, while United Abkhazia, a political party, which enjoys a majority in the parliament and which submitted Bagapsh's candidacy in the current elections, dictates the rules of the game. Although Bagapsh's popularity among non-governmental organisations might (but need not) have decreased, he is firmly endorsed by the power structures of the country, which expressed their support already during the 2004 crisis. In addition, Bagapsh has difficulties refuting allegations of nepotism: his older brother, his son, several relatives and close allies are involved in profitable business ventures.

Despite all the allegations, Bagapsh's foreign policy has never been pro-Georgian. To the contrary, its main objective has been to establish a solid base for Abkhazia's independence. Until the year 2008, Bagapsh, Ankvab and their supporters tried to pursue a multidirectional foreign policy by developing their relations not only with Russia, but with Turkey (where many Abkhazian refugees live), the EU and many other nations as well. Since August 2008, Russia has expressed its dislike towards such a policy. Nevertheless, it is clear that a crisis regulation plan cannot be formulated without the participation of at least Georgia, which could be secured by involving international mediators. And it is definitely Bagapsh's team, which is the most willing to do so.

The problems and programme of the opposition

The opposition forces in Abkhazia have not managed to put forward a common candidate, although this option was kept open until the very last moment and will stay open during the potential second round of voting, providing a serious counterbalance to Bagapsh's performance: if he cannot win in the first round, it is possible that a united opposition could take its victory in the second round. At the moment, however,

there is a clear divide between those opposition members who support Khajimba and those who support Butba.

Raul Khajimba was born in 1958 in an Abkhazian town called Tkvarcheli. In 1975, he graduated from a local school and worked as a locksmith. In 1976–1978, he fulfilled his military service and after that continued to work as a locksmith, while he was also active on the regional committee of the Komsomol in Tkvarcheli. In 1979, he began his law studies at the State University of Abkhazia, graduated in 1984 and worked as a legal advisor at a chemistry plant in Sukhumi. In 1985–1986, he studied at a KGB academy in Minsk and was employed by the KGB in Tkvarcheli in 1986–1992. During the Abkhaz-Georgian war in 1992–1993, he led intelligence and counter-intelligence activities on the eastern front. He was awarded the Order of Leon, the highest-ranking award in Abkhazia, for wartime services. After the war, in 1993–1995, he led a department of the Abkhazian National Security Service; in 1995–1996, he was a chauffeur for an international humanitarian organisation; in 1996–1998, he was Head of the Counter-Trafficking Department of the Abkhazian Customs Committee. In 1998, he became Deputy Chief of the Customs Committee. In 1999–2001, he led the Abkhazian National Security Service, while being First Deputy Prime Minister up to 2003. In 2002–2003, he served as Abkhazian Defence Minister and in 2003–2004 as Prime Minister. He became Vice President in February 2005 and resigned in May 2009.

The opposition forces led by Khajimba represent the so-called old opposition, which formed already under Ardzinba's rule. It seems that Khajimba has also retained the support of Russian Prime Minister Putin, although the latter declared on a visit to Abkhazia in August 2009 that Russia intended to continue its cooperation with the current Abkhazian authorities, supplementing this statement with a call for the opposition to seek a compromise. Khajimba's weak point is the fact that some members of the old opposition do not trust him because he was, after all, Bagapsh's vice president for four years. In addition, memories of his loss in the 2004 elections still tarnish his reputation.

The forces that gather around Beslan Butba are called the new opposition. These are mostly men who have stopped brooding over the Independence War in 1992–1993 and who prefer to focus on economic growth, judicial reform and rooting out of corruption. In 2004–2005, the new opposition effectively supported Bagapsh because their interests coincided, while there was a wider divergence of opinion with those in power. Butba has a private TV-channel – Abaza TV – at his disposal, although it has not managed to secure broadcasting rights in the whole country.

Beslan Butba was born in 1960 in the Ochamchira district in Abkhazia. In 1983, he graduated from the Institute for Engineering and Construction in Moscow and started to work as a foreman at the Repair and Construction Department No. 1 in Moscow, becoming its chief engineer and head in 1986. In 1989, he became a businessman and founded a construction co-operative. In the 1990s, he returned to Abkhazia, where he continued to pursue business activities. During the war between Georgia and Abkhazia, he provided humanitarian aid to Abkhazia, sent wounded men to better hospitals in Moscow and brought good military doctors to Abkhazia. At the end of the 1990s, he returned to Abkhazia once again, where he paid for the restoration of a hotel that had been damaged during the war. Since 2005, he is the leader of the Business Club Sukhumi, which unites prominent businessmen in Abkhazia. Since 2000, he has been active in politics. In 2002–2007, he was a member of

the People's Assembly of Abkhazia. In 2007, he was elected Chairman of the Party of the Economic Development of Abkhazia. Since 2005, he is President of Nart, a football club in Sukhumi. He has been active in charity work for many years.

The two opposition leaders do not make public accusations of Bagapsh being pro-Georgian, but they might be using their ties with the Russian media, which airs these kinds of accusations from time to time. The current authorities are mostly blamed for being corrupt and for having too close ties with Russia, which could jeopardise Abkhazia's sovereignty, for which many spilled their blood. Considering the current situation, however, convergence with Russia cannot be avoided, regardless of the fact who leads the country. In addition, the weakness of the opposition's ideological foundation damages its prospects at the elections.

