



Abkhazia Again: The UN Helicopter Shootdown

Robert M. Cutler

Earlier this month, a helicopter carrying members of the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) was shot down after taking off from Sukhumi, capital of the secessionist region of Abkhazia. It crashed, killing all nine on board. At first glance, it might seem that some party to the secessionist conflict—whether Georgian, Russian, or Abkhaz—was trying to take advantage of the world's attention being focused on Afghanistan, in order to pursue tactical, strategic, or political aims in Georgia. However, the situation is more complicated than that.

The firing came from near the Kodori Gorge, a river valley that is the de facto boundary between the part of Abkhazia that Georgia controls and the part that the rebels control. To get a sense of the distances involved, it is worth noting that Kodori Gorge is about forty miles inside the old, official administrative boundary of Abkhazia with the rest of Georgia. It is about twelve miles down the coast from Abkhazia's capital Sukhumi, which is in turn about twenty miles down the coast from Gudauta. Gudauta is home to a Soviet-era air force base that Russians agreed to evacuate this summer but have not yet done.

There are about 500 Chechen and Georgian fighters in Kodori Gorge. The Chechens in all likelihood came from Pankisi Gorge, a region to the northeast on the Russian border populated by Georgians of Chechen descent (a separate group called Kists in Georgia), where Chechens fleeing the Russian military operations have been confined since 1999. They have been there ever since, because the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe patrols the Georgian-Russian border, blocking their return (as well as blocking Russian incursions into Georgia). Russia has cranked up pressure lately to be allowed to go over the Georgia border into Pankisi Gorge in "hot pursuit" after them.

So probably these Chechens, with a Georgian military escort, were trying to take a long way around (like a buttonhook play), to re-enter Russia through the North Caucasus west of Chechnya and then make their way back. Some of the Georgians could also be partisan forces originally from Abkhazia itself. The Abkhaz insurrection in 1992-1993 chased thousands of Georgians, as well as ethnic Armenians and others, out of Abkhazia, creating a massive refugee problem that still hobbles the Georgian social-services system and has important ramifications for the country's politics.

About 1,300 Russian troops are in Abkhazia as peace-keepers from the Commonwealth of Independent States, under the terms of a Georgian-Abkhazian agreement from 1994 that helped to end the fighting. Planes bombed Kodori Gorge on October 9, but the Russian command says these were not their planes. Russian peace-keepers now say that they will let humanitarian supplies such as food into Kodori Gorge, where the Chechens and Georgians appear to be confined without a clear way out, but that they will not allow other supplies such as munitions to pass. Most recently, it is reported that Georgian partisan forces (but not Chechens) have been skirmishing with Abkhaz forces in Kelasuri, a suburban railway station only a few miles from the city center of Sukhumi.

Meanwhile three political developments have intervened. First, the Georgian Parliament has voted to terminate the Russian peace-keepers' mandate on three months' notice, as the agreement provides. Second, the Abkhazian authorities have declared their intention to seek to become part of the Russian Federation, under provisions of an amendment to the Russian constitution passed several months ago that defines how territories not now part of the Federation may join. Third, President Vladimir

Putin has publicly declared that it is Russia's state policy to respect the territorial integrity of Georgia.

The impartiality of the Russian forces in Georgia has long been questioned. It is known that in the early 1990s, political forces in Moscow hostile to Georgia's President Eduard Shevardnadze (because they blamed him, as Gorbachev's Foreign Minister, for negotiating away the Soviet bloc in Europe and ultimately for the disintegration of the USSR itself) openly provided military assistance to the Abkhaz revolt. The Georgians would probably like to see the Russian peace-keepers replaced by Ukrainians.

Russia inherited four bases in Georgia from the Soviet military. After negotiations, the first one closed on schedule earlier this year. Gudauta is contentious because it is in Abkhaz-held territory. The Russians don't want Georgians to have full access to it, because they think that might mean NATO will eventually use it. The Georgians, who complain that the Abkhaz rebels already get help from Gudauta as well as from the CIS-sponsored Russian peace-keepers,

don't want it to fall into Abkhaz hands.

Clearly, none of this has anything directly to do with Afghanistan or Islamic militancy: although Russia never misses an occasion to point out that Chechens are Muslims, that they have engaged in terrorist acts in Russia such as blowing up apartment complexes (although some Russians think the KGB's successor organization did this to have a pretext to invade Chechnya), and that they have documented international connections—including the presence of ethnic Chechen fighters in Afghanistan. But although Russia appears not to have incited the present situation, it has everything to do with Russia and Georgia.

Georgia and Russia need a state-to-state treaty. Shevardnadze and Yeltsin signed one in the mid-1990s but the Russian Duma never ratified it. Such a treaty—a new one would have to be drafted now—could also cover relations between South Ossetia, another secessionist region of Georgia on the Russian border (but where things are less acute than in Abkhazia), and

North Ossetia, which is part of the Russian Federation.

Shevardnadze cannot succeed himself under the Georgian constitution, and he has declared he will not seek to change the constitution to allow him to serve another term. Some Georgian ministries knew about the plan to evacuate the Chechen rebels from Pankisi Gorge, but most did not. Some ministers and members of parliament attribute the plan to Shevardnadze personally. Recriminations over its failure are now starting, all the stormier since reliable information on the situation in Kodori Gorge is hard to get in Tbilisi. Even within the Tbilisi political elite, not to mention the Moscow political elite, moves are being made around this crisis with an eye toward the post-Shevardnadze era. And this is the real significance of the current events in Abkhazia.

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