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Ajara – A New Russian Option in Georgia?

by Dr. William C. Green

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Introduction

This paper assesses indications that Russia might attempt to cultivate separatist sentiments in Ajara as a means of putting pressure on the Georgian government. Ajaran autonomy within Georgia is internationally recognized, although the extent of its self-rule was greatly scaled back after the 2003 Rose Revolution led local despot Aslan Abashidze to flee to Moscow. There are indicators that Russia might be attempting to support an Abashidze-led resistance to Tbilisi in Ajara. While the stronger sense of Georgian identity in the region and the potential for adversely involving Turkey are impediments to Russia achieving an Abkhazian or South Ossetian-style secession in Ajara, such an initiative would enable Russia to further erode Georgian sovereignty and fracture its territorial integrity.

In the wake of its August 2008 conflict with Georgia, Moscow may be reviewing the potential for establishing a separatist regime in the Black Sea coastal region of Ajara. The recent conflict saw Moscow drastically alter a *status quo* in the South Caucasus that had existed for the previous fifteen years, imposing by force a resolution on the major issues in dispute between itself and Georgia, and unilaterally recognizing the independence of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian regions. However, in doing so it removed major elements previously at its disposal for pressuring the Georgian government, other than a renewal of military conflict and the occupation of territory universally recognized as Georgian. It is reasonable to assume that the Russian government is examining new initiatives by which it can pressure Georgia.

Russia's South Caucasus policy has been focused for the last few years on Abkhazia and South Ossetia. By supporting but not recognizing the independence of their governments, Moscow was able to modulate Georgian behavior by playing on its desire for a restoration of national integrity. With these two regions now "independent" and South Ossetia at least far on the path toward annexation, Russia's new interests in the South Caucasus may have outrun its policy preparations and on-the-ground capabilities. If this is indeed the case, Russia will be raising an entirely new set of issues for dealing with the Georgian government.

To be sure, Russia has effectively limitless pretexts available should it choose to reopen armed hostilities. For example, it might allege that continuing unrest in the North Caucasus (Dagestan, Ingushetiya, and of course Chechnya) is the result of Georgian operatives infiltrating from the Pankisi Gorge, or that Georgia is violating the terms of the EU-brokered ceasefire. An even more ominous course was hinted at recently with the publication of police alerts alleging a Georgian program to unleash a wave of terror bombings across Russia.^[1] Russia demonstrated in the recent conflict that it has the ability to move its forces across Georgia virtually at will. But its near complete failure to muster international support for its actions implies that it will be looking for a

set of options more effective than its on-going economic blockade yet more indirect than force. One means of doing this is to continue the policy previously carried out in Abkhazia and South Ossetia—encourage separatist sentiment in Georgia's peripheral regions, with an eye to further fracturing the country.

This paper assesses indications that Russia might attempt to cultivate separatist sentiments in the Georgian region of Ajara with just such a policy in mind. Properly conducted, such an initiative might enable Russia to erode Georgian sovereignty still further and fracture its territorial integrity by more subtle means than the use or threat of naked force. Ajara is in some ways an ideal candidate for such a policy, as it is an autonomous republic within Georgia, and until recently was ruled by a local despot with little interference from the national government in Tbilisi. By contrast, an attempt to organize a separatist movement among, for example, the majority ethnic Armenians in Javakheti district or the ethnic Azeris who comprise a significant portion of the population in rural eastern Georgia, would find no autonomous administrative structures in place and no tradition of local self-rule.

Ajara—Another Potential Georgian Break-Away Region?

Ajara is located in the southwestern corner of Georgia, bordering Turkey to the south and fronting the Black Sea to the west. Its major city is the port and resort of Batumi. In addition it contains the border crossing point of Sarpi and five rural districts. According to the 2002 census its population was 376,016 out of a total Georgian population of 4.3 million.^[2] A small amount of crude is sent by rail from Baku in neighboring Azerbaijan to Batumi for refining and export by tanker. Batumi is also connected by road and rail to Tbilisi. Ajarans are overwhelmingly ethnic Georgian, speaking a cluster of closely related dialects.^[3]

