



საქართველოს სტრატეგიისა და საერთაშორისო ურთიერთობათა კვლევის ფონდი
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IVLIAN HAINDRAVA

REGARDING THE “RED LINES” AND MORE

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Technical Editor: Artem Melik-Nubarov

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The term “red line” has been actively used in political discussions in Georgia since the events of 2008. It is primarily utilized in the context of conflicts in order to present the fundamental aspects of Georgian-Russian and sometimes Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-Ossetian confrontations. At the same time, no unified understanding of red lines inherent to our realities has been established which is why this title is sometimes ascribed to cases that do not fit it. The multitude of essentially false red lines, on the other hand, negatively influences the process of finding new/additional ways/forms of engaging with the other parties to the conflicts. The aim of this analysis is to reveal the nature of the red lines of the parties on the example of the conflict in Abkhazia, separate other less restrictive political phenomena from those red lines and, as a final result, clear away certain directions of engagement between the parties to the conflict that have been “barricaded” up until now.

It has been up to half a century since the notion of the “red line” has come into use in politics. It reflects the “tolerance limit” of a political actor and is a type of a warning, pointing out that if the opponent would cross this line, the existing format of balance (security) will collapse and response measures would be unavoidable for that opponent. Red lines mark the borders, recoiling from which are considered to be an unacceptable violation of national interests and, therefore, they separate the space of political maneuverability from that of a political “protected territory.” More frequently, a specific party openly states what it considers to be an intolerable violation of its vital interests and which steps taken by other parties would be deemed as unacceptable to such an extent that they would prompt an adequate response while the responsibility for the events taking such a turn would lie with those crossing the red line.

The technique and/or tactics of negotiation sometimes require for the real (true) red line to be kept secret which means that there could be a certain distance between the stated and the true red lines (maximum objectives and minimum objectives) which provides more flexibility in negotiations for the party utilizing such a trick. It could even be that a fictitious, false red line is drawn (stated) in advance which could make it possible to gain a more valuable concession from the opposing side at the expense of a relatively painless pullback.

We could add one more – domestic political dimension to the presented explanation/definition of the term of the “red line:” usually government attempts to determine with high precision where the red line passes in the perception of the public (what they will tolerate as opposed to what they will not) in order to avoid taking a step that would cost it its power during the next election cycle (in the worst case – immediately). This component is valid for democratic states while authoritarian governments heed the public opinion to a much lesser extent with their decisions guided by other priorities instead. In this regard, authoritarian regimes are in a more beneficial position as compared to democracies which are unable to act in disregard to public opinion and bypassing democratic procedures.

In practice, the approaches to the red lines are often “fortified” with various types of (pre)conditions and (“principled,” “unwavering”) positions. The *(pre)condition* is structured in the form of demand(s) towards the opponents without the fulfillment of which progress in relations is excluded. The *position* of the party towards a specific issue represents its basic approach to it while the issue itself could be of greater or lesser significance. Both of these are sometimes perceived as a red line, yet red lines are resistant to time and political developments (such as government change, for example) while the (pre)conditions and positions are subject to changes parallel to the changes in realities over the course of time. Such a change could manifest itself in softening or even conceding the (pre) condition or position in question, especially when there is an indication from the side of the opponent regarding the softening/conceding of its equally “unwavering” position.

In the case of the conflict in Abkhazia, the picture reflecting the red lines (together with the preconditions and positions) are rather complex as it contains not two but three components: apart from the Georgian and Abkhazian sides, Russia is a separate actor as well. Despite the fact that the Abkhazian and Russian approaches to Georgia are quite close to one another, often even convergent, they cannot be called identical which should be taken into account. At the same time the correlation between the three parties of the conflict is characterized with a clear asymmetry: the potential of Abkhazia separately taken is many times inferior to that of Georgia while the capacities of the latter are even more inferior as compared to Russia (to say nothing about enormous disparity between Russia and Abkhazia). Therefore, the red lines marked by Abkhazia are, for the most part, functional to the extent that Russia either shares or

tolerates them while Georgia's declared red lines would remain as verbal declarations alone were it not for the support of the West. As to the red line declared and militarily drawn by Russia towards Georgia (see below) is not just a warning for Georgia alone but also for the West as well as for the states falling within the area that Russia considers its (exclusive) sphere of influence.

