

Abkhazia Twenty Years On, Some Thoughts

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Reflections on Abkhazia: 1992-2012

The Republic of Abkhazia, factually an independent state with limited formal recognition, a client of Moscow, and unlikely ever to be a component of Georgia in any form, bears a mark upon it, "Made in the U.S.A." Permit me to explain.

In June of 1992 I attended a conference in Maikop where I met once again my old friend and colleague, Slava [Viacheslav] Chirikba. He told me that war was coming to Abkhazia, that Georgia was going to invade his homeland, and asked me to send warning to the U. S. State Department. I did as he asked upon my return to Canada, contacting "State" via a public number. My calls went unreturned, unacknowledged. Two months later Slava's fears became reality as Georgian irregular forces invaded Abkhazia. Within three more months I found myself in Washington, escorting the first Abkhazian delegation ever to visit that capital. I was in the company then of Natela Akaba, Liana Kvarchelia, and the two Kazans, Yahya, and his son Yanal. This was my first engagement as a back channel diplomat and advisor to Washington. By the time the Abkhazians had driven out regular Georgian troops in September of 1993 I had attained a status as an advisor to Washington, Ottawa, and Moscow, on matters of the Caucasus. While I went on to deal with the Ossetian – Ingush conflict and the Chechen wars, as well as advising on a wider range of matters, my first experience with the organs in Washington had left an ineradicable impression on me. Several crucial shortcomings in diplomatic thinking had led to the "loss" of Abkhazia. I shall summarize these briefly.

First, the diplomats at State rushed to recognize Georgia within borders that were largely fictional, being lines drawn not merely by the Soviets, until the preceding year (1991) arch enemies, but by none other than Stalin himself. Two factors seemed to underlie this act, which can only be termed simplistic. The first seemed to be the conceptual difficulty of admitting any nuances in the categories that defined the objects of the international order. Any one with any knowledge of the history of the South Caucasus would have implemented a nuanced policy, reigning in the Georgian forces and softening the territorial claims of Tbilisi. Such a nuanced policy would have benefitted all parties concerned save Moscow. Instead State, and the rest of the West following its example, simply endorsed Tbilisi's claims and demonized Abkhazia in ways that bordered on the fictional, depicting Sukhum (Aqua) as a seat of Muslim terrorists, when in fact it was a largely Orthodox Christian nation, multi-ethnic, and with strong democratic tendencies. Its leader, Vladislav Ardzinba, was viewed with scorn by State as a former *apparatchik*. In fact he had served as Abkhazia's representative to the Duma. Such a Soviet background seemed not to be a failing, however, when it came to Georgia's (second) leader, Eduard Shevardnadze, but consistency was not the issue.

In the case of Shevardnadze the West felt a debt to him for his part in the collapse of the Soviet Union. So, not only was the conceptual apparatus of State impoverished to a crippling extent, it was also bound by matters of personal allegiance and indebtedness. So, it seemed that Shevardnadze had called in an old debt of sorts and that this served to strengthen the resolve of State even when it became obvious after the battle of Gagra that Georgia's chances of victory were growing ever more feeble and that Russia (with support largely in the form of arms and fighters from republics in the North Caucasus) had finally sided with the Abkhazians.

For me State's policies were baffling, because my own friendships (with Ardzinba as well as Chirikba) and my own regard for Georgia, played little role in my assessment of the war, its course, and its

consequences. It was my first exposure to the time honoured diplomatic principle of reciprocity, of which personal indebtedness was a variant.

Once the Georgians had been driven out, with the exception of the upper reaches of the Kodor Valley, aid was not extended to Abkhazia despite the fact that it had suffered severely in a war that it had not initiated. Its archives and state library had been burned, many of its citizens displaced or killed, its economy left a shambles. On the contrary, a sort of “anti-Marshall Plan” was put into place to punish the Abkhazians (which included not only ethnic Abkhaz, but Armenians, Russians, and a few remaining Mingrelians). Russia, under Boris Yeltsin at this time, also joined in an embargo against this war-ravaged nation. This embargo, as with others, was porous to some extent, but Abkhazia truly suffered during this time. The strategy articulated to me by senior members of State Department was that the Abkhazians would agree to rejoin Georgia if they understood that the only chances they had for a normal life lay with reunification. Four features of this policy struck me as absurd.