Ajara's unique status within Georgia derives from its back-and-forth history under first Ottoman and then Russian rule. As a result of protracted Ottoman occupation, well over half the population of this region had converted to Islam by the mid-nineteenth century. In 1878 Ajara (then including territory now in Turkey and in many places still inhabited by ethnic Georgians) was annexed by the Russian Empire. As a result, the Christian element in the population began to increase, primarily because of migration of Orthodox Georgians from areas that had never been under Ottoman rule. In Article 6 of the 1923 Treaty of Kars, Georgia pledged to respect Ajara's autonomous status:

Turkey agrees to cede to Georgia suzerainty over the town and port of Batum, with the territory to the north of the frontier, indicated in Article IV of the present Treaty, which formed part of the district of Batum, on condition:

1. That the population of the localities specified in the present Article shall enjoy a greater measure of local administrative autonomy, that each community is guaranteed its cultural and religious rights, and that this population may introduce in the above-mentioned places an agrarian system in conformity with its own wishes.
2. That Turkey be assured free transit through the port of Batum for commodities and all materials destined for, or originating in, Turkey, without customs duties and charges, and with the right for Turkey to utilize the port of Batum without special charges. For the application of this Article, a commission of representatives of the interested Parties shall be created immediately after the signing of the present Treaty.

The Treaty of Kars was signed by Turkey and by three components of the new Soviet Union, the Soviet Socialist Republic of Armenia, the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, and the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia, after negotiations to which the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic was also a party. During the Soviet period the treaty was a dead letter: religion, whether Islam or Christianity, was persecuted; "autonomy" was little more than a matter of local

nomenclature; all agriculture was collectivized according to Stalinist principles, and Turkish access to the port of Batumi was non-existent. Following the Second World War, Soviet leader Joseph Stalin even revived claims to the territories ceded to Turkey in the Treaty of Kars, although this was rescinded by his successors.

However, in the 1990s local conditions more-or-less returned to the status they held in the early 1920s, facilitating recognition of the treaty as the basis of the border and legal regimes in the South Caucasus. Since the collapse of the Soviet Union it has been vigorously upheld by Turkey, not least because of the recognition it gives to Turkish interests in the internal affairs of its three South Caucasian neighbors. Post-Soviet Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan also recognize its validity as the legal foundation of interstate relations in the South Caucasus region, although Armenia has complained that Turkey itself has failed fully to honor the treaty's terms and conditions.^[4] Because of the Treaty of Kars, Ajara entered the post-Soviet period with a functioning regional government that included a Supreme Council, ministries with established jurisdiction and functions, and local services. Given that the key difference between Ajarans and other Georgians was the greater prevalence of Islam in the population rather than language or ethnicity, autonomous status would probably not have been granted to Ajara during the Communist period without the preexisting commitment to Turkey.

During the “perestroika” years of the late 1980s, Aslan Abashidze was able to rise to local prominence. Abashidze was a grandson of the Georgian Muslim leader Murad Abashidze, who led Ajara during Georgia's previous brief period of independence, during the Russian Civil War (1918-1921). The scion of a princely family that claimed to have ruled Ajara since the fifteenth century, Murad Abashidze was shot by Stalin's order in 1937.^[5] While his ancestry meant that Aslan Abashidze had a difficult time during the Soviet years, he was able to leverage it into appointment as Chairman of the Supreme Council of the Autonomous Republic of Ajaria and Deputy Chairman of the Georgian Parliament in 1991, as the Soviet Union began to disintegrate. During Georgia's rocky transition out of Soviet Communism—it fought a civil war in 1991-93 during which the autonomous republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia mounted successful Russian-backed secessionist revolts—Abashidze focused his attention on establishing his power base within Ajara.

Abashidze's regime was noted for corruption and for facilitating smuggling and trafficking of all sorts across the Turkish border and through the port of Batumi. He discouraged other industries, especially tourism, for which Batumi had been noted in the Soviet period.^[6] Tax revenues were not forwarded to the national government but remained in Ajara at his disposal. His control over his fiefdom was ironclad, exercised through both the Ajaran Ministry of the Interior and his personal militia, which for appearances' sake was termed the 25th Brigade of the Georgian Defense Ministry. Moreover, a Russian army base just outside of Batumi was always a potential instrument of intervention, should Moscow choose to interfere in Ajari affairs. He had strong backing from Moscow, and both Russian Defense Minister Pavel Grachev and Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov visited Batumi, but not Tbilisi.