As for the West, the Georgian red lines (and those of some other countries as well) supported by it (such as non-recognition, for example) fall under the containment policy of revisionist Russia, serving the purpose of not allowing the forceful alteration of borders by the Kremlin and the imposition of its political project onto others. It is another question as to what level of success the West manages to do this as it is overloaded with both internal and external challenges and currently experiences the phase of de-consolidation – in other words, how difficult the red lines drawn by the West are to cross.

The outlined above disposition and terminological clarity (applicable to our realities) will help us separate the red lines, on the one hand, and the (pre)conditions and principled (unwavering) positions, on the other, also aiding us in determining which one of those are real (true) red lines and which are false (fictitious) ones, also – how rigid some positions and (pre) conditions are. Let us begin with the Abkhazian side.

Abkhazians consider the *independence of Abkhazia* to be fait accompli. However incomplete (ephemeral) this independence may be, Sokhumi does not consider the possibility of holding a discussion on this issue. It must be noted that this does not only mean independence from Georgia but also from the main (and only) patron of Sokhumi – the Russian Federation. Abkhazians have open and sharp negative reactions towards any initiatives for incorporating Abkhazia into the Russian Federation – initiatives that are periodically voiced from the north; despite pressure, Abkhazians still maintain some domestic legal norms through which they try to protect themselves from Russian dominance. It is worth noting that Abkhazians managed to not only alter the title of the “inter-state” agreement elaborated by Moscow in 2014 (instead of “alliance and *integration*” it was changed to be “alliance and *strategic partnership*”) but also managed to achieve the formulation of certain articles of the agreement in its final form in a way that preserved tangible sovereignty in their domestic affairs. Hence, independence is the real, true red line for Abkhazians and there seems to be no prospect of them peacefully backing away from it.

At the same time, this fortress still has a weak spot – other ethnic groups residing in Abkhazia (which amount the majority of the population) are certainly not as categorical with regard to this issue as are the Abkhazians. The latter are well aware of this and that is why non-Abkhazians are not allowed anywhere near determining Sokhumi's political course (Abkhazian ethnocracy is, of course, fueled by other factors as well). Precisely due to this factor, as well as a clear lack of resources for state building and extreme dependence on Russian will, the first of the Abkhazian red lines seems more like a dashed line upon closer inspection.

The same cannot be said about their second red line whose essence and purpose is the *non-return of Georgian IDPs*. Abkhazians avoid openly speaking about this, yet in practice they are no less (subconsciously even more so) categorical than in the case of independence. It is noteworthy that for 12 years of the Geneva discussions, our opponents have not entered the discussion on the return of IDPs at all. Leaving aside the pre-war demographic situation, even the Georgian population of the Gali district (that was halved as a result of war) with the rest of Georgia at their back is seen as the main challenge to their independence (and identity) by Abkhazians as having many Georgians in Abkhazia means not Abkhazian but Georgian statehood. In addition to this, the mass return of Georgians to Abkhazia does not seduce other local ethnic groups either (excluding Georgians themselves, of course) for various reasons due to which this specific red line is also rather thick.¹

Together with these two red lines, Abkhazians also voice their (pre) condition towards the opposing (Georgian) side: to sign an *agreement on the non-use of force*. This means that before the Georgian party fulfills this condition, there can be no reconciliation, much less a resolution of conflict. Georgian arguments used in response to this are well known and compelling; however, the Abkhazian side (with Russian support) stubbornly puts up this issue during every round of the Geneva discussions. Many believe that a simple political goal can be identified behind such determination – to coax Georgians and equalize Abkhazia's own status (non-recognized) to that of Georgia (recognized) through the mutual signing of a joint document. Others argue that such stubbornness is encouraged by the Russians in order to keep the discussions (Georgian-Abkhazian relations as such) stagnant while tiny Abkhazia is being completely swallowed by giant Russia. Whatever the case may be, the rhetoric of the new leadership of Sokhumi alone indicates that there is space where engagement is possible

without signing the aforementioned agreement, meaning that this precondition will be put aside if the prospect of tangible results appears on the horizon. It may be reasonable to discuss posing the response (and completely logical) (pre)condition from the Georgian side as well – yes, let us sign a document on the non-use of force but with a reservation that it will only be enacted after de-occupation (full withdrawal of the Russian military from Abkhazia).

At the same time, in such obstinacy one could also see political foresight on the part of Abkhazians. If the Abkhazians have a document on the non-use of force signed by the Georgian side together with them (which is to say an obligation towards Abkhazia itself, not the “international community”), then one day they may decide not to extend the agreement with Russia regarding the presence of the latter’s military base in Abkhazia. Unfortunately, such a happy day even theoretically can only come in 2059 as the 2010 agreement is active for 49 years with the possibility of an automatic extension for the following 15 years...

