

The Abkhaz Dilemma and the Czar's Dog

Lincoln A. Mitchell

April 19, 2010

There is an old story about a pogrom in Czarist Russia. During the pogrom, attackers break into a Jewish home, destroy much of the meager property inside and threaten to kill the man of the house. The terrified man pleads for his life and is finally spared under the condition that he teach the Czar's dog to talk within one year. If he fails, his attackers promise they will come back and kill him. When the attackers leave, the man's wife says to him "Are you crazy? How are you ever going to teach the Czar's dog to talk?" The man responds "Who knows? In a year, the dog might die, or the Czar might die."

I was reminded of this story on a recent trip to Abkhazia. Abkhazia is, of course, according to international law still part of Georgia, but the Abkhaz leadership despite being recognized by only four countries, view themselves as an independent state. The pretense of Abkhaz leadership is severely compromised by the extreme dependence of Abkhazia on Russia for security, economic survival and almost all contacts with the outside world.

Georgia's dilemma with regards to Abkhazia is clear. Georgia seeks to reintegrate Abkhazia into Georgia and reassert its sovereignty over Abkhazia. However, this task, which has never been easy, is made more difficult because the presence of Russian security forces in Abkhazia makes it easier for the Abkhaz leadership to ignore Georgian overtures of any kind. Moreover, the steady growth of Russian influence in Abkhazia means that the challenge gets more difficult as time passes.

The Abkhaz dilemma is somewhat more complicated. They are no longer worried about a possible military effort by Tbilisi to bring Abkhazia back under its control as the presence of Russian security forces in Abkhazia all but preclude this. The Abkhaz leadership is also not very concerned about ceding much of their real sovereignty to Russia as they see this as the price they have to pay for nominal independence and a clear break with Tbilisi.

Abkhazia's biggest concern is not that Russian influence is too strong, but that Russia may at some point in the future abandon them in favor of a better relationship with Georgia. Thus, Abkhazia's current feeling of security and sense that it can safely ignore Georgia is grounded in the tension between Russia and Georgia, which remains extremely high following the war the two countries fought in August of 2008.

At the moment, it may seem like this tension will not go away, thus securing Abkhazia's current status for the foreseeable future but, the dog might die or the Czar might die. In other words, the current situation, including the relationship between Russia and Georgia is likely to last for a while, but it cannot be taken as a given. However, unlike the Jewish man hoping for the death of the dog or the Czar, Abkhazia's hopes, metaphorically

speaking, lie with the dog and the Czar having a good long life and there being little change in the relationship between Georgia and Russia.

While, for the short term the odds favor Abkhazia, after that it is less certain. In Georgia, while support for that country's western orientation and aspirations to join western multi-lateral organizations remains strong, it is not impossible that the government that comes to power after presidential elections in 2013 will seek to de-escalate tensions with Russia. It is also almost certain that whoever succeeds Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili will bring a personal style that is less confrontational than that of the current president.

Moreover, regardless of what hawks in Washington and Tbilisi may say, it is not a given that Russia will always have leadership that seeks conflict and tension with Georgia. Russian leadership might decide that better relations with Georgia, particularly a post-Saakashvili Georgia, are something they can tradeoff with the west for something else they want more. This is not imaginable now, but if Putin and Saakashvili both give way to leaders for whom Georgia-Russia politics is not additionally complicated by personal animus, this would become more conceivable.

While Abkhazia may feel that it can safely ignore Tbilisi now, that feeling is based on an Abkhaz-Russia relationship that may not last forever. Georgia's challenge is to slow down Abkhaz dependence on Russia before Abkhazia wins recognition by a few more countries or otherwise strengthens its currently tenuous claim on statehood. The Abkhaz challenge is to concretize their gains as much as possible before change comes to Russia, Georgia or the relationship between the two countries. Both Tbilisi and Sukhumi are racing against the clock, and at least in the Abkhaz case, hoping the Czar and the dog stay alive for at least a few more years.