During his thirteen year rule, Abashidze never won an election with less than ninety percent of the vote.^[7] In 1998 he had himself elected “President of Ajaria” and his son Giorgi mayor of Batumi in elections from which international and Georgian monitors were barred, but which Russian observers declared to be free and fair.^[8] Abashidze's grip on the electorate meant that his Democratic Revival party controlled—at a minimum—ten percent of the total Georgian vote, which made it one of the largest factions in the fractured parliament. Between 1993 and 2004 he did not leave Ajara except for trips to Moscow, alleging that the central Georgian government in Tbilisi was trying to have him assassinated. This charge reflects his complicated relations with Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze's administration—he supported it when it came to power at the end of the civil war, then opposed it for a decade, and again supported it when Shevardnadze unsuccessfully confronted the populist “Rose Revolution” of 2003.

Abashidze played a direct role in provoking the Rose Revolution. In the November 2, 2003 parliamentary elections, he pressed hard by all means at his disposal for his Democratic Revival party to gain a plurality of the votes, then went into coalition with President Shevardnadze's For a New Georgia party in return for national recognition of the enhanced powers he had awarded himself as President of Ajara. International and Georgian election observers denounced the voting as fraudulent, and opposition leader Mikheil Saakashvili claimed that an independent audit of the polling showed his coalition had actually won the election. Weeks of demonstration marred by violence culminated when Shevardnadze attempted to convene the newly elected parliament. Supporters of the reform coalition burst into the chamber carrying roses, and in the ensuing chaos Shevardnadze was forced to flee. He declared a state of national emergency but key police and military leaders refused to support him. Shevardnadze resigned the presidency at a November 23 meeting with the opposition brokered by Russian Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov. On January 4, 2004 Saakashvili was elected president, and in new parliamentary elections on March 28 his party, the National Movement-Democrats, won a strong majority.[9]

During the Rose Revolution Abashidze sent counter-demonstrators to Tbilisi to back the Shevardnadze regime, but after Saakashvili's election he had to deal with rising levels of unrest by pro-democracy activists in Batumi and elsewhere in Ajara. Abashidze declared a state of emergency in Ajara immediately after Shevardnadze's resignation and used Ajarian Interior Ministry forces to raid and harass the opposition and attack demonstrators. On March 14, newly-elected President Saakashvili took advantage of Abashidze's absence in Moscow to attempt to enter Ajara and support his party's parliamentary candidates. He was stopped at the border by Ajarian Ministry of Interior forces. On his return to Tbilisi, Saakashvili announced an economic blockade of Ajara until Abashidze disbanded the region's Interior Ministry, allowed free campaigning, and gave up his control over local tax revenues.

Tensions continued to heighten, and on April 19 and 21, 2004, Batumi-based military commanders [Roman Dumbadze](#) and Murad Tsintsadze announced that they were loyal only to the "Supreme Commander-in-Chief of Ajara" Abashidze, perhaps signaling preparations for a unilateral declaration of independence. "I do not recognize the charges voiced by president Mikhail Saakashvili against me, and from today do not obey the [\[Georgian\]](#) Supreme Commander-in-Chief. According to Adjara's Constitution, Aslan Abashidze is the Supreme Commander-in-Chief, and I together with 547 servicemen of the 25th brigade come under Abashidze's command," was Major General Dumbadze's unequivocal statement at the time.[10] At the end of April 2004, Abashidze ordered the demolition of the two bridges over the Choloki river that comprises the administrative border of Ajara. Abashidze's control over events nonetheless continued to weaken. After a meeting with Russian Security Council Secretary Sergei Ivanov on May 5, 2004 in which Abashidze vainly appealed for support, he accepted a Russian offer of asylum and fled with his family and entourage to Moscow.[11]

The Saakashvili government's ouster of Abashidze and reintegration of Ajara into the Georgian polity was handled deftly enough that both Georgian and outside observers thought, prior to the 2008 Russian intervention, that it might serve as a model for eventual Abkhazian and South Ossetian reunion.[12] Cross-border trafficking was scaled back and the delicate issue of religious identity and rights created no unusual turmoil. The Georgian government tried hard to walk the delicate line between respecting Ajara's special status and integrating the region back into the Georgian political and economic spheres.