As we pointed out in the introductory part, the approaches of Abkhazian red lines (and those of others as well) are reinforced with “unwavering”, “principled” positions such as the maximum prohibition of movement with the rest of Georgia. While the restriction on the entry of ethnic Georgians to Abkhazia proper (be it from the south or the north) can be explained (explained but not justified), a sharp negative attitude towards the visits of Abkhazians to the rest of Georgia, which is an omen of impending problems for the recipient of such attitude (excluding extraordinary situations) and in essence is equal to prohibition, cannot be explained rationally. It could possibly be seen as masking petty jealousy/envy – Abkhazians must not witness first hand that the quality of life in Georgia is higher according to various parameters as compared to not just Sokhumi but even Russia. However, this “rigid” position is being rattled by time (the Berlin Wall fell, too) and the realities (the demand on healthcare that corresponds to contemporary standards) and the political course of the current leadership in Sokhumi is much more measured than that of its predecessor (at least in terms of the connections of the residents of Gali with the rest of Georgia).

Yet another “rigid” Abkhazian position – the restriction on acquiring/owning real estate by the “non-citizens of Abkhazia” is being rattled for everyone to see. Poverty exacerbated by the pandemic forces Sokhumi to look for ways of attracting private foreign (essentially – Russian)

investments to which the aforementioned restriction creates an insurmountable barrier. Therefore, discussions have started in Abkhazia regarding the creation of a kind of free economic zones in the so-called “depressive” regions (Tkvarcheli, Ochamchire, Gali) where Russian citizens will be able to buy apartments (but not land), reside for an indefinite time and conduct business activity in a welcoming environment. What the reaction of Russian businessmen (and the government) will be about this initiative is so far unclear; however, it is a fact that Abkhazians themselves have started talking about this, an issue about which they not even dared to think a little while before. This is precisely the case when the change in realities causes positions to be revised.²

Georgia’s goal is to get Abkhazia back and, therefore, its main red line is drawn on the *non-recognition of Abkhazia’s independence*. Theoretically, it is possible to reconcile (mutually nullify) Georgian and Abkhazian red lines regarding the latter’s independence; for example, by utilizing the following scheme: a so-called package agreement is made by which Georgia recognizes Abkhazia’s independence while Abkhazia simultaneously signs a document on uniting with Georgia in a (con)federative state. That said, the current level of mistrust between the parties and the differing vision of the future certainly does not create fertile ground for theorizing in this direction.

The second red line – *the IDPs must return to Abkhazia* – is full of accompanying problems. First of all, from everything mentioned above it follows that such a return could only take place if the first task is resolved (re-integration of Abkhazia within Georgia) – Georgia cannot exchange the return of the IDPs for recognition even if the Abkhazians were to express their readiness in this regard. Second: a voluntary, secure and dignified return – is an adequate formula that entails the existence/clarification of numerous parameters such as: what is the number of those who would potentially return? To which places? In what timeframe? What kind of conditions need to be created for them and through whose funds? How will their rights be ensured? And so on. Third: are those living in the Gali district today to be considered as returnees? Are the residents of Gali included in the overall number of IDPs to which Tbilisi refers? Fourth: how much do the annual UN General Assembly resolutions on the Status of Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees (which are recommendatory in nature, not obligatory) bring us closer to the goal of the return of IDPs? To what extent do the political-diplomatic efforts directed at mobilizing

support at the General Assembly each year represent the optimal spending of not-so-limitless foreign policy resources? How long will this “epopee of resolutions” continue?

About this Georgian red line, it can be said that it is honest and, therefore, not false; however, a question remains: How realistic is it?

