

Saakashvili Strikes Ajaria Deal

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The Georgian president and the Ajarian leader have averted the threat of civil war – for now.

A four-hour meeting between Georgian president Mikheil Saakashvili and rebel leader Aslan Abashidze, the head of the Black Sea region of Ajaria, ended in a breakthrough on March 18 with Abashidze giving up key powers that he has enjoyed for years.

Saakashvili announced that a blockade imposed on Ajaria by the central authorities would be lifted at midnight. The Georgian authorities had begun blockading the autonomous republic after the local authorities turned back Saakashvili as he attempted to visit the region on March 14.

A visit by parliamentary speaker Nino Burjanadze on March 17 appears to have broken the deadlock. Under intense pressure from Tbilisi and with his closest ally, Moscow, officially proclaiming neutrality, Abashidze made major concessions.

First of all, Abashidze gave his assurance that preparations for parliamentary elections on March 28 would go ahead unhindered and that all political parties would be allowed to campaign for votes. The general prosecutor's office in Tbilisi will review all cases of people detained in recent political rallies and clashes in Ajaria. "Those people who were detained because they were engaged in political activity ought to be set free," Saakashvili said.

The two leaders also agreed that all armed groups in Ajaria should be disarmed and that weapons given out to the population should be surrendered to the authorities.

Saakashvili said that a new post of "representative of the president of Georgia" would be set up in the autonomous republic, and that its holder would share responsibility for the customs service and the port of Batumi – which have for the last ten years provided the main revenues for Ajaria and the Abashidze administration.

Abashidze, a former minister in Communist-era Georgia, has turned his native province into a semi-independent fiefdom over the last ten years, refusing to send budget revenues to Tbilisi, not travelling there himself, and establishing close relations with Moscow politicians and the Russian military base in Batumi.

He and Saakashvili, who do not disguise their dislike for one another, have been locked in a war of words and accusations ever since last November's "Rose Revolution" in Tbilisi.

Ajaria has autonomous status and a large Muslim population but the population is ethnically Georgian, and no observers believe the region is in danger of seceding from Georgia.

If the deal sticks, it represents a major triumph for Saakashvili, who has made reintegrating Ajaria into the Georgian state and clipping Abashidze's wings a prime objective.

"All sides have displayed good will," Saakashvili said after the meeting. "There is no personal conflict with any leaders in Georgia. There are important state issues, which have been already decided by agreements.

The main thing now is to hold a normal election campaign and to conduct a normal democratic state process. We have to preserve civic peace and normal relations between the centre and the region.”

Saakashvili arrived in Batumi, following the same route he was denied from taking four days before across the River Choloki. On the previous occasion armed supporters of Abashidze had prevented him from crossing. As his cortege travelled towards Batumi he stopped several times to greet local people and supporters gave him flowers and shouted “Misha!” Several thousand supporters of both leaders then turned out in Batumi as the two men met.

After meeting Abashidze, Saakashvili went to meet members of the local opposition, most of whom are also his own supporters.

For three days, Georgia had been bracing itself for the possibility of civil war. Armed supporters of Abashidze had manned concrete barricades on the borders of Ajaria. Occasionally they fired shots in the air for dramatic effect. A curfew was imposed in Batumi, armoured vehicles patrolled the streets, most shops and the local market shut down. The price of bread doubled and there were frequent power cuts.

Demanding that the Ajarian authorities admit the president, release the opposition activists they held and allow free and fair elections to be held, the government in Tbilisi imposed a blockade, freezing Ajarian bank accounts and preventing ships from entering Batumi port.

Saakashvili, who had relocated to the nearby port of Poti after being denied entry to Ajaria, summoned members of his government there and called the Ajarian actions a “provocative and arrogant act against Georgian statehood”.

Another leading Georgian politician and parliamentary deputy, Koba Davitashvili, a former close associate of Saakashvili was even more outspoken, charging that, “With the help of his illegal armed formations Aslan Abashidze has begun a military revolt against Georgia.” He called for criminal charges to be opened against Abashidze.

In their turn, the authorities in Batumi accused the Tbilisi government of plotting to shoot down the airplane on which Abashidze was returning from Moscow when the crisis broke out. In the event, Abashidze’s pilot switched off his navigational system as it was coming in to land.

The local opposition, several of whose members have been arrested in recent weeks, found itself in the front line of the crisis and said that Abashidze was stepping up his persecution of them. One opposition activist, Goderdzi Totochava, said that, “someone rang up and said that we should leave Ajaria within 48 hours if only for the safety of our children.” In the town of Kobuleti, the homes of three opposition activists were strafed with gunfire.

The mayor of Moscow, Yury Luzhkov, a friend of Abashidze, flew in to Batumi on March 16 to offer his support for the Ajarian leader. However Saakashvili said he was satisfied by telephone calls to President Vladimir Putin and United Secretary of State Colin Powell, and a meeting with OSCE chairman-in-office Solomon Passy, in which they all voiced support for Georgia’s territorial integrity.

Although the immediate crisis is over, the next test of will on both sides will be the election on March 28, when Abashidze will hope to consolidate his waning power and Saakashvili will hope to weaken him further through the ballot box. In last November’s parliamentary election – whose results have been annulled – Abashidze’s Agordzineba (Revival) Party was awarded an improbable 95 per cent of the vote in Ajaria.

Over these tense few days, thousands of Georgians have worried that civil war could break out, and have prayed for peace. A group of Batumi women held a protest action on the border of Ajaria and one of them Guliko Shervashidze said that, "I don't want a single person to die because of this. Sabre-rattling will not result in anything good for either side. Surely it's possible for the centre and the region to sort out their differences and for normal elections to be held."

In Tbilisi, most people blamed the Ajarian leader for the crisis. "Aslan Abashidze has gone way too far," said 29-year-old Goga. "He ought to go or it will all end badly for him. I have friends in Batumi and I know that no one in Ajaria will allow Georgia to be broken up. The whole conflict arose because a small gang of people want to hang on to power - and that is not worth a single drop of blood."

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