For example, on July 5, 2007, the seat of the Georgian Constitutional Court was moved from Tbilisi to Batumi.[13] A sizable program of public works and of promoting the tourist trade and resettling long-term refugees from Abkhazia has created much visible prosperity, especially in Batumi, and minimized any lingering sympathy among the population at large for the departed Abashidze family. However, it is inevitable in any power transition that discontented individuals and interests will look back to the previous regime with nostalgia. Ajarians prone to such nostalgia were reminded of the dark side of Abashidze's rule when in January 2007 he was sentenced *in*

absentia to fifteen years in prison, for embezzlement and abuse of office. He has also been indicted for complicity in the murder of Nodar Imnadze, his former deputy, during the Civil War in 1991.[14] (By contrast, former President Eduard Shevardnadze has not been charged with any crimes, and lives in semi-retirement in Tbilisi, occasionally making statements on national issues for the Georgian press.)

Weighing the Potential for Russian Intervention in Ajara

On August 28, 2008, following its short war with Georgia, Russia demanded that former Georgian Major General Roman Dumbadze be exchanged for twelve Georgian soldiers seized during its sack of the port of Poti.[15] Dumbadze had been commander of the Batumi-based 25th brigade of the Georgian Interior Ministry (nominally subordinated to the Georgian Defense Ministry but actually administered by the Ajari Interior Ministry) when Aslan Abashidze had his standoff with Saakashvili. He fell into Georgian hands when Abashidze fled to Moscow. Dumbadze was arrested by the Georgian authorities and sentenced to 17 years in prison for treason and mutiny.[16] With both Abashidze and Dumbadze in Moscow, the Russian government has the nucleus of an Ajaran government-in-exile, should it chose to put additional pressure on Tbilisi.

Successful Ajaran separatism would be a devastating blow to Georgia, as the Russian newspaper *Kommersant* noted on August 29.[17] It would lose one of its two remaining seaports, and its most important land border crossing into Turkey at Sarpi. Russia would have again demonstrated its ability to punish South Caucasus adversaries by means other than brute military force, with a chilling effect on not only the Tbilisi government but also on Azerbaijan and, other governments of former Soviet republics. However, Russia must overcome significant impediments if it is to execute such a policy successfully.

The first—and most important—is that Ajarans are ethnically Georgian. Ajarans seem to view themselves as Georgians rather than a separate people, and shared in the post-Soviet burst of Georgian patriotism. The region received its special status nearly a century ago because of its Muslim majority. However, while both Islam and Orthodoxy have seen an increase the number of their practicing members since the fall of Communism, the identity of the Georgian Orthodox Church with the Georgian nation since independence from the Soviet Union has led to Muslims becoming a minority in Ajara for the first time since the Ottoman conquest.[18] The 2002 census—conducted under Abashidze, himself a Muslim -- found that of Ajara's population of 376 thousand, 240,552 were Orthodox and 115,161 were Muslim. Moreover, the respectful manner in which Georgia has handled Ajaran autonomy since the flight of Abashidze means there is likely to be little popular support for, and much opposition to, any attempt to set up a separatist movement. Lingering popular sentiment favoring the rule of the Abashidze princely house would seem to be the only local source of support for a Russian-backed Ajari government-in-exile.

As noted earlier, one element that influenced the situation in Ajara in Russia's favor was its possession of a former Soviet military base outside of Batumi, the 12th Military Base, formerly home of the 145th Motorized Rifle Division, and one of four such bases in Georgia. These facilities became foci of Russian influence in the country, not least because they were islands of stability during the Georgian civil war and then centers of employment in the impoverished years that followed. From the moment of independence, various Georgian governments demanded that Russia withdraw from these bases, but a framework for withdrawal was not developed until the parties to the Conventional Armed Forces in Europe (CFE) Treaty adapted it to post-Soviet conditions in Europe. Negotiations to this effect were completed at the November 1999 Summit of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. (It should be noted that while Russia ratified Adapted CFE, the NATO parties agreed not to proceed with the ratification process until Russian lived up to Adapted CFE provisions. In 2007 Russia formally withdrew from the treaty.) Article 1 Paragraph 3, of the Adapted CFE Treaty reads:

Conventional armaments and equipment of a State Party in the categories limited by the Treaty shall only be present on the territory of another State Party in conformity with international law, the explicit consent of the host State Party, or a relevant resolution of the United Nations Security Council. Explicit consent must be provided in advance, and must continue to be in effect as provided for in Article XIII, paragraph 1 *bis*.^[19]

Annex 14 of the accord is a Joint Statement of the Russian Federation and Georgia, in which Russia agreed to pull out of its bases at Vaziani and Gudauta by July 1, 2001 and to complete arrangements for a withdrawal from Batumi and Akhalkalaki in the year 2000. However, negotiations for withdrawal from the latter two dragged on until March 31, 2006, when Russia agreed to a pullout by the end of 2008.^[20] Russia actually completed its withdrawal early, pulling out from the 12th Military Base in Batumi on November 13, 2007.^[21] It would seem then that, at least from the perspective of military capabilities immediately at hand, the time for Russian intervention in Ajara has passed.