Another Georgian red line is formulated as the demand of *the de-occupation of territories* and hence resembles a (pre)condition (de-occupation as a necessary, yet not sufficient condition for the normalization of bilateral relations). Its nature rests in the fact that by occupying Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Russia crossed a red line of international importance, violating the borders of its neighboring state as well as its sovereignty and territorial integrity; however, this does not mean that the line has, therefore, disappeared and in fact the goal is once again to return Russia beyond the mentioned line. At the same time, the position derived from this thick red line, such as the “occupation regime,” is not as unequivocal as the fact of the occupation itself. Especially when this term is used in the singular form as if the administrations of one and the same regime fully (and identically) govern the situation in both Sokhumi and Tskhinvali.³ Meanwhile, Sokhumi and Tskhinvali both enjoy autonomy, yet the level of their autonomies differs – Sokhumi has more of it and wants even more than that. It is obvious that in both cases the local governments are reinforced by the occupying state and that many things are done with its overt or covert dictation; however, in Sokhumi’s case, some things have happened without the involvement of the occupier while yet others have been done in opposition to its will, sometimes including the formation of the de-facto government. The cliché of the “occupation regime” directs all attention towards Moscow which fails to reflect local realities, relieves the de-facto government from its responsibility for faulty steps taken and removes stimulus for them to take positive steps (everything is ascribed to Moscow anyway).

The Georgian principled position regarding *the non-recognition of Abkhazians as a party of the conflict* is in direct connection with this situation and carries signs of fictitiousness. Firstly, an approach according to which the Abkhazian participant in the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict is not considered a party is paradoxical at the very least; secondly: there are a number of documents that names Abkhazia as a party of conflict, together with Georgia.⁴ Thirdly: if the Abkhazians who are not recognized

by us to be a party of the conflict were to decide to sign a document with the status of a party of the conflict, that would, for example, restore free movement from both sides of the Enguri River, would we refuse?

The argument, according to which since 2008 – when Russia committed aggression against Georgia and occupied its territories – it is Russia which effectively controls Abkhazia (and South Ossetia) and is, therefore, the only opposite party to the conflict, is not exactly exhaustive as the fact that the Russian-Georgian conflict has “overshadowed” the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict does not at all mean that the latter has completely disappeared.⁵ With this incomplete argument, some try to mask the fear that referring to Abkhazians as a party of the conflict might lead us to the international recognition of Abkhazia’s “independence.” This fear, however, is exaggerated: both state as well as non-state actors can be parties of a conflict and referring to an actor as a “party” does not in itself define its legal status, let alone meaning the automatic recognition of independence, even if the party in question is aspiring to this. In the conflict in Moldova, Transnistria has been referred to as a party for 28 years now, yet no one (not even Russia) has recognized its independence; in the case of Cyprus, the secessionist side (the so-called Republic of Northern Cyprus) has been recognized by no one but Turkey since 1983.

Another so far unwavering Georgian position is the restriction of travel abroad for those living on the occupied territories unless they hold Georgian (or neutral) passports. The political effectiveness of this position, not to mention its humanitarian components (especially during the need to travel abroad for medical or educational purposes), raises questions domestically and externally alike as it contradicts the tasks of restoring mutual trust and reconciliation, increases the level of alienation and facilitates Russia’s dominance in Abkhazia.

Such positions, formed during various stages and in various situations of the unresolved conflict, follow Georgian (and Abkhazian) politics by inertia, are not refined or reviewed for years and are not left in the past when and where necessary, serving only stagnancy in bilateral relations when such stagnancy promises only miserable results for both sides.

Russia’s main red line – revealed in the context of the conflicts with full clarity – is *not allowing Georgia’s integration into NATO.*⁶ The very real nature of the risks associated with not just crossing but even approaching this line was confirmed by Russia through military force – in 2008 in

Georgia and 2014 in Ukraine. Given that Russia actually considers NATO's approximation to its borders as a direct threat (to what extent this is well-reasoned is another matter) to its vital interests (security – primarily) means that, to put it more figuratively, this specific red line is quite intensely red. It can also be said that Russia's all other dashed red lines or full lines that are sort of reddish, (pre)conditions or positions (in essence, its foreign and security policy in the so-called "near abroad") stem from the intention of preventing Georgia (Ukraine, Moldova...) from joining the Euro-Atlantic space (minimum objective) or, in the best case, the intention of making Georgia (Ukraine, Moldova...) part of the Eurasian Union (maximum objective).

