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Nationalistic Georgians Have Their Own Problems With  
Minority Unrest

The nationalistic unrest that occasionally erupts in the Soviet Caucasus in anti-Russian manifestations took a different twist in recent weeks when demonstrators in the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia threatened to secede from Georgia and join the Russian Republic. The Abkhazis presumably believed that they would receive fairer treatment in the Russian Republic. It appears that Moscow made extraordinary efforts to satisfy some of the Abkhazian cultural and economic demands.

Coming in the wake of demonstrations in Tbilisi, the Abkhazian demonstrations strengthened the impression of eroding discipline in several areas of the Caucasus, giving the appearance that the authorities once again were able to quell disorders only by appeasing the demonstrators. At the same time, some central authorities doubtless found perverse pleasure in the spectacle of the party head of Georgia, the most fiercely anti-Russian republic in the Soviet Union, in confrontation with a minority that views Georgians rather than Russians as their oppressors. The Georgian leader may be saddled for the blame in letting problems in Abkhazia get out of hand.

The nationwide discussions of new republic constitutions apparently provided the impetus for the agitation in Abkhazia. Abkhazi nationalists reportedly carried out a letter-writing campaign from February to April in support of a constitutional amendment that would allow Abkhazia to secede from Georgia and become part of the Russian Republic. The Abkhazis evidently were further encouraged to believe that change was possible by the success the three Caucasian republics had in winning concessions from Moscow in April. As a result of anti-Russian demonstrations on 14 April in the Georgian capital of Tbilisi, Georgian was reinstated as the official language in the new Georgian constitution. On 20 April,

29 June 1978

6  
~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

#4

the first secretary of the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic was transferred to a Georgian Central Committee job in Tbilisi. The timing of his transfer suggests that it was related to nationality problems in his bailiwick.

Events in Abkhazia evidently came to a head in May, shortly before the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet was scheduled to vote on the new autonomous republic constitution. On 15 May, Moscow canceled a scheduled visit of US officials to Sukhumi, the capital of Abkhazia, because of "several disturbances of a local character." On 21 May, a large group of Abkhazians gathered in Sukhumi, demanding a wide variety of constitutional amendments to redress their grievances. Soviet party secretary Kapitonov, who apparently made a special trip to Sukhumi because of the demonstrations, addressed the crowd after Georgian party leader Shevardnadze's efforts to silence it were met with derision. Kapitonov rejected demands for secession and the proposal that Georgian be removed as one of the official languages of Abkhazia, but he seemed eager to pacify the Abkhazis on other issues. He revealed that the Georgian Central Committee had adopted a resolution aimed at eliminating shortcomings committed "at one time" and gave assurances that assistance from Moscow would also be forthcoming. Two weeks later a joint resolution from the central government and party apparatus was published that made major concessions to the Abkhazis. Even though Kapitonov's speech was markedly conciliatory, the crowd refused to disperse until it was announced that the session of the Abkhazian Supreme Soviet, scheduled for 26 May, was indefinitely postponed. The session finally was held on 6 June, at which time the constitution was "unanimously approved," according to the Georgian press.

Abkhazis have long resented Georgian domination. As recently as 1973, according to a Georgian newspaper, a "half-baked 'theory' was prevalent in Abkhazia that claimed responsible posts should be filled only by representatives of the indigenous nationality." Apparently, similar demands were made during the recent demonstrations.

29 June 1978

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

The present situation in Abkhazia, however, would seem to undermine the Abkhazis' claim for greater influence and control. Abkhazis compose less than 16 percent of the population of the Abkhazian Autonomous Republic, while Georgians constitute 41 percent. Even Russians, with 19 percent, outnumber Abkhazis. It seems likely that the reported figure of 30,000 demonstrators in Sukhumi is much inflated, unless large numbers of Russians joined with Abkhazis in the anti-Georgian demonstration. There are only 77,000 Abkhazis in the entire republic.

