

Opening the Russian– Georgian railway link through Abkhazia

A challenging Georgian governance initiative

Soon after the parliamentary election in 2012 Georgia’s new government declared its willingness to reconstruct and reopen the former railway communication link with Russia through Abkhazia, which was interrupted as a result of the Georgian–Abkhaz war in 1993. With its confidence-building character, the initiative is part of a broader Georgian foreign policy strategy aimed at re-establishing political and economic relations with Russia, a development that would represent a significant geopolitical challenge for the countries of the South Caucasus. The initiative will test Tbilisi’s ability to prevent any changes to Abkhazia’s current political status and to keep the project purely economic in nature.

Key Questions

- How important is the restoration of the railway link for Georgia and Abkhazia, and particularly for the purpose of conflict resolution between the two?
- What are the political risks involved in the railway project?
- Does the new initiative meet the interests of all countries in the Caucasus region?

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Opening the railway: A confidence-building measure

The victory of Bidzina Ivanishvili's coalition in the 2012 parliamentary elections in Georgia has brought about a fundamental change to the Georgian–Abkhaz peace process. Unlike its predecessor, Georgia's new government has recognized Abkhazia as an existing reality, one that has its own voice regarding its future, with which Georgia will have to find a way of engaging. Thus, Abkhazia has been recognized as a party to the Georgian–Abkhaz conflict, at least unofficially, although Georgia's Minister for Reintegration Paata Zakareishvili has declared that the Georgian government will continue to maintain its policy of non-recognition of the separatist entities that are currently seeking to secede from the Georgian state.¹ This is the context within which Tbilisi launched a new initiative for the restoration of the Georgian–Abkhaz railway. The aim is to develop economic relations between the conflict parties and through such an approach to increase the mutual trust between them.² However, before such highly desirable aspirations can be realized, the project will have to deal with a number of key geopolitical and geo-economic challenges.

The opening of the railway is not a new idea. Indeed, several attempts were made in 2004–2005 to restore communications between Georgia and Abkhazia through the railway link. In 2005, the parties agreed that a research group consisting of Georgian, Abkhaz and Russian experts would visit Zugdidi, Gali and Ochamchireto study the state of the railway line there. The negotiations foundered in 2005, however. And, if the project failed in 2005, why should it succeed today? There are two main reasons why the new initiative might be more successful. First, because in 2004 Tbilisi was hoping to negotiate the issue only with Russia, without engaging Abkhazia as a party to the conflict. Second, the former Georgian government made its offer conditional: in exchange for the opening of the railway, Tbilisi demanded the right of return for Georgian internally displaced persons and refugees who left Abkhazia after the war in 1993. The current Georgian government's approach is different: Tbilisi has declared its willingness to negotiate the issue with Abkhazia directly, as well as with other actors, without imposing any preconditions.³



Passenger train in Psyrtskha, Abkhazia. Photo: Sergei Rubliov

'We need to promote the restoration of traffic through Abkhazia [in order to] give Abkhazia an alternative so that its economic and transportation systems would not be tied only to Russia,' Zakareishvili declared.⁴ In addition, he emphasized that 'restoration of the railway would help refugees return home and solve many problems [in the long run]. Especially since the development of transport ties will contribute to the economic development of Abkhazia.'⁵ Generally, the Georgian minister hopes that economic cooperation will increase the chances of a solution to the Georgian–Abkhazian conflict. However, if it is to be successful, any initiative will need to be free of explicit political connotations and to be couched solely in economic terms.⁶ The railway initiative has found a positive echo in Georgia. According to a poll conducted by the National Democratic Institute (NDI), 68% of respondents said they would welcome the re-establishment of the rail link.⁷

As for Abkhaz attitudes towards the Georgian proposal, initially scepticism prevailed, insofar as the project touches upon Abkhaz–Russian relations. The Abkhaz recall that in the 1990s, in order to reopen the railway and thus a possible connection with Armenia, Russia had

been willing to sacrifice Abkhaz national interests. The Abkhaz also question whether Georgia is prepared to reopen the rail link with no preconditions attached (e.g. in the absence of an agreement on the return of refugees, for example). However, Abkhazia's de facto president, Alexander Ankvab, has expressed an interest in examining the issue more closely. According to him, at the time of the Soviet Union, there were 24 freight and 12 passenger trains using the railway (carrying 13–15% of all goods crossing the Caucasus), but the current benefits that Abkhazia might reap from a reopened rail link would need to be properly assessed. In 2005, when the project was being negotiated with the Saakashvili government, the Abkhaz hoped that they would be able to collect customs and transit duties for cargo travelling between Russia and Georgia. According to their calculations, Abkhazia would have received somewhere in the region of US\$500,000–800,000 per month.⁸