The opposition has mounted two major charges against Bagapsh. The first pertained to the campaign to grant passports, i.e. citizenship, to Georgians living in the Gali region – a move which, critics claimed, was undertaken to enlarge Bagapsh's supporter base and which could launch a mass return of Georgians to Abkhazia which, in its turn, could lead to the re-emergence of ethnic tensions. The effect of this accusation decreased considerably after a decision was taken by the Bagapsh administration not to start the passport campaign before the elections. The second key accusation concerned the negotiations over the Kodori Valley that were held with Georgia in 2006–2008 which were, according to critics, unconstitutional and compromised the territorial integrity of the state. Since the events in August 2008, when Abkhazia reinstated its full control over the Kodori Gorge, this accusation has lost its sting.

The paradoxical nature of these elections stems from the fact that Bagapsh, who wants to pursue a multidirectional foreign policy, is competing with people, who yearn for deeper integration with Russia, but who nevertheless attack Bagapsh for allegedly promoting too close ties with Russia.

The Russia factor

With the events in August 2008, Russia succeeded in forcing Abkhazia into a position where the Russians no longer have to worry about their status being undermined, as the relationship between the two countries has been solidified by a series of bilateral agreements. Consequently, it does not actually matter to Russia who will be Abkhazia's next president, which is why it did not intervene in this year's election campaign as rudely as it did in 2004. However, the Russians do realise that unlike South-Ossetia, which is rather interested in acceding to Russia, Abkhazia stands firmly for its independence. So, under present conditions, it is profitable for Moscow to convey an image of Abkhazia as an independent state, which provides additional motivation for Russia to act in a constrained manner. However, for the very same reason, Russia follows closely all the political developments in Abkhazia. Whoever will become Abkhazia's next president, the

Russians will be satisfied with the result, unless it leads to a serious domestic political conflict (like the one in 2004 –2005).

The characteristics of Abkhazia's electoral system

The law stipulates that the president of the Republic of Abkhazia must be a person who is an ethnic Abkhazian, who speaks the Abkhaz language, who is 35–65 years old, who is eligible to vote and who has been a permanent resident in the country for at least five years before the polling day. The presidential term of office is five years. One person may occupy the presidential post for up to two consecutive terms.

Together with the president, a vice president is elected, whose candidacy is submitted by the presidential candidate.

There is some confusion over the size of the electorate which, Abkhazia's electoral commission claims, is currently around 129,600 people. When a voter receives his ballot paper at the elections, his passport is stamped with a respective mark.

The country has 35 constituencies, which include a total of 186 polling stations. Two additional polling stations have been set up outside Abkhazia – one in Moscow and the other in Cherkessk. It cannot be ruled out completely that polling stations/constituencies will be established in Turkey, which has a large Abkhaz population, but this is unlikely because Turkey has not recognised Abkhazia's independence. The electoral commission is led by Batal Tabagua, a veteran of the Independence War and an ardent supporter of Bagapsh. In his professional capacity, however, Tabagua is expected to act independently. In order to declare an election to be legitimate, at least 50% of the electorate must turn up to vote. Various sources claim that this threshold will be passed easily in these elections.

Conclusion and possible scenarios

Bagapsh's team has not fulfilled all the promises made before the previous elections. The leaving of several team members has weakened it, while other members of the team have attracted fierce criticism for corruption and for using administrative resources to further their business interests. On the other hand, Abkhazia's macroeconomic figures have risen, vital agreements with Russia and Russian corporations have been concluded and the living standards of the nation have been maintained or even increased. Moreover, under Bagapsh's rule, the government apparatus has become relatively transparent for the first time in the country's history. In addition, the current administration has sufficient resources for securing Bagapsh's re-election. Compared to his role as a charismatic leader who solved the crisis in 2004–2005, he will be a weaker president during his second term of office. However, this will be entirely to Russia's liking.

It is very probable that Bagapsh will take a victory already in the first round with more than 50% of the votes. It would be most beneficial to him if his victory margin were not too large, which would urge the opposition forces to accuse the current authorities of forging the election results, and not too thin either, which would allow the

opposition to question the results of vote counting and to demand that a second round of voting should be held.

If it turns out that a second round is necessary, it will be much harder for Bagapsh to win because the currently splintered opposition could manage to join its forces and win the elections.

Russia is primarily interested in Abkhazia staying a stable country and in demonstrating that Abkhazia is, indeed, independent. It is therefore unlikely that Russia will actively intervene in Abkhazia's affairs.

Following a purely political logic, Moscow will rather continue to support the current transparent power structures.

According to the most probable scenario, Bagapsh will win already in the first round of voting. This might lead to protests from the opposition, which could escalate into a serious confrontation only if the electoral commission is not be able to convince the opposition of the legitimacy of Bagapsh's success, which is not likely to happen.

A weak result for Bagapsh (less than 50%) means that a second round will be held, where he will almost definitely face Khajimba as his opponent. In this case, Butba's votes will have a significant role to play. If the candidates of the opposition join their forces, they could pose a real threat to Bagapsh. The situation could turn violent only if an opposition candidate manages to attract a sufficient number of votes on December 12 to claim that he won the elections.

It is characteristic of elections in Abkhazia that it is almost impossible to forge election results *en masse*. Even if the alleged culprit had powerful support from outside the country, he would still have to face a strong outburst of anger in Abkhazia, which could easily escalate into an armed conflict. For this reason, any involvement in Abkhazia's political processes must be conducted in a very calculated, accurate and moderate manner, despite the fact that the Abkhazians are characterised by a strong attraction to Russia (although there are diverging views regarding the closeness of Russia-Abkhazia relations) and a diehard opposition to any dependence on Georgia.