

## Russian-Georgian Crisis in Motion

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**07.05.2008**

**On April 16, Russian President Vladimir Putin issued a decree instructing the Russian government to officially establish legal relations with separatist regimes of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.**

The enforcement of Putin's ukase would entail opening of Russian government representations in the two regions internationally recognised as belonging to the sovereign territory of Georgia. The representations would be manned with active diplomats employed in the foreign service who would also offer consular services. In addition, the representations would house officials from other Russian ministries and lower-level government agencies who would promote mutual economic cooperation between Russia and the breakaway regions. Putin also tasked the Russian government with compiling a list of documents (including identity documents) which the separatist regimes have issued and which Russia considers legally valid, and he gave an order to recognised as legal subjects all the companies and other legal persons registered by the separatist regimes. Tbilisi was not consulted before issuing the ukase. Moreover, Russia's intentions became known to Georgian authorities through public sources.<sup>1</sup>

The Russian Foreign Ministry later used the example of the relations maintained between Northern Cyprus and Turkey to justify the decision to recognise legal acts and documents of the separatist regimes.<sup>2</sup>

**Background and analysis:** Putin's ukase of April 16 constitutes a logical extension of the processes that have so far influenced developments in Abkhazia.

On November 13, 2007, Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili delivered a speech, stating, among other things, that Russian President Vladimir Putin had threatened to 'create a new Cyprus in Abkhazia' in a tête-à-tête conversation on the sidelines of the CIS summit in Minsk in 2006.<sup>3</sup> Later (on December 9, 2007) Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov claimed that Putin had never said anything like that.

On February 20 this year, after meeting with Chairman of the Russian State Duma Foreign Affairs Committee Konstantin Kosachev, the South Ossetian leader Eduard Koikoty announced that Russia had a 'new plan' for supporting Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

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<sup>1</sup> ICDS interview, April 2008.

<sup>2</sup> 'Moscow Justifies Legal Links with Abkhazia, S.Ossetia', Civil Georgia, [www.civil.ge](http://www.civil.ge), April 29, 2008.

<sup>3</sup> "Putin Threatened Cyprus Model on Georgia" – Saakashvili', Civil Georgia, [www.civil.ge](http://www.civil.ge), November 13, 2007.

According to Kokoity, Russians planned to actively support Russian citizens who lived in the separatist regions. Moreover, he said that South Ossetia's maximum aim was to 'integrate into Russia'.<sup>4</sup>

On March 1, Abkhaz separatist authorities announced a partial mobilisation of troops.<sup>5</sup>

On March 5, the South Ossetian separatist regime asked Russia and western countries to recognise its independence.

On March 6, Russia announced that it will unilaterally withdraw from the regime of sanctions established for Abkhazia in 1996 by the decision of the CIS Council of Heads of State.<sup>6</sup> These sanctions were imposed because of 'Abkhazia's destructive behaviour' that undermined the efforts to find a peaceful solution to the conflict. Separatists' refusal to permit the return of refugees who had left Abkhazia during the war from 1992 to 1994 was also a major contributory factor to the establishment of sanctions. An estimated 250,000 refugees had fled from Abkhazia and most of them were ethnic Georgians. Abkhaz separatists, who were supported by Russian troops and voluntary fighters from the North Caucasus, committed widespread atrocities, such as ethnic cleansing and genocide, against the Georgian civilian population (estimates from different sources suggest that Abkhaz separatists killed 13,000-20,000 civilians, most of them Georgians).<sup>7</sup>

Moscow presented its move as lifting an economic and trade blockade, while actually the sanctions established with respect to Sokhumi also obligated the parties that had joined the blockade not to supply weapons and other military equipment to Abkhazia and not to carry out transit operations pertaining to such equipment through their territory to Abkhazia; the parties also undertook not to dispatch military instructors, combatants, etc. to Abkhazia and to prevent the movement of such personnel through their territory. However, Sultan Sosnaliev, the then Defence Minister of the separatist government of Abkhazia, admitted in March 2005 that officers of the Abkhaz army were trained in Russia.<sup>8</sup>

On March 7, the Abkhaz separatist parliament addressed the international community and Russia, urging them to recognise Abkhazia's independence.