As things now stand, the representation of Abkhazis in important political posts appears grossly disproportionate to their share of the population. Since 1958 the first secretary of Abkhazia has evidently been an ethnic Abkhazian. Of the delegates<sup>?</sup> to the all-union Supreme Soviet elected from Abkhazia, five were Abkhazian and only three Georgian.

The Abkhazian case for seceding from Georgia is weakened further by the fact that there is no contiguous area dominated by Abkhazis to which they could attach themselves, and which could offer political support for such an initiative. By contrast, for example, the inhabitants of another turbulent area in the Caucasus, the Nagorno-Karabakh Autonomous Oblast, are able to make a better argument that their oblast should be transferred from one union republic to another. The Karabakh Oblast is part of Azerbaydzhan, yet over 80 percent of its population is Armenian and it lies close to the border of the Armenian Republic. In 1975, according to the Azerbaydzhan Republic newspaper, virtually the entire leadership of the Karabakh Oblast was ousted for supporting a movement to detach the oblast from Azerbaydzhan and join it to Armenia.

In recent years authorities in Moscow have been loath to carry out any major republic boundary changes, whether for economic or nationality reasons, because of opposition from local vested interests. Kapitonov also indicated that "foreign policy" considerations made the transfer of Abkhazia from Georgia to Russia undesirable, implying that the leadership fears setting a dangerous precedent should a foreign country such as Romania ever

29 June 1978

8  
~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

advance irredentist claims on Soviet territory. Reflecting the political sensitivity of the question of boundary changes, Kapitonov indicated that the secession proposal had been given serious and comprehensive examination by central organs.

There are indications that Shevardnadze may become a scapegoat in the Abkhazian affair. He probably would have preferred that the grievances of the Abkhazis not be aired publicly. Instead, the events in Abkhazia have been given unusual publicity in the Georgian press. On 7 June, for example, the entire front page of the republic's major newspaper and most of the second page was devoted to Abkhazia. The fact that this material, which included Shevardnadze's muted admission of guilt, was published in the republic but not in the central press suggests that Moscow especially wanted Georgians to know about the anti-Georgian agitation of a minority within their own republic.

It may well be that some central authorities attempted to turn the Abkhazian demonstrations to their advantage. Moscow, which in the past has not been above resorting to divide-and-rule tactics in the polyglot Caucasian areas, is probably still smarting from the April demonstrations in Tbilisi, which necessitated an ungraceful retreat on the Georgian language issue. Some leaders in Moscow may have believed that playing up Abkhazian discontent would give the unruly Georgians a healthy dose of their own medicine by driving home to them that they, too, are vulnerable to criticism as overweening masters and are dependent on Moscow's backing for continued domination over their own minorities.

Shevardnadze may be seen as particularly culpable because of his role at the time of the Tbilisi demonstration. After receiving a flood of letters protesting the removal of Georgian as the republic's official language in the Georgian draft constitution, Shevardnadze reportedly tried to persuade Moscow to reverse its decision on this issue. It seems clear that the Georgian police and party apparatus knew about the Tbilisi demonstration in advance, and it is rumored that they did not intervene because they were more loyal to Georgia than to Moscow.

29 June 1978

9

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~

Perhaps because of his vulnerability on the nationality issue, Shevardnadze went out of his way to express loyalty to Moscow, according to the published version of his Sukhumi speech. He made an unusual reference, for example, to the Soviet peoples being "headed by" the Russian people.

Party officials in Azerbaydzhan and Armenia, who have national minorities of their own to worry about, may also be feeling pressure to make amends for the behavior of their people in opposing the Russifying changes in the draft constitutions of their republics. In a speech on 18 May, Azerbaydzhan party leader Aliyev discussed at length the necessity of improving the quality of Russian language teaching in his republic. (~~CONFIDENTIAL~~)

29 June 1978

10

~~CONFIDENTIAL~~