Political risks

The rail-link initiative can be viewed as a compromise from the Georgian side. In order to promote economic relations with Abkhazia and build confidence, Tbilisi is prepared to



Photo: Nona Mikhelidze

run the risk that the project might in some way contribute to an upgrading of Abkhazia's political status, facilitating its quest for independence. From Georgia's perspective, it will be difficult to keep economics separate from politics, and a particularly thorny issue will be the legal dimension of the current initiative. In 2005, Abkhazia's then Deputy Prime Minister Leonid Lakerbaia stated that 'the question of restoring railway communications is a purely economic problem and it ought not to be accompanied by political demands. If Georgians want to build trust between our peoples then it should happen through the economy and without any additional political demands.'⁹ It remains to be seen whether Abkhazia will maintain such an approach – that is, considering the project as purely economic, without demanding some kind of political recognition. Abkhazian officials have already declared that 'Abkhazia should be the legal owner of its section of the railway'.¹⁰ Questions related to customs, border posts and security (e.g. who will obtain the right of inspection on the border between Russia and Abkhazia at the Psou river) are thus bound to become highly challenging issues.

Furthermore, opponents are concerned about the possibility that economic projects like this may contribute to the reintegration of Abkhazia into Georgian territory.¹¹ Minister Zakareishvili is aware that such an objective is not immediately within reach. The railway project is only in its initial phase, and it would

take years to see implementation through. In terms of conflict resolution, for Zakareishvili the first results will only be discernible in two years, and at least seven years would have to pass for reconciliation to become an irreversible reality. Hence, although conflict resolution would occur only in the long run, 'the more economic projects with Georgia's participation are being carried out in Abkhazia, the greater is the chance to resolve the conflict'.¹²

Geopolitical challenges

The railway initiative is part of a broader Georgian foreign policy aimed at re-establishing political and economic relations with Russia. Georgia seems ready to take Russia's interests in the region into account. Indeed, reopening the railway link is in the interests of both Moscow and Yerevan. Currently, Russia's communications with Armenia take place through the Georgian Military Road crossing the Larsi checkpoint. Through the Abkhazian railway, Russia would regain its connection with Armenia and Iran. Generally, the rail link would increase Russia's economic activities in the South Caucasus. Given that Armenia's borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan are closed, and Abkhazia offers the only way of linking Armenia and Russia (and Western markets) by rail, this Georgian initiative would clearly improve Armenia's transport network, reducing significantly the cost of trade. Furthermore, it would contribute to the development of hu-

man mobility, trade and tourism in the region. Thus, the railway could help to end Armenia's current isolation.

Such a situation, however, explains Azerbaijan's negative reaction to the initiative, as it fears that it would enable Russia to deliver weapons to Armenia and to use the military base in Gyumri through Abkhazia. In addition, Baku fears that reopening the railway link via Abkhazia would undercut the importance of the existing Baku–Akhalkalaki–Kars rail link largely promoted and implemented by Azerbaijan.¹³ Such fears were heightened by the somewhat imprudent statement by Georgian Prime Minister Ivanishvili regarding the disadvantages of the Baku–Akhalkalaki–Kars rail link.¹⁴ Ivanishvili's remarks were later clarified, but still reveal the challenge posed by the Abkhaz rail link to Azerbaijan's interests.

Conclusions and recommendations

Opening the Abkhaz railway would assist in the development of the economies of Georgia and Abkhazia and lead to an improvement in Georgian–Russian relations. Furthermore, it may contribute to confidence-building between Georgians and Abkhazians by encouraging joint economic activity between them. More broadly, the railway would have a positive influence on the economies of the countries of the South Caucasus. It would end Armenia's isolation, no doubt causing Azerbaijan irritation. However, Azerbaijan needs to acknowledge that the isolation imposed by Baku and Ankara upon Armenia has born no fruit to date in terms of conflict resolution in Nagorno-Karabakh. Furthermore, the Abkhaz railway could also benefit Azerbaijan: via Abkhazia, Azerbaijan would be able to reach Ukraine, thus diversifying its access to the West.