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<sup>4</sup> 'Kokoitõ: Venemaal on "uus kava" tunnustamata vabariikide toetamiseks' [Kokoity: Russia Has a New Plan to Help Unrecognised Republics], Interfax/BNS, February 20, 2008.

<sup>5</sup> 'Abhaasia kuulutas välja osalise mobilisatsiooni' [Abkhazia Announced Partial Mobilisation of Troops], Interfax/AP/BNS, March 1, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> See English translation of the decision, 'Full Text: 1996 CIS Treaty on Abkhaz Sanctions', Civil Georgia, <http://www.civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=17293>.

<sup>7</sup> See e.g. the CSCE Budapest Summit Declaration of December 6, 1994, [http://www.osce.org/documents/mcs/1994/12/4048\\_en.pdf](http://www.osce.org/documents/mcs/1994/12/4048_en.pdf); 'Georgia/Abkhazia: Violations of the Laws of War and Russia's Role in the Conflict', Human Rights Watch Report, March 1995.

<sup>8</sup> 'Abkhaz Defence Minister: Our Officers Are Trained in Russia', Civil Georgia, [www.civil.ge](http://www.civil.ge), March 24, 2005.

On March 11, Russia's Ambassador to NATO Dmitry Rogozin announced that if Georgia got some kind of prospect of NATO membership, the process of 'real secession' of Abkhazia and South Ossetia from Georgia would begin the next day.<sup>9</sup>

On March 17, the Russian State Duma adopted a draft resolution suggesting that the Russian government recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

On April 3, Putin sent a letter to separatist leaders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, in which he expressed his support to them and 'shared their concerns' about the promises of future membership NATO had given to Georgia at the Bucharest summit.<sup>10</sup>

On April 8, the Georgian Ministry of Justice announced that it had received a letter from the Russian Ministry of Justice, informing Tbilisi of Moscow's plans to establish 'direct contacts' with the separatist regimes in order to enable Russian citizens who serve their sentences in Abkhaz and South Ossetian prisons to be transferred to Russian prisons.<sup>11</sup> The Russian Ministry of Justice justified its actions with reference to the European Convention on Extradition. However, this convention applies only to sovereign states.

At least 80 per cent of Abkhazia's population have received Russian citizenship,<sup>12</sup> while the respective percentage in South Ossetia is 85-90.<sup>13</sup> In the first half of the current decade, Russia offered a fast track to Russian citizenship to people living in the breakaway regions, despite Georgia's frequent protests that it was a clear breach of Georgia's sovereignty.

On the same day, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov gave an interview to the radio station Ekho Moskvy, claiming that Russia will do 'everything in its power to prevent Ukraine and Georgia from joining NATO'.<sup>14</sup> According to Lavrov, 'Abkhazia and South Ossetia do not want to hear anything about Georgia becoming a NATO member'.

On April 15, the Abkhaz leader Sergey Bagapsh and the South Ossetian leader Eduard Koikoty met in Sokhumi.

**On April 20**, a Russian MiG-29 fighter jet allegedly shot down a Georgian Unmanned Aerial Vehicle (UAV) over Abkhazia, as it performed a monitoring mission in that region. At first, Moscow officially denied the fact that a UAV of the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs had been shot down over Abkhazia; then Russians supported the claims of Abkhaz separatists who said that their L-39 trainer jet armed with air-to-air missiles had downed the UAV

<sup>9</sup> 'Rogozin: Gruusia võib mässulised piirkonnad kaotada' [Georgia Could Lose Rebel Regions], Reuters/BNS, March 11, 2008.

<sup>10</sup> 'Putin kinnitas toetust Lõuna-Osseetiale ja Abhaasiale' [Putin Vows Support for South Ossetia and Abkhazia], Reuters/BNS, April 3, 2008.

<sup>11</sup> 'Gruusia süüdistab Venemaad katses legitimeerida separatiste' [Georgia Accuses Russia of Legitimising Separatists], Interfax/BNS, April 8, 2008.

