

New Abkhazia – South Ossetia “Opening” of Georgia?

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Georgia is hinting at potential steps that it might take towards “reestablishing” “constructive” relationships with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. It was stated in the joint meeting of the Foreign Affairs Committee, Relations with Diaspora Committee, and the Interim Commission on Territorial Integrity of the Georgian Parliament, held on December 24, 2009, that there have been efforts towards a document which could provide a “road map” to that end. Georgian Minister Temuri Yakobashvili stated that the Parliament is preparing a 9 page strategy document. The full text of this document was not disclosed, as it has not been approved by the government in office yet. It is stated that the main title of the document is “Government Strategy Concerning Territories under Occupation”, with the subtitle “Engagement through Cooperation”. Efforts towards implementation of the document are aimed to start on January 1, 2010 and be completed by July 31.

Temuri Yakobashvili, the Minister of State of Georgia responsible for integration issues, and thus for the relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, said that the new strategy is prepared in accordance with the Helsinki Final Act, based on values of the European Union. Yakobashvili stated that the document was prepared after having conversations and exchange of opinions with stakeholder countries, domestic and international institutions, immigrants, and political parties (among which Abkhazia and Southern Ossetia do not seem to have been given any place). Yakobashvili indicated that the goal of the new strategy is to reestablish healthy relationships between peoples separated by the borders drawn and to vest equal and universal rights to all citizens of Georgia, including those who are settled in Abkhazia and Tskhinval (not South Ossetia), that is, Abkhazians and Ossetians. The strategy is indicated to encompass some steps with economic, educational, health related, and cultural dimensions, as well as envisaging diplomacy and interaction between peoples (not use of arms). Nika Laliashvili, a Christian-Democrat member of the parliament, appealed to the political parties in Georgia so as not to be too critical of the document, stressing that the document has the “highest quality” among those prepared concerning the “Georgian territories under occupation”.

It is indicated that use of the term “territories under occupation” in the title of the document was debated in committee meetings concerning the document. Certain terms that were previously used by Georgian authorities referring to the Abkhazian and Ossetian administrations such as “puppet” and “proxy” administrations were abandoned, using the term “administrations in control of governance in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali/South Ossetia regions” instead. It is underlined that this should be perceived as a positive step, a token of goodwill.

To answer the questions pertaining to the timing and the reason for preparing a new strategy document, the solution of the issue is implied not to be left to the international community alone, in an effort to prevent strengthening of Russia’s hand in the matter. In addition, it is indicated that, with this document, Russia’s isolating Abkhazia and Ossetia again, by establishing unilateral relations with them, is going to be prevented.

Although the content of the strategy document has not yet been formally disclosed, some clues pertaining to its implementation are available. Georgia aims to reestablish its transportation connections with Abkhazia and Ossetia through railways and roads. Another step is establishment of “special trade zones” at the administrative borders, with the expressed goal of facilitating interaction between peoples. It is also stated that the talks held in Geneva are considered to serve as ground for defining and implementing the new strategy.

It is stated that the Abkhazian diaspora in Turkey is aimed to be contacted in an attempt to revitalize cultural relations. Yakobashvili said that the diaspora in Turkey is persuaded into a negative perspective of Georgia and this is aimed to be cleared off with the new strategy. He underlined that the Georgian administration would engage in serious efforts to that end. So much so that, return of “immigrants” (Abkhazian “mohajirs”) to Georgian land is said not to be perceived to pose a threat. Nevertheless, this discourse does not have much substantive meaning beyond political talk, especially considering Georgia’s general attitude to repatriation, as can be seen in the case of Meskhetian Turks. On the other hand, it does not seem reasonable for the Tbilisi administration to make such statements that are beyond its domain of influence either.

The new Georgian strategy should be evaluated with caution. Especially the diaspora front’s being stressed again prompts the diaspora in Turkey to consider the matter with utmost care. While the full text of the document is not yet available, some signals of change in Georgian attitude that is partially imposed by the conditions, can be seen. This “long” overdue cooperative approach is unlikely to be received favorably unless the title of the document and the terminology used are changed. Given the conditions under which it is not possible for Abkhazia and Ossetia to back down from their independence, this document is not likely to bring the concerned parties to a positive standing.