A final obstacle to any Russian attempt to promote a secessionist regime in Ajara that should not be overlooked is the potential that this move would hold for alienating Turkey. There is a complicated mix of elements in Turkish relations with Georgia, as there are in Turkey's relations with Moscow. Turkey has had good relations with Georgia, and is its partner in the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline, launched in the 1990s as a means of transporting Caspian energy resources to the world market without their having to traverse Russian or Iranian territory. Turkish truckers are ubiquitous on Georgian highways, following another circuitous route that allows them to avoid Armenia in carrying goods to and from Azerbaijan and points east. There are several hundred thousand Georgian economic migrants in Turkey, and Turkey support was crucial to Georgia in surviving the early stages of Russia's economic blockade, launched in 2005.

On the other hand, Turkey has in recent years been drifting toward a more pro-Russian stance, as its relations with its traditional allies in Europe and the United States have become more strained. While there is no tradition of warm ties between Moscow and Ankara, not all voices within Turkey are pro-Georgian. The sizable Abkhazian diaspora has been loud in its attacks on Tbilisi, and there are signs that the Turkish government is taking an interest in the Meshkhetian and Azeri Turkic minorities in Georgia.^[22] As previously mentioned, the Treaty of Kars recognizes a legitimate Turkish interest in the autonomy of Ajara. Russian establishment of a puppet regime directly on the Turkish border, or even a serious effort to destabilize Ajara, could well tip Ankara into direct support of Georgia. Turkey's size, relative wealth, geographic siting, and Western-style military give it the capability to support South and even North Caucasian resistance to Russia, or even intervene on its own behalf. Moscow would probably weigh this possibility heavily in reviewing its Ajara options, especially since the advantages it would gain in spitting Turkey from its Western allies far outweigh any satisfaction it might obtain from further humiliating a small neighbor with barely five million inhabitants.

Conclusion

In reviewing the factors that might support or hinder Russian encouragement of a separatist movement in Ajara, two stand out as favoring the success of such a move—the existence of a recognized regional government, and a recent tradition of local self-rule. By contrast, there are a number of significant differences between the situation in Ajara and that in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The first is the Georgian ethnicity of Ajara, and the tendency of the population to stress their national rather than their local identity. A second is that Ajara has no border with Russia and Russia has closed the military base it had in the region. There is no boiling discontent in Ajara, and while Russia could work to aggravate tensions this would take time and could well be unsuccessful in any event. Finally, Russia must consider the potential impact a Russian-orchestrated secession movement on its relations with Turkey, which is situated to make Russia's own position in the Caucasus very uncomfortable, should it become hostile.

It is nonetheless possible that by reuniting the Abashidze-Dumbadze team Moscow intends to set up an Ajaran political opposition or even government-in-exile. This move would undoubtedly unsettle Tbilisi and perhaps even affect national political dynamics as Saakashvili attempts to retain the Presidency in the wake of the August '08 debacle. However, this step alone is unlikely to be met with any enthusiasm in Ajara, even among that element of the population with residual affection for its native Muslim dynasty. To instate an Abashidze-led separatist regime, Moscow would have to install it by force, or else wait for a renewal of political turmoil in Georgia to create an opportune moment for its return. While Ajara does not border Russia, the August 2008 conflict demonstrated that Russian forces can intervene at will anywhere on the territory of the Georgian Republic. Thus, Russia could conceivably impose a restored Abashidze regime in Ajara by force if it was willing to reinforce the reputation it has acquired for unilateral and violent behavior in the Caucasus region, and accept additional local and international criticism. Such a move would punish Georgia for its alignment with the West, and might even bring a more tractable regime to power in Tbilisi, but at the price Russia at present seems unwilling to pay.

About the Author

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