<sup>12</sup> 'Стенограмма пресс-конференции в "МК" Министра иностранных дел Республики Абхазия Сергея Мироновича Шамба' [Transcript of the МК press conference of Foreign Minister of the Abkhaz Republic Sergey Mironovich Shamba], Московский комсомолец, July 13, 2006.

<sup>13</sup> Sukhov, Ivan, 'Современная Российская политика на Кавказе' [Contemporary Russian Politics in the Caucasus Region], a study commissioned by ICDS, March 2008.

<sup>14</sup> 'РФ сделает все, чтобы не допустить принятия Украины и Грузии в НАТО' [Russia Will Do Everything in Its Power to Prevent Ukraine and Georgia from Joining NATO], RIA Novosti, April 8, 2008.

(L-39 jets do not have any equipment to fire air-to-air missiles); in the end, Russia's Ambassador to NATO Dmitry Rogozin suggested that the UAV could have been shot down by a MiG-29 that belonged to a NATO member state.<sup>15</sup>

Georgia claimed that the MiG-29 took off from the Gudauta airbase in Abkhazia. Russian authorities have declared that Russian forces have abandoned the Gudauta airbase. Tbilisi insists that Russian troops are still illegally stationed at the base, but no foreign observers have been allowed to verify this claim.

### **Background and analysis:**

This UAV was the second one shot down over Abkhazia: the first UAV owned by the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs was downed in the Otshamtshira region on March 18. At first, Georgia denied that such an incident had occurred, but later confirmed it, admitting that the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Ministry of Defence had at their disposal up to 40 Israeli-made Hermes 450 UAVs. According to the Russian media, Tbilisi might have purchased five sets of Hermes 450 UAVs from the Israeli defence company Elbit Systems.<sup>16</sup> One set includes five UAVs, a ground control station and support elements. The altitude limit for the Hermes 450 of a full composite structure weighing 450 kg is 6,100 m at a speed of 130-176 km/h. It has a length of 6.1 m, wingspan of 10.5 m and height of 1.8 m. The Hermes 450 is equipped with digital video and infrared cameras transmitting imagery in real time to a ground station.

After the incident on April 20, the conflict escalated rapidly. News of Georgia's plans to conduct a military operation in Abkhazia were published ever more frequently in the Russian media, while Georgia was buzzing with rumours that Abkhazia and Russia might organise a joint attack targeting the territory controlled by Tbilisi, primarily the upper Kodori Gorge (Upper Abkhazia).<sup>17</sup>

### **Background and analysis:**

The Kodori Gorge lies in the eastern part of Abkhazia at an approximate 30 km distance from the Abkhaz administrative centre Sokhumi.

Even though the Kodori Gorge is geographically located within the administrative borders of Abkhazia, Abkhaz separatists have never actually controlled the upper part of the gorge, an area which Georgia officially calls the Upper Abkhazia. After the end of the Georgian-Abkhaz war in 1994, the upper Kodori Gorge has been under the factual control of the Svans (ethnic Georgians).

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<sup>15</sup> 'Генсек НАТО съест свой галстук за причастность альянса к уничтожению дрона' [NATO Secretary General Will Eat his Tie, if It Turns out that the Alliance Was Involved in Downing the Drone], Lenta.ru, April 30, 2008.

<sup>16</sup> 'Абхазия – "Гермесова" могила' [Abkhazia – Hermes's Grave], Независимое Военное Обозрение, May 15, 2008.

<sup>17</sup> See e.g. 'Генштаб МО России планирует крупномасштабную военную операцию против Грузии' [Russian General Staff Plans a Major Military Operation Against Georgia], Грузия Online <http://abkhazeti.info/news/1208800752.php>, April 21, 2008.



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In 2002, the population of the upper Kodori was approximately 2,000. In 2006, Georgia carried out a police operation in the upper Kodori in order to disarm the paramilitary forces of a local warlord Emzar Kvitsiani who had subjected the area under his control. As a result of the operation which lasted for a few days, Kvitsiani was overpowered and he fled to Moscow. The UN Observer Mission in Georgia UNOMIG stated that the presence of Georgian police forces in the upper Kodori was not in violation of the ceasefire agreement concluded in 1994.