First of all, the parties with which the Georgian administration consulted in shaping the document are not clear. The issue has not been discussed with the Abkhazian and Ossetian sides. Defining Abkhazians and Ossetians as citizens of Georgia and engaging in actions against Russia do not constitute much of a change, except striving for the isolation of Russia from regional affairs by balancing her out. The fact that this is being done unilaterally further indicates that the new strategy is not new at all. In fact, the Georgian side's action towards extending the scope of the talks ongoing in Geneva with the Abkhazian and Ossetian administrations and towards facilitating the strengthening of the Abkhazian and Ossetian sides' relations with the international community would have been more rational and realistic. Abkhazian and Ossetian governments' response to the "new" strategy will be seen after the document is fully disclosed. Nevertheless, that should not be expected to be too much of a favorable response.

Another issue that draws attention with respect to the "new" approach emerges as the approach to Abkhazian diaspora. As a matter of fact, the Georgian administration had tried to contact/establish relations with the diaspora in the past. It is well known that those efforts failed because they lacked sincerity and necessary energy. The contention that diaspora is misinformed stands out as a heading to be met with a certain degree of surprise by the diaspora itself. I guess the implied sources for that misinformation are Abkhazia and maybe, to a little extent, Russia. This perspective is to be considered to be the first and the most fundamental indicator of the impending failure of Georgia with this initiative. If the Georgian administration perceives the diaspora in Turkey as a puppet, a lever with which it can change the power balance in matters of Abkhazia and Ossetia, it is making a huge mistake. The Georgian administration would be expected to have analyzed the relations that diaspora has developed with Abkhazia and the future of these relations more thoroughly and rationally. Development of a compact and well-thought perspective which does not alienate Abkhazia and Ossetia, but rather prioritizes them, would have been more correct and realistic. Handling of the issue of Abkhazia by the diaspora in concert with Georgia and its making suggestions to Abkhazia accordingly is an idea that stretches the limits of imagination at this point. This shows, at the least, that the Georgian administration has not understood the organization of the diaspora and its position in Turkey as best it could.

In this context, a related issue that needs to be addressed is Georgia's view of Sergei Baghapsh's visit to Turkey. Georgian Foreign Ministry's summoning the Turkish Ambassador in Tbilisi to the Ministry to discuss (to prevent) Sergei Baghapsh's visit to Turkey is known and closely observed by the diaspora. It is not a coherent and effective approach to try to establish new relations with the diaspora and Abkhazia on the one hand, and trying to prevent Baghapsh's visit to Turkey on the other. Prevention of Baghapsh's previous visit to Turkey though quite impolite/non-diplomatic ways is still fresh in the memory of the diaspora.

Georgian authorities' efforts towards prevention of Baghapsh's meeting with government officials in Turkey cannot be perceived to be a constructive attitude. Last September Turkish Minister of Foreign Affairs Ahmet Davutođlu paid a visit to Georgia to negotiate the release of Turkish ships that were confiscated by Georgian coast guard boats as they were headed to Abkhazia. Deputy Undersecretary Ünal Çeviköz, who was accompanying the Minister during his visit, went to Abkhazia and had some meetings. While this was perceived to be a positive attitude, the negative attitude towards Baghapsh's visit would have a detrimental effect. It would not lead to anything but alienation of the diaspora. Georgian administration's indecisive/inconsistent attitude in this matter cannot be perceived to be a constructive attitude. The Georgian administration's inclusion of the opening of direct naval and airways to connect diaspora to Abkhazia, engaging in direct talks with Abkhazia as equal parties in this respect, and adopting a new and constructive approach to regional balances, unlike those in the past, can serve as pillars of a "new" strategy. Any approach that excludes these measures cannot be "new", and would provide no solution to existing problems.