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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Blakkisrud, H. (2025). Abkhazia's 2025 Presidential Elections: De Facto State Patron-Client Relations and Russian Interference. *Caucasus Analytical Digest*, 142, 12-16. <https://doi.org/10.3929/ethz-b-000692533>

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## Abkhazia's 2025 Presidential Elections: De Facto State Patron–Client Relations and Russian Interference

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DOI: 10.3929/ethz-b-000741462

### Abstract

On 15 February 2025, the Abkhazians went to the polls to elect a new president to succeed Aslan Bzhania, who had been forced to resign following a wave of popular protests. This election was particularly notable due to unprecedented interference by Abkhazia's patron, the Russian Federation. The relationship between Abkhazia and Russia has evolved over the years. While Abkhazia relies heavily on Russian backing for security and infrastructure, most Abkhazians oppose full integration with Russia. In particular, the question of whether Russian citizens should be allowed access to the Abkhazian real estate market has become a contentious issue that has sparked resistance. When Bzhania attempted to accommodate Russian interests in the real estate market in 2024, he faced a backlash and was ultimately forced to resign. The 2025 election featured two main candidates: Badra Gunba, who was backed by Moscow, and opposition leader Adgur Ardzinba. Gunba's victory raises several questions about Abkhazian sovereignty and the future of the country's political landscape. Gunba must balance the expectations of his patron against the concerns of a populace that has grown wary of losing its autonomy amid Russia's increasing integration efforts. Hence, the dynamics of this election exemplify the complexity of de facto state patron–client relationships.

### Introduction

On 15 February 2025, Abkhazian voters went to the polls to elect a new president to replace Aslan Bzhania, who resigned in November 2024 after a mob broke into the presidential compound. Abkhazia is no stranger to popular unrest or to presidents being forced to leave office early. In fact, both of Bzhania's immediate predecessors were forced to leave due to popular protests (Aleksandr Ankvab in 2014 and his successor Raul Khajimba in 2020). What made this election so special was the unprecedented pressure and overt interference exerted by Abkhazia's patron, the Russian Federation.

### Backdrop: De Facto States and Patronage

The international system that arose after World War II is premised on the concepts of sovereign states and mutual recognition. However, not all state-like entities have been granted membership in the club of internationally recognised states. Over the years, various entities have emerged with aspirations to join the international community but failed to achieve recognition, leaving them (semi)permanently stuck in the limbo between secessionism and statehood (Blakkisrud, 2023). These entities are commonly referred to as de facto states, that is, as states that have all the trappings of a regular state but lack international recognition (Pegg, 1998). The break-up of the Soviet Union in 1991 led to the establishment of several such de facto states, including Abkhazia, which waged a successful war of secession from 1992 to 1993 and officially declared its independence from the Republic of Georgia in 1999.

Most unrecognised states that manage to hold on to their de facto status for any period of time do so because they possess the backing of a patron state that acts as a powerful protector and provides the de facto state with vital resources, including security guarantees (Biermann, 2025). In the case of Abkhazia, however, despite Russian involvement in the 1992–1993 secessionist war, Moscow did not immediately assume the role of its patron. Instead, it adopted policies that seemed to favour the Georgian side. In the mid-1990s, in connection with the First Chechen War, Russia restricted cross-border movement, introducing a ban on Abkhazian males aged 16 to 60 crossing the border. Additionally, at the behest of Georgia, Russia joined an economic blockade against the secessionists. However, as Russia's relations with Tbilisi gradually deteriorated, sanctions were slowly eased, and more assistance was provided to Abkhazia.

The great watershed came with the 2008 Russo–Georgian War. In the aftermath of the war, Russia decided to unilaterally recognise Abkhazia as an independent state. Over the next few years, Russian funding and support poured into Abkhazia. For a time, up to 75% of the Abkhazian budget was reportedly covered by Russian transfers (Blakkisrud et al., 2021). However, in recent years, Moscow has gradually reduced this direct financial support, expecting Abkhazians to shoulder more of the cost of running the de facto state.

In parallel, Russian authorities have pursued a stepwise integration policy. A series of far-reaching agreements has been reached (Ambrosio/Lange, 2016). One of the most important of these is the 2020 agreement

on harmonising legislation across a broad range of sectors to establish a unified socioeconomic space with Russia (Belkania, 2023).

### Adopting a Unified Socioeconomic Space

De facto states such as Abkhazia face a dilemma: on the one hand, they have fought a war to achieve full independence; on the other hand, these secessionist entities are often small and weak, making them dependent on a patron not only for security guarantees but also for infrastructure and various services that they cannot provide for their population on their own (Blakkisrud, 2023). This raises the question of de facto state agency: what room for (bounded) independent agency do such unrecognised states have vis-a-vis their patrons (Berg/Vits, 2020)?

