

Tsurtumia Alexander

Phd in Political science

Invited lecturer of Political science department

Tbilisi State University

(Tbilisi. Georgia)

BLACK SEA COSSACKS OF ABKHAZIA – SUPPORT FOR SEPARATISM IN SAKARTVELO (ABKHAZIA) AND UKRAINE

Summary: Russia actively supported and supports separatism in the former Soviet republics. This support is a mechanism for maintaining influence: in Georgia, Ukraine, Moldova, etc. One of the instruments of support is the «Black Sea Abkhazian Cossacks», which is involved in the processes not only in Abkhazia, but also in the eastern regions of Ukraine (Donetsk and Lugansk).

Key words: Cossacks in Abkhazia, separatism in Sakartvelo, East Ukraine.

Резюме: Росія активно підтримувала і підтримує сепаратизм у колишніх радянських республіках. Ця підтримка є механізмом збереження впливу в Грузії, Україні, Молдові тощо. Одним з інструментів підтримки є «Чорноморське абхазьке казачтво», яке залучене до процесів не лише в Абхазії, а й у східних областях України (Донецькій та Луганській).

Ключові слова: казачтво в Абхазії, сепаратизм у Сакартвело, Східна Україна.

The process of dissolution of the Soviet Union was difficult. In the 80s of the 20th century, Moscow promoted separatism in several republics. The conflict developed in two regions of Georgia: in the Autonomous Republic of Abkhazia and in the Tskhinvali region (the so-called South Ossetian autonomy). With the declaration of independence by Georgia, these conflicts took a much wider scale. Moscow's support ensured the strengthening of separatism and the intensification of the conflict in the above-mentioned regions.

Moscow avoided direct participation in hostilities. In the ongoing conflict in Abkhazia, the representatives of the autonomous units of the North Caucasus Russian Federation joined the side of the separatists. Kuban Cossacks also took part in the fighting. They were in second place among the “volunteers” in number.

The Black Sea Cossacks of Abkhazia was formed during the conflict. Before that, there were no reports about Cossacks living in Georgia, especially in Abkhazia. It is interesting that the head of the Gudaut Cossacks for some time was a person of ethnic Greek origin. The current number of Abkhaz Cossacks is about 1 000 people. The current head of the Black Sea Cossacks of Abkhazia is Vadim Mironenko.

“By the mid-1990s, part of the former Russians began to call themselves Cossacks, creating the “Community of the Cossacks of Abkhazia” headed by Ataman Oleg Petrov. Later, ten years later, the status of the community expanded due to the entry of the Cossack society of Abkhazia into the Kuban Cossack army. On the streets of Sukhumi appeared mummers in Circassians and hoods; who is richer – he sewed bekeshi and cloaks for himself. And since 2005, Ataman Valery Vasilchenko has been actively creating Cossack societies in all cities and regions of the Republic of Abkhazia. Even where no one had heard of the Cossacks before: well, what kind of Cossacks can there be in the Gali region with a Megrelian (Georgian) population? And in Gudauty, the ethnic Greek Anatoly Mikropulo became the Ataman” [1].

From the activity of the Cossacks of Abkhazia, several circumstances should be highlighted. In 2018 there was a conflict between the de-facto government of Abkhazia and the “local Cossacks”. The reason for the disagreement was the government’s decision to allow Cossacks to participate in the “Independence” parade in September 2018. The reaction of the Cossacks was strongly negative.

“The appearance of mummery Cossacks in Sukhumi would be a reminder of who is the boss in Abkhazia and who is pursuing imperial policy” [1].

From 2014, when in two eastern regions of Ukraine (Donetsk and Lugansk regions) Moscow (Russia) ignited the center of separatism and helped to conduct hostilities, the Black Sea Cossacks of Abkhazia became actively involved in the ongoing processes. Their activity takes place in two directions: in combat operations and in the form of assistance in the form of financial and material resources.

The beginning of 2004 should be considered the main starting point of the current processes. During the years of Boris Yeltsin's rule, the term "near abroad" was actively used in Russia's foreign policy in relation to the former Soviet republics. After the presidency of Vladimir Putin, this term is gradually disappearing. Since 2004, Russia has been actively using soft power, opposing the cooperation of Georgia and Ukraine with the European Union and the process of integration into this organization.

In 2004, Russia's "gas war" was a warning to both Ukraine and Europe, followed by Putin's warning at the 2005 Munich conference not to cross "red lines". Even more rigid was Putin's speech at the 2007 Munich conference that Russia also has the right to carry out humanitarian intervention in countries where it deems it necessary [2].

Western politicians and analysts should have paid due attention to this speech. The recognition of Kosovo was one of the "red lines" for Russia. Robert Asmus's view on this issue is interesting and important: "Diplomacy must also follow the main principle of the Hippocrates: do no harm!" Irritated by the (unprepared and hasty) recognition of Kosovo's independence by the US and European states, Russia tried to compensate for the resentment and ambitions at the expense of other western allied states.

All of this was reflected in the August 2008 war in Georgia and the developments in Ukraine after 2014, the annexation of Crimea and the support of Sepatazim in Donetsk and Lugansk regions. Since 2014, volunteers from Abkhazia have been actively involved

in fighting on the side of the Donetsk separatist regime. They are led by Akhrik Avidzba, who was awarded the title of hero by the separatist regime.

“In 2014–2016 Avidzba commanded several units of the People’s Militia of the DPR, including the Pyatnashka international brigade. He participated in the battles for Ilovaisk and Debaltseve, for which he received the title of hero of the DPR” [4].

On February 24, 2022, after the start of Russia’s aggression against Ukraine, “volunteers” from Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region were actively involved in fighting in support of the separatists [5].

Cossacks of Black Sea Abkhazia and its ataman Vadim Mironenko are actively involved in the ongoing processes in Donetsk region. They periodically bring various types of cargo to the region. This activity is reflected in the Black Sea Abkhazia Cossack’s page on Twitter [6].

On May 4, 2022, Vadim Mironenko in Sokhumi held a press conference at the “Sputnik” press center. He spoke about the current situation in Donetsk region and presented his “vision”. “If we lose there (Donetsk – A.T.), tomorrow will start here (Abkhazia – A.T.). And here it will start lightning” [7].

Of course, such statements make the situation tense. The policy of the Georgian government is not to resolve the issue of territorial integrity by force.

Russia relies on the principle of humanitarian intervention, sharply violating the sovereignty of states and international legislation. The activity of Black Sea Abkhazia Cossacks and other units is an instrument of Russia’s aggressive policy. Russia is using the Abkhaz Cossack factor to show international “support” for the Donetsk and Lugansk separatist regimes. All this, apart from physical involvement, is a special propaganda tool in the hands of Moscow. The support of the world community and, what is most important, the principled position in relation to the territorial integrity of Georgia and Ukraine is the main way to achieve peace.

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