The inauguration of Abkhazia's new president, Raul Khajimba, will take place on 25 Sept. As the republic's fourth president, he is well aware of the people's hopes and aspirations and the challenges facing Abkhaz society: creation of a working economic model, improvement of living standards, societal consolidation, strengthening of relations with Russia, and development of relations in the international arena to whatever extent possible.

Georgia sat on the sidelines during the presidential election in the breakaway autonomous republic, but it nevertheless watched intently as the process played out. What follows is an analysis of the near-term prognosis for the situation. Alexander Rusetsky, a noted analyst and the director of the Caucasus Institute for Regional Security, shared his thoughts on how the relationship between Tbilisi and Sukhumi might unfold, what sorts of prospects exist for nurturing contacts, and how the regional situation is shaping up going forward.

Q. A new president is about to take office in Abkhazia. Should we expect that to somehow foster a better relationship between Tbilisi and Sukhumi, with more efficacy than the multiparty negotiations in Geneva that have been the only way of bringing the two sides together?

A. I'm not ruling out a new round of confrontation in Abkhazia. Following the undoing of the unionists who supported Tbilisi, a dispute started between the separatists, who support independence for Abkhazia, and the irredentists, those of a pro-Moscow bent who want to join Russia. Irredentist-minded political forces are now rising to power, leaving the separatists out in the cold. So the crisis of legitimacy in Abkhazia (from Tbilisi's standpoint) has risen to a whole new level.

The present administration does not reflect the interests of the majority of the population of Abkhazia. To support my point, let me draw attention to the 200,000 people who were expelled from Abkhazia, and to the more than 20,000 Georgians still living in Abkhazia who were denied the right to vote in the last election. These people were driven out of political life. The supporters of Abkhaz independence, the separatists, may soon find themselves in a similar position. I am leaving open the possibility that the persecution of civil society and of leaders of existing NGOs will intensify. Through entrapment, they will be “caught” consorting with "Western intelligence services." The same scenario that is playing out in Russia will spread into Russia's spheres of influence in the Near Abroad.

On the other hand, Tbilisi could link up with the irredentists, who have Moscow behind them. Up to this point, Tbilisi and the West have bet unsuccessfully on the separatists. Although this may seem strange to say, the new format could end up working better, for the simple reason that Moscow is not going to block it. Every attempt to establish a basis for strategic talks with the separatists has failed because Moscow is not amenable to such action. The Abkhaz separatists neither had nor could have had sufficient pull to wage the politics of independence.

If negotiations bear fruit and the irredentists, unionists and separatists start cooperating, Abkhazia may achieve a greater level of economic and political independence and sustainable development.

The Geneva course is dead, in my opinion. Moscow and Tbilisi have to be the principal parties in the negotiations. The fragmented political segments of Abkhaz and South Ossetian society must be full-fledged participants in the
negotiating process. International organizations should have clear entitlements to balance the asymmetry of tiny Georgia on the one side and nuclear great power Russia on the other.

Q: Before 2008, that is, prior to Russia's recognition of the sovereignty of Abkazia and South Ossetia, many joint projects (Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian, and even three-way or multilateral) were carried out. Now what? Are any of the several hundred NGOs still there and continuing to address the problems of both places, since they have a partner on the other side?

A. There are nongovernmental organizations like that. But they are under extremely tight control, especially in Tskhinvali, and are considered agents of Western political persuasion. Further problems have arisen for them as well, rather serious ones, according to my sources. However, I think that if the West, Moscow and Tbilisi institute the right policies for the job, it is possible to create mechanisms to ensure serviceable civil society institutions in these regions. In that respect, I want to mention that NGOs everywhere in divided societies, including organizations created by those driven from their homes, must have regular upkeep. The institutions of civil society mustn't function as tools of confrontation or a means of advancing the agenda of one geopolitical actor or another. Instead they should be peacekeeping resources that focus on enhancing civil safety and providing sustainable development for communities and society as a whole. I hope Moscow can reassess the situation and find some way to engage the West in a dialogue on cooperation to support the development of civil society institutions.

Q. Can Tbilisi be said to have any real ties to Sukhumi and Tskhinvali, along humanitarian lines at least?

A. They have always had ties at every level. No matter how the conflict evolves, the attraction between people is growing stronger, as is the hatred of all the political figures who have inflicted this ongoing tragedy on the people for more than 20 years.

Q. A number of Abkhaz leaders have stated the premise that if the fate of our people is to be assimilated, then we will assimilate with the Russians. Is there any chance of overcoming such profound dislike for Georgia?

A. When phrases like that circulate in the mass media, the result is an escalation of conflict and a degradation of national dignity. The Abkhaz are bearers of a complex psychosocial phenomenon. Abkhaz society is not homogeneous; it is filled with an assortment of conflicts. In general, "Abkhaz" can be regarded as having connotations of both ethnicity and citizenship. The muhajirs who were banished to Turkey by the Russian Empire generally do not identify themselves with the term "Abkhaz." It's the same thing as when an Azerbaijani from Shusha is referred to as an Artsakhite. Thus the constitution adopted after the war is called the Constitution of the Republic of Abkhazia (Apsna). And that is not wordplay; it is the crux of the conflict. Early in the 1990s, well-known practitioners of peace studies deemed the Abkhaz conflict a philological one. They did so with good reason. Some residents of Abkhazia detest Georgians, some Russians, others Armenians, and still others Turks. This resulted from specific traumas of body and soul that the people suffered. So it has to be dealt with as a psychosocial problem, not a foundation on which to erect political structures.

Q. Abkhazia insists on following its own path to development. South Ossetia occasionally talks about joining the Russian Federation. How realistic do you consider the plans of these partially recognized republics?

The question itself uses terminology that creates an inaccurate picture of what's happened. These are regions of conflict. Societies are splintered here. So the phrasing "Abkhazia insists on following its own path to development" represents the position of the Abkhaz separatists but not the position of the unionists who desire reunification with Georgia or the position of the irredentists who seek maximum integration with the Russian Federation. And the phrasing "South Ossetia periodically speaks of joining Russia" expresses the wishes of the Ossetian irredentists, but it does not reflect the interests of the Ossetian separatists who want independence. And that also leaves out the people who were victims of ethnic and political purges and who are understandably unionists with a pro-Georgia orientation. It is with profound conviction that I say this: These quasi-political formations will have no chance of success unless they strive to build within themselves an ingrained civil peace.

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