The government-in-exile of the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia, recognised by Georgia as the legal authority of Abkhazia, has been based in the Kodori Gorge village of Chkhalta since 2006.

On March 11, 2007, three Mi-24 helicopters attacked the buildings of the Abkhaz government-in-exile in the village of Chkhalta. Tbilisi asserted that the attack helicopters came from Russia and flew back to Russia after the attack. Even though it cannot be ruled out that Abkhaz separatists own attack helicopters, the level of military capabilities needed to organise such an operation is clearly higher than that of Sukhumi. Attack helicopters cannot carry out a night mission in the mountains without very experienced pilots, good planning and special equipment.

The upper Kodori, to where, according to the Russian Foreign Ministry, Georgians have massed their troops to attack Abkhazia, is a bottled up place surrounded by up to 4,000-meter-high mountains. There is only one road built last September that connects the upper Kodori and the rest of the territory controlled by the Georgian central government.

A narrow, mostly wooded valley descends from the upper Kodori down to Abkhazia; there is only one derelict road virtually impassable even by a 4-wheel-drive jeep that runs in parallel with the Kodori River towards the coast. Due to its natural conditions, the Kodori Gorge cannot be possibly used as a 'bridgehead' to begin a military attack on the coastal areas controlled by the Abkhaz separatist regime.<sup>18</sup>

**On April 25**, the Russian Foreign Ministry's Special Envoy for the CIS Valery Kenyaikin accused Georgia of mobilising its forces at the border with Abkhazia and said that Russia will defend its citizens in Abkhazia 'even through military means. We will use every means to do this; there should be no doubt about it.'<sup>19</sup>

**On April 28** (Monday), the press reported that Russian military reinforcements had been deployed in Abkhazia over the weekend.<sup>20</sup> On April 29, however, the Russian Foreign Ministry officially accused Georgia of preparing for an attack on Abkhazia and confirmed that Russia had sent reinforcements to the CIS peacekeeping forces in the region.<sup>21</sup> Moscow claimed that Georgian forces had massed approximately 1,500 troops in the upper Kodori Gorge and the surrounding area to prepare the ground for attacking Abkhazia. It is estimated that in addition to reservists (up to 20,000 men), Abkhaz separatists command up to 5,000 troops of permanent readiness.

**Background and analysis:** After the end of the bloody civil war waged between Georgian forces and Abkhazians from 1992 to 1994, the CIS peacekeeping forces have been deployed in the region to keep Georgians and Abkhazians apart. The engagement of the peacekeeping forces is based on two documents: the agreement on a ceasefire and separation of forces signed by Abkhazia and Georgia in Moscow on May 14, 1994, and the decision to introduce collective peacekeeping forces into Abkhazia adopted by the CIS Council of Heads of State on August 22, 1994.

These documents stipulate that the size of the peacekeeping forces cannot be changed without Tbilisi's consent and that the extension of the mandate of the forces has to be re-evaluated every six months, whereas Tbilisi has the right to demand that the peacekeeping operation were brought to an end. On several occasions, Tbilisi has considered whether to use that right, but so far it has backed down under diplomatic pressure from the West.

The peacekeeping forces were sent to Abkhazia under the aegis of the CIS, while in reality only Russian forces have been deployed in the region.

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<sup>18</sup> 'Russia Reinforces Forces in Abkhazia as a Possibility of Armed Conflict Looms', Eurasia Daily Monitor by Jamestown Foundation, May 2, 2008.

<sup>19</sup> 'Diplomaat: Venemaal on valmis kaitsma kaasmaalasi Abhaasias, Lõuna-Osseetias' [Diplomat: Russia Is Ready to Defend Compatriots in Abkhazia and South Ossetia], Reuters/AFP/Interfax/BNS, April 25, 2008; 'Россия защитит соотечественников в Абхазии и Южной Осетии "военными методами"' [Russia Will Defend Compatriots in Abkhazia and South Ossetia Through 'Military Means'], Lenta.ru, April 25, 2008.

