

Ajaria: Tbilisi in Charge

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Council of Europe attacked for alleged support of disgraced Ajarian leader as Georgian government tightens its grip on the region.

As it consolidates its victory in Ajaria, the Georgian government has launched a stinging attack on the Council of Europe chief for alleged favouritism toward the region's ousted leader, Aslan Abashidze.

Days after securing central rule in Ajaria for the first time in more than a decade, officials in the Georgian government lashed out at Council of Europe Secretary General Walter Schwimmer, and said that his representative Plamen Nikolov had been asked to leave the country.

At issue was Schwimmer's statement in early May, just as the crisis over Ajaria was reaching boiling point, that both Tbilisi and Abashidze's regime had "lost their ability for dialogue". In Georgia's view, that suggested that Tbilisi was equally to blame.

In contrast to a more restrained reaction from officials at the time, Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili was furious. Speaking on May 9, he described Schwimmer as "an impudent, well-paid bureaucrat". Three days later he was quoted by the RIA Novosti news agency as saying "the procedure for changing" the Council of Europe, CoE, representative in Tbilisi had already begun.

However, a CoE spokeswoman in Tbilisi told IWPR that Nikolov had "not yet received any formal request" to leave, and he remained in post. Schwimmer will Georgia's newly appointed foreign minister Salome Zurbishvili at a ministerial meeting in Strasbourg on May 12-13, the spokeswoman said.

Saakashvili was quoted as saying that Schwimmer had "expressed regret" for his comments in a telephone conversation with parliament speaker Nino Burdjanadze.

Georgia has been a member of the Council of Europe since 1999, and has attached a high priority to integrating into European institutions. At Saakashvili's inauguration in January, for example, the blue-and-gold European banner was raised alongside the Georgian flag outside parliament, to the accompaniment of Beethoven's Ode to Joy - the European Union anthem.

The row reflected strong feelings in Tbilisi over Ajaria, where Abashidze had ruled almost unchallenged since 1991. He fled by plane to Moscow in the early hours of May 6 after demonstrators took over the centre of the local capital Batumi, in a miniature repeat of the "rose revolution" that toppled Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze last November.

Events in Ajaria have boosted the Georgian government's confidence, with Saakashvili saying the country has overcome its "defeated-nation syndrome" and promising to stage official celebrations in Tbilisi soon.

In Batumi, the central government is moving fast to fill the power vacuum ahead of new elections, set for June 20.

A temporary bridge has been built over the Choloki river to free up road traffic, blocked since Abashidze's forces blew up the two main bridges into the region in early May. Rail links, also disrupted during the crisis,

have been restored, but oil shipments have experienced delays because of fears that Abashidze supporters laid mines in Batumi's port.

Meanwhile, the remnants of Abashidze's once unassailable power-base are fast disappearing.

His once powerful Revival Party has been disbanded. In the disputed November elections that sparked the Rose Revolution the party came second place with 19 per cent of the vote across Georgia - largely thanks to fraud, critics say. In repeat parliamentary elections in March, when Saakashvili's National Movement swept the board, Revival was crushed and won no seats.

Ajaria is temporarily under direct presidential rule from Tbilisi, and changes are expected to be made to the local constitution, although the government has promised not to revoke the region's status as an autonomous republic.

Georgia's parliament overwhelmingly rejected a call led by former Saakashvili ally Koba Davitashvili to hold a referendum in Ajaria on whether it should retain its autonomous status.

Davitashvili wants to see Ajaria become part of Georgia like any other province.

Georgian prime minister Zurab Zhvania voiced opposition to any change, saying the politicians pushing for it were "playing a dangerous game".

Ajarian television - famous for its pro-Abishidze coverage and the way it showed wall-to-wall feature films during the "rose revolution" and the recent showdown - has been all but shut down.

Journalists from the station have staged protests against a decision to transfer the station's equipment to the state-owned Channel One.

"All these years we had to do a lot of things against our will to comply with the personal decisions of Aslan Abashidze," said journalist Tea Vashalomidze. "Suddenly there was hope that we'd have a chance to do an honest professional job. But instead of that, the Georgian authorities are completely rejecting our work."

The journalists received support from the local anti-Abashidze movement, Our Ajaria. "We did everything for Ajarian television to become independent and now that this has become a reality, eliminating it like this isn't right," said Our Ajaria representative Avtandil Darchia.

The restoration of central control over Ajaria - and its access to the Black Sea and Turkey - will be a major boost for the cash-strapped Georgian government. For years, Abashidze refused to contribute revenues to the national budget, and he is believed to have amassed a private fortune from his control over Batumi's port, several seaside resorts, and the frontier with Turkey.

The economics ministry has indicated that it might look into the way state property was privatised in Ajaria.

For the moment, plans are in place to auction off some of Abashidze's more colourful assets - some 200 dogs, most of them the local big sheepdog breed, and a fleet of expensive foreign vehicles cars said to

include American Humvees, assorted BMWs, and two London black taxis.

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