The (pre)condition voiced by Russia towards its opponents since 2008 requires them (primarily – Georgia) to *recognize new (military-political) realities*. These realities include: a) the irreversibility of Moscow's decision on recognizing the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia (the issue of revoking this cannot be considered) and b) the "legitimacy" of the deployment of its military bases in Abkhazia and South Ossetia since this was done on the basis of bilateral agreements with "sovereign states" – Abkhazia and South Ossetia. This pre-condition reflects Russia's principled position according to which the territorial integrity of Georgia in 1991 borders perished together with the Soviet Union and there is no such thing as the occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The irrevocability of recognition is determined not only by the fear of losses in terms of image/prestige (Russia, after all, is no Vanuatu or Tuvalu to be deciding one thing today and opposite the day after) but also the requirement of confirming the consistency of its political course – the recognition of the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was followed by the annexation of Crimea and then the direct involvement in the Syrian civil war. Russia is demonstrating its power which it considers to be beneficial for "domestic consumption" (for North Caucasians, for example) as well as the "near abroad" (so that no other follows the path of Georgia and Ukraine) and globally, too, so that important geopolitical questions are not decided without Russian participation. The maintenance/deployment of its military bases (or personnel) on the territories of others should also be considered as a demonstration of strength, continuing in Syria after Georgia and even reaching Libya now.

At the same time, saying that the independence of Abkhazia and the presence of its (Russian) military base there is a matter of life and death

for Russia would be a clear exaggeration. Acquiring Abkhazia, apart from strengthening its positions in the Caucasus and on the Black Sea, also provided Russia an additional headache⁷ while the issue of the presence/absence of its military base there is considered in the context of its main red line.

In the context of red lines/(pre)conditions/positions, **South Ossetia** requires separate consideration as the differences with Abkhazia are clear and significant.⁸ Here, we shall only state that Tskhinvali has drawn around itself one all-encompassing red line through the so-called borderization process by which it stated: *We do not want Georgia and Georgians*. After the catastrophe of August 2008, “borderization” was complemented with an alienation process purposefully encouraged by the Tskhinvali de facto and Russian governments on the background of which this red line is thickening. It will take a lot of time and effort to change the feelings dominating the region after the war. At the same time, here, as mentioned in the introduction, we have a case when a red line is functional to an extent that it is ensured by Russian force; without this factor, the attitude of Ossetians towards Georgians/Georgia could not and would not have been so rigid.

* * *

Before the Georgian and Abkhazian societies find an algorithm that will delete the so far insurmountable red lines between them, first the space between these lines must be cleaned of pseudo-principled and ostensibly “unwavering” positions as well as the pre-conditions that hinder the return of humans to a state of being maximally approximated to normalcy (conflict transformation process).

In Sokhumi, they already realize – it is impossible to live in constant enmity.⁹

References

1. Despite the universally recognized principle of the right of return, the forcefully displaced persons as a result of conflicts have not always enjoyed the opportunity of returning to their homes, including in Europe, more specifically in the former Yugoslavia (author's remark).
2. Even more alarming is the initiation of the process of creating a "common social-economic space" between Russia and Abkhazia; see: <https://mfa.gov.ge/News/saqartvelos-sagareo-saqmeta-saministros-komentari.aspx?CatID=5>.
3. In the UN documents, the de-facto governments of Sokhumi and Tskhinvali are referred to as "authorities in control in Abkhazia and South Ossetia" (author's remark).
4. These include, for example, the May 14, 1994 Moscow Agreement on a Ceasefire and Separation of Forces, UN Security Council Resolutions ##858, 892, 993, 1036, 1065, the November 14, 1996 resolution of the European Parliament and many more.
5. For more details see: Ivlian Haindrava "Transformation: On the Role of Georgian-Abkhaz and Georgian-Ossetian Conflicts in Georgian-Russian Relations," GFSIS, 2017 <https://www.gfsis.org/files/library/pdf/English-2467.pdf>. In the documents of international organizations, Abkhazia (and South Ossetia) are referred to as "parties" after the 2008 Russian-Georgian war as well. See, for example, the October 2, 2008 Resolution #1633 of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe ("parties to the conflict"), <http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=17681> and the Tagliavini Report ("sides involved in the conflict") <https://smr.gov.ge/en/page/21/strategiuli-dokumentebi>.
6. The purpose of this already drawn line was clarified by then President of Russian Federation, D. Medvedev, during his November 21, 2011 meeting with the soldiers at the Vladikavkaz military base: "If you...had faltered back in 2008, the geopolitical situation would be different now and a number of countries which (NATO) tried to deliberately drag into the alliance would have most likely already been part of it now." <https://in.reuters.com/article/idINIndia-60645720111121>
7. For more details see: I. Haindrava "Cost of Gains," <https://www.gfsis.org/ge/publications/view/2525> 2018.
8. *Ibid.*
9. From an interview with Sergey Shamba <https://www.ekkhokavkaza.com/a/30772165.html> August 8 2020.