

Abkhaz Prime Minister Ousted

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The surprise dismissal of the prime minister and de facto leader of Abkhazia has transformed the political landscape in the breakaway republic.

The unexpected sacking last week of Anri Djergenia, the prime minister of Abkhazia who was also the leading contender to be its next president, has shaken up the political scene here.

The dismissal on November 29 of the prime minister by Abkhazia's ailing head of state Vladislav Ardzinba evidently came as a shock even to Djergenia himself. On that day, the premier was planning to hold a press conference to report back on a two-week visit to Moscow.

That trip had apparently been a success, as Djergenia signed a contract on supplying electricity from Abkhazia to the Krasnodar region to the north. For the first time, Russia also backed Abkhazia's claim to be represented at talks on the future of the republic at the United Nations.

The television news and other official media reported Djergenia's dismissal without any commentary, along with the news that his replacement is to be Gennady Gagulia, currently head of the republic's chamber of commerce.

In some of the few official comments on the event, the breakaway republic's vice-president, Valery Arshba, later insisted nothing dramatic had happened. "Premiers come and go, but it is President Ardzinba and the people who define Abkhazia's policy direction towards greater closeness with Russia," he said.

The official reason for Djergenia's removal was his alleged failure to implement the budget and make adequate preparations for the winter.

But this looks improbable, as the budget has been fully implemented, according to figures from the first nine months of this year, and winter poses no big problem for a subtropical region where the average temperature in January is 12 degrees centigrade.

Everyone, therefore, sees a political reason in the fall of Djergenia.

Djergenia, a Soviet-era official, who was appointed to the top government job in May 2001, was Abkhazia's first "political" prime minister - his predecessors had concentrated solely on economic policy. He represented Abkhazia in its peace negotiations with the Georgians - a job that he has not yet formally lost. As Ardzinba increasingly vanished from public view due to illness, Djergenia began to act as the unrecognised republic's de facto leader.

The premier was widely considered the favourite to succeed Ardzinba as leader, when the next presidential elections are held in two years' time, or even earlier. He was even tied by marriage to Ardzinba: the president's wife, Svetlana, is Djergenia's first cousin - something that carries great weight in Abkhaz society.

However, Leonid Lakerbaia, a former close associate of Ardzinba who is now leader of the opposition, said

he believed Djergenia had been felled by his "barely concealed presidential ambitions".

There was a widespread perception that he was lobbying for support for his leadership bid in Moscow. Djergenia had talked of the idea of Abkhazia having "associated relations" with the Russian Federation.

"He was building up authority in Russia, but not in Abkhazia and that could only have raised the suspicions of Ardzinba, who is a mistrustful person," Lakerbaia said. "Maybe Djergenia's extreme lobbying on behalf of Russian interests, which often diverge from Abkhaz ones, went too far and angered the president, who thought that the prime minister was plotting against him."

Djergenia's departure strengthens the leadership chances of two other official candidates, the current foreign minister Sergei Shamba and the defence minister Raul Khajimba.

Without the prime ministerial job, Djergenia himself can have very little hope of claiming the top job, as he enjoys little popularity amongst the Abkhaz public.

Lakerbaia, who was once Ardzinba's heir apparent, said the head of state had won himself some time, during which he can look for a suitable successor "in a calm situation or even - it is not impossible - seek a third presidential term".

Currently, Ardzinba, who has problems with his speech, has not come to his presidential palace for more than a year and has remained in his residence on the edge of Sukhum. Abkhaz television periodically shows his meetings with officials, although without his voice being heard.

Nonetheless, observers say that Ardzinba still keeps his finger on the pulse of events and follows what is happening closely. Those who have seen him say that he still has an excellent memory and is the same man they have always known. The sacking of Djergenia is a reminder that he is still a force to be reckoned with.

The new prime minister is not a political figure at all and will not play a major part in the jockeying for power. Gagulia has already been head of the government once before, between 1995 and 1998, during which time he focussed exclusively on economic issues.

"Political issues will become the exclusive preserve of the president," said analyst Tamaz Ketsba. "However, it's unlikely that Sukhum's foreign policy with its focus on greater closeness to Russia will change at all."

"The situation in Abkhazia is such that anyone who comes to power here, will not be able to think of another path except one that runs parallel with Russia. The republic has no other option."

Inal Khashig reports for the BBC World Service from Abkhazia.

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