First, the terms under which Abkhazia would rejoin and regain a normal life were never articulated in a stable fashion. They were either vague, or at times shifting, so that rejoining Georgia remained an enigmatic lure at best. Georgia was America’s client state, pay back for Cuba in a sense, but America seemed unable or unwilling to force Tbilisi to draw up reasonable terms. Second, the horrors of war were such that no people, including the Abkhazians, would willingly seek a union with an adversary without ironclad guarantees of protection. These guarantees were never forthcoming. Third, the policy clearly ignored the character of the Abkhazian people, their tenacity and love of freedom. Curiously these same features were in line with America’s emphasis on democracy, but they did not suffice to prevent Washington from demonizing the Abkhazians. Fourth, the policy was simply a modern equivalent of a Medieval siege: starve them and they will capitulate. The only aid offered was the program unofficially termed ‘Abkhazian Maidens,’ a plastic surgery program based in Yerevan and sponsored by USAID. Initiated by myself along with Sa’di Duman and Murat Yagan, this program led to the restoration of roughly 400 women from both the Georgian and Abkhazian sides, and yet I personally had to rely on my links to former President Carter to thwart State Department’s efforts to shut this program down. Otherwise, there was no assistance. On this last point the conceptual rigidity and barrenness of State Department again struck me most powerfully. This “siege” policy simply did not work. It was not a policy tailored to the complexities and social norms of the modern world.

In the fifteen years up to the Georgian attack on South Ossetia, seen widely by the Abkhaz as a prelude to a Georgian invasion of their own land, the territorial integrity of Georgia became a predictable trope uttered whenever the South Caucasus was discussed in the West. In all that time, and despite my numerous memos addressing Georgia’s territorial integrity, no one in State or elsewhere in the Western professional diplomatic echelons ever seemed to grasp the fact that the insistence on the Soviet borders of Georgia merely rendered her vulnerable to external subversion, especially by Russia, but also by any other outside party. As she stood with the inclusion of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Georgia was not a stable state. These regions served as potential zones for subversion of Georgia as a state should an outside party so desire. Ironically it was Moscow’s recognition under Medvedev of Abkhazia and South Ossetia that made Georgia into a viable and stable entity, though the rhetoric in the West has yet to acknowledge this. It must not be forgotten, however, that this recognition was itself both an act that fulfilled Russian interests in the South Caucasus, but also one of reciprocity, an act triggered by the West’s recognition of Kosovo.

Today, despite the misguided policies of State Department and the West, Abkhazia has survived, has held successful elections, and has gained a small modicum of recognition. It is now a client state of Russia because only Russia under Putin would engage it in a realistic fashion, and then only in reaction to the affront of Kosovo. Its economy is still precarious, but improving. Any efforts it made to have its case receive a fair hearing were constantly rebuffed over these last twenty years. Despite the moral and democratic agenda State Department sought to promulgate it ignored those same moral features and democratic needs of Abkhazia. In effect State Department, through an impoverished conceptual repertoire and a rigid adherence to protocol and precedent, drove Abkhazia into Russia's arms.

There is yet a more profound aspect to the events surrounding the Abkhazian – Georgian War. What haunts me now is something that Natela Akaba said early on in the War. As we pulled into Washington, D.C., one evening in January 1993 Natela caught sight of the national monuments spread out and illuminated, the so-called Esplanade. The city glowed and she gave a gasp. She said, "Washington! The capital of the world." Instinctively she offered Washington an opportunity to render justice to a small corner of the world. Washington missed this opportunity without even being able to grasp that it had come or what it could portend. What State Department lost was not simply credibility with nations small or large, but rather it let slip through its hands a moral moment to be the leader of a new world order. As Paul Goble put it to me then, "Abkhazia is a small place upon which the world will turn." Abkhazia turned to Russia, rebuffed by the rest of the world. Russia turned to hegemonic ambitions and sought to regain her old sphere of influence, seeing that America could not render justice. America turned her back on an opportunity to articulate a world order based upon a new and moral vision of her national interests. She renounced a new and potentially powerful form of leadership that would have offered justice and help to those in need. The needy of the earth offered America the single most powerful of all tools of statecraft, that of rendering justice. Great empires have been built on this dream. Instead America pursued business as usual in an outmoded and simplistic fashion best suited to a bygone era. The results for Georgia and Abkhazia were entirely predictable. What the ultimate result will be for America remains to be seen.

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