<sup>20</sup> 'Tensions Rise Sharply over Abkhazia', The Moscow Times, April 28, 2008.

<sup>21</sup> 'МИД РФ обвинил Грузию в подготовке нападения на Абхазию' [Russian Foreign Ministry Accused Georgia of Preparing for an Attack on Abkhazia], Lenta.ru, April 29, 2008.

Moreover, it was the Russian army that played a key role in supporting the Abkhaz separatists in their fight against Georgian government forces during the second phase of the war from 1993 to 1994.<sup>22</sup> The Abkhaz side got most of its heavy weapons from Russians, while the Russian Air Force conducted air strikes so as to support military operations carried out by Abkhazians, bombing Georgian-held Sokhumi in 1993. The then Russian Defence Minister Pavel Grachev consistently denied it until Georgians managed to shoot down a Russian Su-27 fighter-bomber and UN observers found a dead Russian pilot in the cockpit. After that Grachev claimed that Georgians had bombed their own positions and having shot down their own aircraft, they had painted Russian insignia on it in order to embarrass Moscow.

So far, the UN Security Council has twice a year extended the mandate of the UNOMIG mission and has therefore mentioned the concept of 'CIS collective peacekeeping operation' in its documents. Nevertheless, the forces in Abkhazia are not in any way connected with UN peacekeeping operations.

UNOMIG is a peacekeeping mission of unarmed military observers; at the moment UNOMIG deploys 133 observers. UNOMIG's mandate stipulates that observers may only monitor and report on the developments in the conflict zone. Every time Georgia has threatened not to extend the mandate of the Russian peacekeeping forces, Russia has made a threat in return, asserting that it will veto the extension of UNOMIG's mandate in the UN Security Council.

In recent years, there have been approximately 2,000-2,200 Russian troops on a peacekeeping mission in Abkhazia.

Moscow stated officially that the current increase in Russian forces in Abkhazia was within the maximum limits set by the decision of the CIS Council. According to Georgian State Minister Temur Yakobashvili, up to 700 Russian troops had been sent to Abkhazia.

Russian military forces crossed Georgia's internationally recognised state border without the permission of Georgia and/or the CIS Heads of State; Moscow did not inform Georgia or UNOMIG of the fact that it had sent reinforcements to Abkhazia.<sup>23</sup> Tbilisi frequently expressed its opinion on various levels that the military build-up by Russia was an illegal step taken in order to annex the region and labelled the additional troops as 'aggressors'.

The press reported that additional military units included tanks, howitzers, armoured vehicles, rocket launchers, etc.<sup>24</sup>

On April 29, when the reinforcements began to arrive, Sokhumi appointed the chief of staff of the Russian peacekeeping forces, Colonel Aleksander Pavlushko to the post of Deputy Defence Minister of Abkhazia.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> See e.g. Cornell, Svante E., 'Small Nations and Great Powers: A Study of Ethnopolitical Conflict in the Caucasus', Routledge, 2001; 'Siege of Sokhumi', Time Magazine, October 4, 1993; 'In Russia's Shadow', Time Magazine, October 11, 1993.

<sup>23</sup> 'International Organisations Passive as Russia Moves Troops into Abkhazia', Eurasia Daily Monitor by Jamestown Foundation, May 6, 2008.

<sup>24</sup> 'Russian Military Hardware Arrives in Georgia's Breakaway Abkhazia', Rustavi-2, May 1, 2008; Georgia News Digest, May 2, 2008.

<sup>25</sup> Rustavi-2, April 30, 2008.

