

Abkhazia's Crisis Sets a New Precedent

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Commentators have compared the recent uprising in Abkhazia's capital Sukhumi to the protests on Kiev's Maidan Square. However, that is a bit of stretch. After all, tiny Abkhazia — which since its 1999 secession from Georgia has enjoyed strong Russian support — is definitely not Ukraine.

Ousted Abkhaz President Alexander Ankvab, who stepped down on June 1 in response to protesters demands, bears little comparison to former Ukrainian President Viktor Yanukovich. Moreover, the events in Sukhumi, in contrast to those in Kiev, transpired without any casualties.

However, during these early summer days in that subtropical republic on the Black Sea, a certain precedent was set concerning those parts of the former Soviet Union that Russia still controls. By calmly standing by as protestors unseated Ankvab, the Kremlin effectively sanctioned the violent seizure of power by the citizens of an independent state.

This indicates that Russia now has fewer options for influencing the parts of the former Soviet Union that it still controls, although various short-term tactics appear to meet the immediate

needs of the moment.

Moscow, of course, sees Sukhumi differently and draws the distinction that, unlike Kiev, no outside forces were involved in the president's ouster. Russia, taking a rather unobtrusive stance in the negotiations between the opposing sides, announced that the situation was Abkhazia's internal affair.

The Russian authorities have never so readily acknowledged political changes achieved through direct pressure. And the Soviet authorities before them never reacted so calmly to conflicts among the former republics or to domestic confrontations.

For instance, in 2004 when protesters seized the administration building of Russia's Karachayev-Cherkessia republic, I personally saw the former Presidential Envoy to the Southern Federal District, Dmitry Kozak, literally get down on his knees and beg them not to demand the resignation of the regional head and his ministers, saying, "If we do such things under force, we will set the country ablaze."

The key word here is pressure, but not always pressure applied through force. In South Ossetia's presidential elections in 2011, when disgraced Education Minister Alla Dzhioyeva unexpectedly beat Anatoly Bibilov — Moscow's protege and successor to President Eduard Kokoity — Russia decided to overturn the election results.

Completely new elections were named with a whole new set of candidates, even though the country's Election Commission had no complaints about the fairness of the first elections. In that case, Russia encountered pressure from outside forces and responded by doing everything in its power to neutralize that pressure.

Can we conclude that after Maidan, after Crimea and after all that is happening now in Donetsk and Luhansk, Russia's leaders no longer refuse to make decisions under pressure from outside forces? The answer is "yes and no."

"Yes" because political circumstances — including those resulting from the annexation of Crimea and that continue to develop against the backdrop of events in Donetsk and Luhansk — force Russian leaders to partially tone down their traditional image of Russia as an omnipotent sovereign that controls everything that happens within its zone of interests.

For example, the speed with which events are unfolding in Ukraine's eastern and southern regions, and the nature of those events are such that Moscow would do better to disavow the role of puppet master, even if it is pulling at least some of the strings.

At the same time, the answer is "no" because recognition of the revolution in Abkhazia is, to some extent, no different than the elections in South Ossetia in 2011 to 2012, which showed that change is only unacceptable when Moscow's "partners" are the ones subjected to it.

The fact is, Moscow never really wanted Alexander Ankvab as a partner in Abkhazia, and he gained the presidency more despite Moscow's strategists than because of them.

In the 2004 to 2005 presidential elections there, Ankvab supported the candidacy of Sergei Bagapsh who ran against Raul Khadzhimba, a Moscow protege. Following Bagapsh's death in 2011, Ankvab won the presidential elections without any particular objections from Russia,

but also without Moscow's enthusiastic support.

Now the former KGB officer turned opposition leader Khadzhimba — whom Vladislav Surkov had unsuccessfully backed in 2004 — is taking revenge for the defeat of a decade ago. And he is acting in concert with the Russian administration that has finally advanced a figure on the tiny chessboard of Abkhazia who enjoys a position that Moscow had hoped to achieve back in the 2004 elections.

The residents of Abkhazia are euphoric over Ankvab's resignation and are counting on his successor — whether the favored Raul Khadzhimba or someone else — to turn around the country's struggling economy and carry out political reforms that would shift some authority from the president to the parliament. However, those people who are now in raptures are headed toward inevitable disappointment.

One reason is that the Constitution of Abkhazia requires that early presidential elections be held before any changes are made to the political system. That means the balance of power between the president and parliament will remain unchanged.

What is more, every presidential contender will fight to achieve the broadest possible power. The winner is unlikely to agree to limit those powers once in office, especially if he has embarked on the politically risky path of economic reform.

For Abkhazia, economic reform essentially means opening the domestic market to outside investors — a task made more difficult by the inertia of enormous public opposition. Abkhazia's aversion to foreign investors stems from the fear that they might destroy the republic's competitive advantage as an inexpensive holiday destination for Russians of modest means, and from the knowledge that investors might ultimately call into question Abkhazia's hard-won sovereignty more than the fact that the republic relies on Russia to finance two-thirds of its budget.

There is no good way out of this predicament: if Abkhazia does not open itself up to investors, the percentage of the budget financed by Russia will grow even as the economy itself shrinks.

To put that in perspective, Russian aid to Abkhazia totaled 6 billion rubles (\$171 million) from 2010 to 2012, but with Moscow facing greater financial limitations now, that figure has fallen below 1 billion rubles (\$28.4 million). With the same number of people trying to secure a piece of a significantly smaller pie has led to greater political competition and turmoil.

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