

Why Is the Leader of Separatist Abkhazia Stepping Down?

By [Moscow Times Reporter](#)

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A man tears down the iron fence of the Abkhazian presidential administration building in Sokhumi.

Dmitry Feoktistov / TASS

The parliament of Georgia's breakaway region of Abkhazia on Tuesday [approved](#) the resignation of its Russia-backed President Aslan Bzhania following days of anti-government unrest.

"In order to maintain stability and constitutional order in the country...I resign from the post of President of the Republic of Abkhazia," Aslan Bzhania said in a [statement](#) earlier in the day.

Bzhania's resignation is part of a [bilateral agreement](#) between the government and the opposition reached on Monday, which also mandated the resignation of Prime Minister Alexandr Ankvab and required protesters [to vacate](#) government buildings that they seized last week.

Abkhazia's Vice President Badre Gunba is set to head the interim government until the new president is voted into office.

Though officials are yet to set the presidential election date, Bzhania has already announced plans to put forth his candidacy.

Opposition protests

Protests [initially broke out](#) in Abkhazia's capital Sokhumi on Oct. 11 following the detention of five activists opposing a controversial investment treaty with Russia.

Though this initial unrest was quelled 24 hours later upon the release of all detainees, protests [renewed on Friday](#) when Abkhazia's parliament was set to ratify a bilateral agreement with Moscow that would grant an array of economic benefits to Russian investors — including an eight-year tax and customs duty exemption.

Thousands gathered near the government buildings complex in Sokhumi — which includes the parliament and presidential administration buildings — on Friday morning.

Protesters [rammed](#) the fence surrounding the building and clashed with security forces after breaching the barrier.

Embed:

Law enforcement [deployed](#) tear gas and stun grenades, while protesters hurled stones and sticks at security forces. Gunfire was also [reported](#) at the scene.

The crowd then moved to storm and occupy the parliament building vowing to vacate it only after Bzhania resigned.

Moscow's hand

The controversial Russian-Abkhazian agreement — which some in Abkhazia dubbed a “benefits package for [Russian] oligarchs” — was backed by Bzhania, marking the politician's second attempt to push through legislation that would facilitate the influx of Russian money into the region.

Over the past two years, Bzhaniya actively promoted the so-called “apartments bill,” which would open the real estate market of the Black Sea coast region to Russians by lifting the existing ban on foreign ownership of residential estate.

The bill's initial approval by parliamentary committees earlier this year was also met with a wave of protests, promoting its eventual [withdrawal](#) from the parliament in July.

“On the Abkhaz side, the main fear is that if they open up the region to Russians, then they would be literally swallowed by the Russian presence,” Olesya Vartanyan, an expert on security and conflicts in the South Caucasus, [told](#) The Moscow Times last week.

“Ever since...Russia recognized Abkhazia [as an independent state in 2008], there was a

demand from it to soften or change the local legislation to allow foreign citizens to purchase property and land,” said Vartanyan.

Last week’s unrest in Sokhumi prompted Russia’s Foreign Ministry to advise its nationals to avoid travel to Abkhazia, which neighbors Russia on the Black Sea coast.

"[Abkhazia’s] opposition forces...did not consider it possible to resolve disagreements with the legitimate government of the country through a civilized dialogue,” Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova [said](#) Friday.

“It is obvious that situations like this do not at all contribute to attracting foreign investments, which render to be important for the socio-economic development of the republic,” Zakharova added.

Hundreds of Russian tourists moved to cancel their planned vacations at Abkhazia’s Black Sea resorts last week, [according](#) to Russia’s Tourism Providers’ Association (ATOR).

With its pleasant subtropical climate and scenic nature, Abkhazia has become a popular travel destination for Russians whose beach vacation options became limited after the Kremlin’s invasion of Ukraine.

Russian nationals do not require international travel documents to enter the region and can cross the border by showing a domestic ID.

In 2024, around 1.4 million Russian tourists visited the small mountainous region with a population of just over 240,000 people, [according](#) to Russia’s Interfax news agency.

The number of Russian visitors in Abkhazia [was projected](#) to grow further to 1.6 million in 2025, but “unrest and political instability in the region are forcing tourists to reconsider their plans,” according to ATOR.

The Kremlin, on the other hand, is unlikely to change its grand plans for overtaking Abkhazia’s real estate market even if the opposition comes to power — though it might allow for “certain concessions” in the controversial bilateral agreement — [according](#) to an anonymous source in the Russian government cited by the independent Vyorstka news website.

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