According to Temur Yakobashvili, the additional forces came from the Khankala military base in Chechnya and included ethnic Chechens. The press stated that the number of Chechen soldiers could be 300. It is highly probable that the Chechen troops are drawn from the Vostok and Zapad battalions that fall under the command of the Russian military intelligence (officially, these battalions belong to the Russian 42nd Motorised Rifle Division).<sup>26</sup>

Vostok and Zapad are classical special troops. They are loyal to Moscow and are among the most powerful units in Chechnya. Both battalions have ample experience in warfare in mountainous regions and they have been used on covert and diversionary operations. The Vostok battalion is notorious for its numerous human rights violations. In the autumn of 2007, Moscow sent troops from Vostok and Zapad as 'peacekeepers' to Abkhazia and South Ossetia.<sup>27</sup>

Chechens have a symbolic meaning in the conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia: it was the Chechen voluntary fighters led by Shamil Basayev who became the main striking force of Abkhaz separatists in the civil war between Georgia and Abkhazia; Tbilisi alleges that back then Chechens murdered Georgian civilians.

The UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) did not confirm the massing of Georgian troops in the upper Kodori Gorge.

**On May 4**, Abkhaz separatists claimed that they had shot down two more Georgian UAVs, while Tbilisi denied it and maintained that Sokhumi's assertions were blatant lies.<sup>28</sup> According to the Russian Foreign Ministry, the UAV 'provocation' on the part of Georgia demonstrated Tbilisi's wish not to solve the conflict through peaceful means; Moscow also stated that Georgia had by that time gathered 3,000 troops in the upper Kodori Gorge to attack Abkhazia.<sup>29</sup>

**On May 5**, the Russian Foreign Ministry issued a statement, according to which the Georgian Defence Ministry used an already tried-out scenario to orchestrate the provocation connected with the two Georgian spy planes shot down by Abkhaz air defence forces on last Sunday; the provocation also showed that Tbilisi undermined all efforts to find a peaceful settlement to the conflict.

Georgia, in its turn, informed Russia that it was withdrawing from the air defence cooperation treaty concluded between Russia and Georgia on April 19, 1995.

According to Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, this step revealed Tbilisi's plans to use force in order to solve the conflict.<sup>30</sup>

Officials in Tbilisi have repeatedly issued public statements on various levels, according to which Georgia will not use military force with respect to Abkhazia or South Ossetia.

<sup>26</sup> See e.g. 'Russia, Georgia: Nearing a Flashpoint?', Stratfor.com, April 29, 2008.

<sup>27</sup> 'Peacekeepers or Provocateurs? Kremlin-Backed Chechen Troops Raise Tensions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia', Chechnya Weekly by Jamestown Foundation, December 6, 2007.

<sup>28</sup> 'Abkhaz Claim Two Georgian Drones Downed, Tbilisi Denies', Civil Georgia, [www.civil.ge](http://www.civil.ge), May 4, 2008.

<sup>29</sup> 'Drone Incident in Abkhazia Gives Rise to New Search for "Invaders"', Interfax/AVN, May 5, 2008.

<sup>30</sup> 'Lavrov: Gruusia kavatseb konflikte jõuga lahendada' [Lavrov: Georgia Plans to Use Force in Conflict Solution], Interfax/BNS, May 5, 2008.



**On May 6**, Foreign Minister of Abkhaz separatists Sergey Shamba said that a 'Buk' (NATO specification: SA-11 'Gadfly' or SA-17 'Grizzly') air defence system was used to shoot down Georgian UAVs. Tbilisi claimed that possession of such weaponry in the conflict zone was a violation of previous agreements.<sup>31</sup>

On the same day, Shamba announced that Abkhaz separatist authorities wanted Russia to take Abkhazia under its military control, allowing the deployment of any troops of any size in Abkhazia; in return, the Abkhaz side demanded security guarantees.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> 'SA-11 "Gadfly" Used to Down Georgian Drones', Civil Georgia, [www.civil.ge](http://www.civil.ge), May 6, 2008.

<sup>32</sup> 'Šamba: Abhaasia nõus Vene sõjalise kontrolliga' [Shamba: Abkhazia Wants Russian Military Control], Interfax/BNS, May 6, 2008; 'Sokhumi Proposes Moscow Take "Military Control" of Abkhazia', Civil Georgia, [www.civil.ge](http://www.civil.ge), May 6, 2008.