Georgia and the Security of the “Sochi-2014” Olympic Games

According to the recent surveys of the American National Democratic Institute (NDI), unresolved relationships of Tbilisi and Moscow are among the most pressing concerns of the people of Georgia. Hopes for improvement are concerned with the new authorities and the Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili. Of course, there is a small progress: the opening of the Russian market for Georgian products, restore of regular flights instead of the present charter, as well as the possible liberalization of the visa procedures with Russia.

Emerging positive trend allowed Ivanishvili to announce the completion of the first phase of improvements in the bilateral relations with Russia. Still full normalization is out of the question. According to the Georgian position, it can only be possible when Russia withdraws recognition of the sovereignty of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, along with withdrawing troops from these territories. From Russia's perspective the normalization process is stalled by the refusal of the Georgian authorities to restore jurisdiction claims in the former autonomous regions. However, Moscow is ready even now to restore the diplomatic relations broken by Tbilisi. But such a move, according to the Georgian side, will only promote the existing situation that is not acceptable for Georgia. Therefore, the beginning of the second phase of improvements in the bilateral relations may be discussed at this stage.

According to the Georgian side, the starting point may be the Olympics in Sochi. The former authorities of Georgia have done a lot to aggravate Russia in this domain. The former Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili has addressed a handful of speeches and letters to IOC President Jacques Rogge claiming that the Olympics cannot be hosted “near the zone of occupation” by a country that “carries out aggression against Georgia”. The Georgian authorities have threatened the world to boycott the games, to sabotage them, taking every step possible on the international arena to transfer the games to a more “suitable” location.

Naturally, such a policy to devalue the Russian "national idea" of the Sochi Olympics brought Moscow to white-hot. On the top of it all, Georgian authorities began to patronize the Circassian idea. At a number of conferences in Tbilisi, organized and financed by the Jamestown Foundation, there was no shortage of foreign guests that supported the requirements of some Circassian diaspora groups to recognize genocide of its people in the Russian Empire, and as a result, cancel the Olympics in the places of mass extermination and persecution.

Of course it is hard to imagine that the IOC would be on the bit of Georgia, since the role it plays in this organization in comparison with Russia is rather insignificant. It’s even harder to imagine that in such a pragmatic era as ours, as rational an organization as the IOC, would be suddenly deeply concerned with the internal Russian political issues, which dates back almost to a hundred years. The campaign to disrupt the Olympic Games in Sochi initially seemed doomed. But it couldn’t but irritate Moscow that spends hundreds of millions of dollars on construction of the Olympic venues and the infrastructural upgrades. And suddenly there were the more unpleasant occurrences that the Georgian blames started to appear. In 2011 Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said, referring to the matters related to the Organization of the Olympic Games, that :“there are some problems with Georgia requiring the attention of diplomats and security forces”. The meaning of this became clear later in the summer of the next year.

Information or rumours that Georgian authorities had actually resumed the practice of attracting North Caucasian militants were confirmed shortly before parliamentary elections in the country in the fall of 2012. Then in the vicinity
of the Dagestan segment of the Russian-Georgian border in Lapankuri the Georgian security forces executed an
unfamiliarly strange operation of eliminating a terrorist armed group. It was not clear where did this group come
from, where it went and what were its objectives? It is still not as of now. There is an investigation on Lapankuri case
taking place in Tbilisi, brought around by the new authorities.

But in those days the locals told the Georgian journalists that tried to sniff something out, that shortly before the
events in Lapankuri, that they saw young people from the republics of the Northern Caucasus in the Pankisi Gorge
(a place of compact residence of the Kists (Chechens ethnic Georgia) and refugees from Chechnya), who arrived
from all across Europe. The strangers made a short sojourn in Pankisi. As it became clear from the testimonies of the
detainees during the Lapankuri operation, the Georgian military forces were transferring the North Caucasians
from Europe to the conspiratorial apartments in Tbilisi, promising to some of them to provide them an access to
Chechnya and Dagestan for the continuation of the "war of liberation", the others were told something different. But
the standby period took too long, and many of them decided to leave Georgia and return to their countries of
temporary or permanent residence. Of course, all these "odd parts" in the shadow of the threats of Georgian
authorities to make things all lovely for the Olympics in Sochi could not remain undetected by the Russian
authorities. And it is only natural that once in power, Bidzina Ivanishvili, who proclaimed the normalization of
relations with the northern neighbor a top priority, tried to address this source of constant irritation.

First, Bidzina Ivanishvili announced that Georgia will not boycott the Olympic Games, the Georgian athletes who will
manage to go through the qualifying competitions: a few skiers, skaters, a total of 10 people will travel to Sochi.
Secondly, he has expressed readiness to attend the opening ceremony of the Sports Forum if he happen to get
invited. And finally, Ivanishvili announced Georgia's readiness to give maximum assistance in ensuring the security
of the Russian Olympic. However, the adoption of the Georgian proposals by the Russian side does not mean that the
next step would be the restoration of the diplomatic relations, but this will become a major step in increasing the
mutual trust and in the transition to second phase of improvement in bilateral relations, clarified Georgian Prime
Minister.

“Winter Olympics Games 2014 will take place near the Georgian border, so we are ready to help Russia in ensuring
security. Our attitude to this issue is to assist the safe holding of the Olympics as much as possible. We should be
able to keep our borders safe and be prepared to cooperate with Russia on any matters of interest,” – the Prime
minister said. “The Olympics in Sochi is a very good reason to streamline relations with Russia, and if it wasn't, we
should have invent another reason ... Maybe it is the Olympics who will become a turning point in our relations.” – he
added.

The question is what kind of security assistance to the Olympic Games Georgia can offer to Russia as the country
capabilities in this domain can hardly be compared, and, as a consequence, should one interpret these statements as
a mere PR?

Vakhtang Maisaya, the Georgian expert on security, states that the situation should be seen as a fundamental
change of Tbilisian policy towards Moscow. “Today it is not a secret anymore that terrorist groups were trained in
Georgia under the supervision of the Saakashvili Government. There are two facts to prove it: the events in
Lapankuri, that were staged by the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and an arrest of a terrorist in Turkey, who had a
passport of Georgian citizen under “Papaskiri” surname. Under the rule of Saakashvili Georgia had become a
country that, say, would harbor terrorists providing them with the time necessary to prepare new attacks. The new
leaders of Georgia have disengaged themselves from that policy, which resulted in a number of military operations.
This confirms the statement made by the Prime Minister about Georgia's readiness to contribute to the
strengthening of the security of the Olympic Games in Sochi”, - said Vakhtang Maisaya to the "New Eastern
Outlook".

According to the expert, the new Georgian authorities can hardly be expected to continue the policy of the Circassian
groups’ support since this it only did occur due to the anti-Russian moods promoted by the former government, the
actual Government of Georgia has quite an opposite attitude towards Moscow. As far as the actual cooperation is
concerned, the Russian and the Georgian structures may supply each other with necessary information in the run-up
to the Olympics, concerning the fact that this form of cooperation is already in place. “It is being carried out on the
three different levels: on the diplomatic lines through the Swiss Embassy, intermediating between Russia and
Georgia in the absence of diplomatic relations, through Interpol, and in a direct way, which will be used, if a specific
terrorist threat suddenly appears. Terrorism is an international problem, going beyond bilateral relations. This is an
overall problem, so cooperation against it is a natural process,” - said Vakhtang Maisaya.
Yuri Simonyan, columnist for "Nezavisimaya Gazeta"; exclusively for “New Eastern Outlook”.