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“The Georgian-Abkhazian Peace Process”

Irakli Alasania
Chairman of the Abkhaz government-in-exile
Special Representative of the Georgian President for the Abkhazian Conflict

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Caucasus Initiative

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On April 29, 2005, the CSIS Russia and Eurasia Program’s Caucasus Initiative hosted a seminar with Irakli Alasania, the chairman of Abkhazia’s government-in-exile and special representative of the Georgian President for the Abkhazian conflict. CSIS fellow Cory Welt moderated the discussion. What follows is a summary of Alasania’s remarks.

Since the end of military confrontation in September 1993, attempts to resolve the Abkhazian conflict have been mired in a lengthy process of negotiations. Past efforts to move the process forward have been unsuccessful, both because memories of recent war made it difficult for Georgians and Abkhaz to engage in productive negotiations and because Russia, who served as both mediator and party to the conflict, did not encourage meaningful negotiations.

Changes in the Abkhaz and Georgian leaderships have now made productive negotiations possible. In 2004, the Abkhaz population expressed their intent “to build a more capable society” and not succumb to Russian pressure by electing a leader that, unlike his Russian-supported opponent, was willing to hold a real dialogue with Georgia. The victor was subsequently forced to sign a deal with his opponent, however, whereby the latter became vice-president.

Before, Russia was the only country the Abkhaz believed could offer them security. This is no longer the case, and mistrust of Russia in Abkhazia is growing. The main power ministers in the republic are not appointed by the Abkhaz leader, but from Moscow. The Abkhaz are looking for ways to get out of their situation, and this is one reason Georgia’s approach toward the conflict is changing.

Georgia’s new approach centers on a “completely new philosophy” of conflict resolution. In the past, Georgia sought Abkhazia’s total isolation, political and economic. Georgia now recognizes, however, that this isolation policy “has not gotten us any further in negotiations.” The Georgian government is seeking possibilities for greater interaction with Abkhazia, to “legitimize trade” between Georgia and Abkhazia and to promote joint economic projects.

Alasania emphasized prospects for Georgian-Abkhaz cooperation in Abkhazia's southernmost Gali region, home of many of the Georgian internally displaced persons (IDPs) that were forced to leave Abkhazia during the war. Successfully cooperating in Gali is important not only to improve the lives of those that have returned to the region but because the region links Abkhazia and Georgia together. Georgia has proposed to develop in Gali small-scale rehabilitation, humanitarian, health, and credit projects.

Thanks in part to Georgia's successful efforts to disband guerilla groups operating in Gali, Georgia hopes the Abkhaz will be more willing to discuss supporting these joint projects, as well as other improvements for the local population, including the establishment of a human rights office, Georgian-language education, and the insertion of UN civilian police to train and supervise local Georgian and Abkhaz police to conduct joint law enforcement operations.

Georgian law enforcement structures have also done "solid work" in the Abkhazian region of Kodori, controlled by Georgia but which for a long time operated as an isolated criminal enclave. Such efforts "make Georgia more attractive for the Abkhaz side to deal with."

Democratic changes in Georgia have "tremendously helped" Georgia's efforts to open a dialogue with the Abkhaz. Alasania indicated that the Abkhaz are interested to learn more about Tbilisi's struggle against corruption, and that they are willing to listen to propositions to peacefully resolve the conflict like that which Georgia has offered the South Ossetians. Unfortunately, however, Russia prevents the Abkhaz from engaging in this kind of dialogue with Georgia.

Because of Russian controls over Abkhazia, Georgia recognizes the need to move slowly. Alasania countenanced patience and indicated that Georgia is trying to "give more room" to the Abkhaz to "work on their own...population" to get them to be more receptive to the idea of coexistence with Georgians. He indicated that the Abkhaz have the desire to "change the environment around them, but they need help from the international community."

Alasania expressed hope that President Bush will take advantage of his upcoming visit to Tbilisi to "make perfectly clear" that the U.S. supports Georgia's territorial integrity and the peaceful resolution of conflicts. Georgia would like to see the US encourage Russia to "get in the game" more positively and for the US to itself be "more proactive" in facilitating dialogue between the two conflicting sides.

Georgia appreciates the EU's interest in participating in the conflict resolution process. The Europeans have offered support for rehabilitation projects and have performed a useful function by asking the Georgian and Abkhaz sides to specify their needs and desires in this sphere. Alasania observed that the EU's "increasing interest should be translated into more concrete steps."

Alasania also noted a desire to bring Turkey into the conflict resolution process, possibly in an independent capacity. Alasania expressed a belief that Turkey is the one country Abkhaz now feel secure dealing with. Turkish involvement could help bring together the Georgian and Abkhaz diasporas living in Turkey which could, in turn, bring the official Georgian and Abkhaz positions closer together.

According to Alasania, the role of Western countries goes beyond mediation. “We really need to have Abkhazia exposed to Western values and democratic values....This is what it is all about.” This can only be done, however, if Georgians and Abkhazians are able to have direct contact. “This is what we’re trying to do. It is not easy...but we are slowly but surely making progress.”

Alasania emphasized that Georgian policy towards Abkhazia is now “consistent” and “will not change.” Georgia acknowledges the de facto Abkhazian government as “the leaders of the Abkhaz side” and will persist in pursuing “only peaceful means” and a “policy of de-isolation.” Alasania acknowledged that it is not “going to be easy...because so many people were devastated during this conflict...but twelve years have passed, and it helps, and some wounds are already healed.”

In conclusion, Alasania stressed that in seeking assistance from the international community, the Georgian government understands they are not yet “talking about results.” Instead, Georgia seeks assistance on “how to start...a meaningful dialogue to bring these war-torn societies [back] together.”

Julia Leikin and Cory Welt