

## **Abkhazia: Railway Breakthrough?**

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The unrecognised republic's isolation could soon be at an end following trilateral talks to reopen the rail link with the south Caucasus.

Abkhaz politicians are in a euphoric mood after an apparent breakthrough in the decade-old dispute over the re-opening of the railway link between the rebel republic and its neighbours.

A promise on the rail issue was given during a recent trilateral meeting between the presidents of Russia and Georgia and Abkhazia's own prime minister in the resort town of Sochi.

On March 18, the Abkhaz parliament passed a resolution appealing to the two houses of the Russian parliament, the State Duma and the Federation Council, to establish "associated relations" between Russia and the unrecognised republic.

Georgia is equally optimistic - but for an entirely different reason. There, the political classes are discussing the prospect of the return of tens of thousands of Georgian refugees to Abkhazia itself, as a result of the same meeting on March 6-7, which was attended by presidents Vladimir Putin and Eduard Shevardnadze and Abkhaz prime minister Gennady Gagulia.

Shevardnadze said the three sides had reached an important agreement to tackle "a package of political and economic problems in Abkhazia" at every stage of the peace process.

Progress on the Abkhaz-Georgian dispute has been deadlocked for almost ten years, since the war ended with an Abkhaz de facto victory.

Abkhazia declared its independence in 1999, but has not been recognised by any foreign country and still suffers from economic and political isolation. In addition, more than 200,000 Georgian refugees are still displaced.

Last December the railway line between Abkhazia and southern Russia restarted, giving the unrecognised republic an important economic and psychological boost.

The Sochi talks focused on reopening the southern section of the railway line, which would effectively end Abkhazia's isolation.

"Politically, the issue of the restoration of the railway link across the territory of Abkhazia has been decided," Abkhaz foreign minister Sergei Shamba told IWPR. He said that it only remained to work on the technical aspects of reconstructing the line and raising the money to do so.

It currently takes around six hours to travel the 130 km between Sukhum and Sochi on a track that has not been repaired since Soviet times. On some sections of the line the driver has to slow down to walking pace to avoid derailing the train.

The 80-km stretch south of Sukhum to the western Georgian border is in an even worse condition. After the town of Ochamchire, two-thirds of the way down the Black Sea coast, the railway line has virtually ceased to exist. Since the war began in 1992, local people have plundered the rails and sold them off as scrap metal, as well as burning the semi-rotten sleepers as firewood.

This railway line links not only western Georgia and Abkhazia but was, before 1992, the main north-south freight and passenger route between Russia and the southern Caucasus. The importance of its possible restoration to landlocked Armenia cannot be over-stated.

Anahit Petrosian, head of the macroeconomic forecasting department of Armenia's finance ministry told IWPR that reopening the railway would be a "positive impulse for all the countries of the region."

"If the railway starts working it will make exports cheaper and diversify them, as our opportunities for air and road transport are very limited," Petrosian said.

Economists estimate that it will cost around 65 million US dollars to fully reopen the railway. Both sides hope that foreign donors will provide the cash to make this happen.

However, the Georgian side sees the reopening of the railway as only one half of the deal. "It will only be possible in parallel with the process of the return of refugees," Shevardnadze said, echoing similar comments by President Vladimir Putin in Sochi.

In response to this, the Abkhaz side says refugees will only go back to the Gal (known by the Georgians as Gali) region in southern Abkhazia, whose pre-war population was 90 per cent Georgian. "We have never rejected the return of refugees to the Gal region of Abkhazia," Shamba said.

He said that more than half of Gal's pre-war Georgian population had already gone back to their homes, but accused the Georgian side of deliberately "dragging out" their return for its own political purposes.

"The refugees are Georgia's trump card for use in the negotiating process and they do not want to lose them," Shamba said.

In Tbilisi however many politicians say that Abkhazia must allow a phased return of all Georgian refugees "I myself come from Gagra (in northern Abkhazia) and I know that the situation there can permit [their return]," said Avtandil Ioseliani, head of the Georgian intelligence service.

The Abkhaz say this is impossible before the status of the republic is determined. "Today we can only realistically talk about the return of refugees to the Gal region, in other words to those areas where Georgians lived compactly before the war," Shamba said. "We cannot countenance a return to other regions, as that would certainly lead to war."

The Abkhaz also categorically reject another idea being openly discussed in Russia and Georgia, of a joint Russian-Abkhaz-Georgian police force and local administration for Gal region.

Both sides do agree on one issue, that from henceforth Russian peacekeepers, operating under a CIS mandate, will stay in Abkhazia until such time as one of the three sides demands their withdrawal. Up until now their mandate has been prolonged every six months, generally after painful debates.

Abkhaz leader Vladislav Ardzinba, who has virtually disappeared from public view because of illness in recent years, talked up this part of the deal in a rare press interview. "Russia is the guarantor of preserving peace in the region," Ardzinba told Abkhaz-Press news agency on March 11.

"In this regard it is very important that the mandate will not be brought up for discussion every six months."

In the Akop café on the waterside by the Black Sea in Sukhum, some early morning coffee drinkers did seem to believe that the Sochi meeting marked a breakthrough. "The closer Georgia drifts towards the United States, the closer the collaboration will be between Russia and Abkhazia," said café customer Daur Kogonia.

"Just a couple of years ago it was hard to imagine that most of the inhabitants of the republic would receive Russian citizenship, the border would open and a suburban train would run from Sochi. And now this is becoming a reality, and on one can say anymore where the integration between Russia and Abkhazia will stop."

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