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Georgia: New opposition bloc launches in Abkhazia after controversial Russia deal

Sunday 14 January 2024, by [Open Caucasus Media](#) (Date first published: 9 January 2024).

The leaders of a new opposition bloc in Abkhazia have called on opponents of the transfer of the Pitsunda dacha to Russia to unite and fight to ‘preserve Abkhazia’s sovereignty’.

The new opposition platform was [announced](#) on 8 January by a group of opposition activists, public figures, and businessmen, including Akhra Bzhaniya, Alkhas Dzhindzholiya, Tengiz Dzhopua, Levan Mikaa, and Lasha Zukhba.

The initiative comes less than two weeks after the controversial [transfer](#) of the Pitsunda (Bichvinta) dacha to Russia for 49 years was ratified by parliament, in an extraordinary session held in the early hours of 27 December.

[Read more: [Abkhazia approves transfer of Pitsunda dacha to Russia](#)]

The founders of the as yet unnamed bloc argue that the agreement constitutes a ‘loss of Abkhazia’s independence’ and have called on all opponents of the deal to unite to ‘protect the national interests of the people of Abkhazia’.

The activists condemned the nearly unanimous ratification of the deal by the Abkhazian parliament and spoke against both the opposition’s and broader society’s inaction.

‘[In Abkhazia,] there is no real political divide between the government and the opposition, or within the opposition. The core issue is whether to preserve our sovereignty or to share it [with Russia]. We are moving towards such a division of political camps’, founder Alkhas Dzhindzholiya [said](#).

Another founder, Tengiz Dzhopua decried Abkhazia’s opposition for ‘sitting in two chairs, but falling from both’, suggesting that opposition politicians attempted to both criticise the government and not damage their relations with them.

While the bloc has not published any programme or formal commitments, its stated aim is to prevent the adoption of a variety of contentious laws pushed by Russia, such as the ‘foreign agents law’, the [construction](#) and real estate law, laws allowing the transfer of large energy facilities into private hands, and others.

Dzhopua emphasised that he considers accusations of being ‘anti-Russian’ levelled against those who oppose the initiatives tightening relations between Abkhazia and Russia to be unfounded.

‘Russia has its own interests, and it defends them. We have our own interests, and we are obliged to defend them’, said Dzhopua. ‘Moderate nationalism is practised in Russia today; why can’t we practise it too?’.

Alkhas Dzhindzholiya and Akhra Bzhaniya both added that if they were required to take up arms to defend Abkhazia from such laws, they were ready to do so.

Russia's tightening grip on Abkhazia

The Pitsunda dacha transfer was the latest in a series of Russian initiatives which critics claim are aimed at strengthening the country's hold on Abkhazia's domestic affairs.

The agreement dates back to 1995, when Abkhazia's first president, Vladislav Ardzinba, agreed to rent the dacha to the Russian Federal Protective Service for 49 years. It came with an adjoining territory of approximately 180 hectares with three buildings on the Black Sea coast. This agreement was unimplemented until January 2022, when the government decided to revive and extend it, amid criticism from activists and legal experts who questioned the legality of the contract.

The extension was [ratified](#) in the early hours of 27 December, driving speculation that the government had held the extraordinary session out of hours in an attempt to avoid mass protests.

'Parliament sessions can only be held at night in wartime and emergency situations. The agreement should have gone through the first reading, second reading with amendments, and then the final reading. Everything was done with violations', [said](#) new opposition bloc founder Akhra Bzhaniya.

Since 2020, the authorities have been considering adopting a Russia-style 'foreign agent law' aimed at curbing civic activism through restrictions on Western funding. In November 2023, President Aslan Bzhaniya signed a law [tightening restrictions](#) on international organisations after the authorities criticised USAID for fostering anti-Russia sentiments in Abkhazia.

The idea of allowing foreign citizens to buy real estate in Abkhazia has been floated since the 2010s but has also been met with staunch opposition. Critics argued that it would lead to a mass sale of land to Russian investors, increased Russian influence in the local economy and politics, as well as creating a window of opportunity for Georgians with Russian citizenship to purchase property in Abkhazia. Real estate sales are currently [prohibited](#) by Abkhazia's legislation.

The issue has semi-regularly resurfaced, most recently in June 2023 during a [conflict](#) between the mayor of Sukhumi (Sukhum) and the city's assembly regarding a construction law.

In 2017, a joint Coordination Centre between Abkhazia and Russia's ministries of internal affairs was [created](#) amidst fears that it would grant Russian officials disproportionate leverage in Abkhazia's domestic matters.

For ease of reading, we choose not to use qualifiers such as 'de facto', 'unrecognised', or 'partially recognised' when discussing institutions or political positions within Abkhazia, Nagorno-Karabakh, and South Ossetia. This does not imply a position on their status.

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