For its part, Georgia should make clear what kinds of cargo would be transported through the link. As noted above, the restoration of the railway would make it easier for Russia to supply its military base in Gyumri, Armenia, as well as to make military shipments to Iran. Tbilisi should consider the highly vulnerable situation in Nagorno-Karabakh and avoid any kind of tensions with Azerbaijan, since Baku continues to be its strategic partner in the neighbourhood. Hence, rather than arguing that Georgia is 'not going to sacrifice its inter-

ests to the benefit of other countries',¹⁵ the Georgian government should take into account the interests of all its neighbours.

Bearing in mind the difficulties of the geopolitical context, the Georgian government should start to consider a possible internationalization of its railway project. For instance, Tbilisi could encourage the EU to contribute to the implementation of the project in the framework of its 'engagement without recognition' policy towards the secessionist entities. Reconstruction of the railroad would require significant funding. By inviting the EU into the project, Tbilisi could both improve the economic feasibility of the project and allay Western fears regarding the government's rapprochement with Russia.

As for the legal implications that would emerge around the railway project and the difficulties Tbilisi could face regarding how borders, customs and security issues are regulated, the World Trade Organization agreement between Georgia and Russia could offer a way out. According to the deal, reached through Swiss mediation, trade at the borders of disputed areas is to be monitored by a neutral private company, which would be accountable to the Swiss government, though it would be hired by Georgia and Russia.¹⁶ In the same agreement, the Abkhaz territory is defined as a 'trade corridor'.¹⁷

Finally, returning to the broader question of whether reopening the Abkhazian railway might bring about a resolution of the current conflict, the Georgian government is under no illusions. As Georgia's minister for reintegration himself recognizes: 'We'll not return Abkhazia [to Georgia] by opening the road communication but the railway would be one of the factors to build relations with Abkhazia.'¹⁸ In sum, reopening the railway is a new governance initiative that is seen as a tool for

building confidence among the parties, mostly through recognition of Abkhazian agency in the peace process, and aimed at conflict resolution in long run. ■

Notes

- ¹ 'No Plan To Solve Deadlock over Occupied Georgian Regions', *Eurasia Daily Monitor* 9(227), 12 December 2013. Available at: [http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews\[tt_news\]=40232](http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews[tt_news]=40232).
- ² Interview with a state official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Tbilisi, Georgia, January 2013.
- ³ Interview with a state official from the Ministry for Reintegration, Tbilisi, Georgia, January 2013.
- ⁴ 'Georgia: The Railway to Abkhazia', *Georgia Times, Analytics*, 2 November 2012. Available at: www.georgiatimes.info/en.
- ⁵ 'Kommersant: Georgia Ready To Create Rail Link to Russia', 2 November 2012. Available at: http://en.gazeta.ru/news/2012/11/02/a_4838957.shtml.
- ⁶ Note 5 above.
- ⁷ NDI-commissioned Public Opinion Survey, Civil Georgia, Tbilisi, 12 December 2012. Available at: <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=25539>.
- ⁸ 'No One in the Leadership of Abkhazia Has Been Informed About the Resumption of Railway Communication' [in Russian], *Apsnypress*, 18 January 2013. Available at: <http://apsnypress.info/news/8086.html>.
- ⁹ 'Georgia: Georgia-Abkhaz railway – Light at End of Tunnel?', ReliefWeb report, 27 July 2005. Available at: <http://reliefweb.int/>.
- ¹⁰ 'Fast Tracking Regional Integration Through Georgian-Russian Railway Link', *Eurasia Review*, 24 December 2012. Available at: www.eurasiareview.com.

¹¹ Interview with several civil society representatives, Tbilisi, Georgia, January 2013.

¹² See note 4 above.

¹³ The Baku-Akhalkalaki-Karsi railway would connect Asia with Europe and thus represents competition for Russia's Trans-Siberian Railway.

¹⁴ 'PM Says Construction of Baku-Kars Railway "Triggers Questions"', 21 December 2012. Available at: <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=25575>.

¹⁵ 'Opening of Abkhazian Railway Meets the Interests of All South Caucasian Countries', Public Radio of Armenia, 16 November 2012. Available at: www.armradio.am.

¹⁶ 'Georgia-Russia WTO Deal in Details', 18 November 2011. Available at: <http://civil.ge/eng/article.php?id=24158>.

¹⁷ 'Abkhaz leader on Georgia-Russia WTO deal', 8 December 2011. Available at: http://www.georgiatoday.ge/article_details.php?id=9692.

¹⁸ 'Paata Zakareishvili: We Will Not Return Abkhazia by Opening Railway Communication but the Railway Will Be One of the Factors To Build Relations with Abkhazia', 5 November 2012. Available at: <http://www.kommersant.ge/eng/?id=3581>.

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THE PROJECT

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