The 2020 Russo-Abkhazian agreement on a unified socioeconomic space is a case in point. When this agreement refers to ‘harmonisation’, it is implied that Abkhazia adopt existing Russian standards and regulations (Belkania, 2023). Some steps of this harmonisation process, such as reforming the health care and pension systems (including the prospect of pensions being increased to match Russian levels), were clearly in the interest of the Abkhazian population. Other steps, such as opening the Abkhazian Black Sea shelf to oil drilling by Russian companies, were more controversial.

However, what in particular raised a red flag were the stipulations concerning the opening of the real estate market for Russian citizens. Thus far, Abkhazian authorities have consistently warned that a liberalisation of this sector could result in an influx of ethnic Georgians with Russian passports. As a result, only Abkhazian citizens are permitted to buy real estate. However, strong Russian business interests have for years been pressing for access to the lucrative market along the Black Sea coast, making control over the real estate sector a symbol of Abkhazian resistance to Russian encroachments (see Kolstø, 2020). While the Abkhazians acknowledge their reliance on Russian infrastructure across various sectors and have ceded sovereignty in key areas related to state- and nation-building (in the education sector, for example, most textbooks are imported from Russia), the real estate sector has taken on a symbolic importance that far exceeds its actual market value.

### Local Resistance

The implementation of the 2020 agreement occurred against the backdrop of Russia’s full-scale war on Ukraine, which commenced in February 2022. At best, progress has been sluggish, both because Abkhazia has

not been a priority for Moscow and because the Abkhazians themselves have been dragging their feet. The war has also drained Russia of financial resources and, in relation to its de facto state client, it seems, of patience as well. The political crisis that hit Abkhazia in 2024 was therefore to some extent driven by Russia: Moscow was clearly irritated by the Abkhazian government’s slow progress in implementing the necessary legislative amendments, including reforms to the real estate sector and conditions for Russian investments, and responded by introducing several punitive measures (see below).

As a result, the Abkhazian government found itself in a difficult squeeze: on the one hand, it needed to accommodate its patron, while on the other hand, it had to tread carefully to avoid provoking the opposition’s ire. The domestic political scene in Abkhazia is highly polarised, organised around personalities and networks rather than political parties. The two opposing political camps exhibit similar strengths and have alternated in power over the past two decades. Importantly, the political power struggle between them has played out not only through the electoral process but also in the streets (cf. the toppling of President Bzhania’s two predecessors) (Kolstø, 2021). Thus, Bzhania faced a difficult task.

### Initiatives to Overcome the Impasse

The Abkhazian resistance towards opening up the real estate sector to foreigners is well-known and well-documented. A recent example is the January 2022 property deal that transferred the Pitsunda complex, a Soviet state resort (dacha), to the Russian state (formally under a 49-year lease). The deal was met with public uproar and led to a political crisis. In Abkhazian media, the case was framed as a test of Abkhazia’s ability to stand up for its vital national interests in the face of external pressure. Only in December 2023, after an almost two-year delay, did the Abkhazian parliament succeed in passing the legislation necessary to finalise the transfer. To circumvent the protests, the legislation had to be adopted in an extraordinary session held in the wee hours of the morning.<sup>1</sup>

Bzhania’s first attempt to implement ‘harmonisation’ in the real estate sector, a 2023 draft law titled ‘On the Regulation of the Legal Status of Aparthotels and Apartments’, failed to pass; after the initial parliamentary hearings, it was returned to the presidential administration.<sup>2</sup> In the summer of 2024, however, under mounting pressure from Russia, Bzhania made a new attempt to push this piece of legislation through parliament. This

1 ‘Georgian breakaway region transfers Soviet-era seaside dacha to Russia’, *Moscow Times*, 27 December 2023. Available at: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/12/27/georgian-breakaway-region-transfers-soviet-era-seaside-dacha-to-russia-a83579> (accessed 23 May 2025).

2 ‘Zakon ob apartamentakh otozvan. Vlas’ takticheskii otstupila?’, *Ekho Kavkaza*, 25 July 2024. Available at: <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/al/zakon-ob-apartamentah-otozvan-vlastj-takticheskii-otstupila-/33050864.html> (accessed 23 May 2025).

time, he presented a watered-down version, recasting it as a regional development project: Rather than opening the entire sector to foreign investment, such investment would be limited to the underdeveloped southeastern stretch of the Abkhazian Black Sea coast. However, the parliamentary opposition remained dissatisfied; any tampering with the strict regulations governing the real estate market was considered anathema. In July 2024, the government succumbed to widespread pressure from the opposition and various civic organisations, including the powerful war veterans' association, withdrawing the draft law.<sup>3</sup>

This was not acceptable to Russia, however. In the early autumn of 2024, Moscow began stepping up pressure on Abkhazian authorities. In the face of a mounting energy crisis in Abkhazia—partially related to widespread illegal crypto mining, which consumes enormous amounts of electricity—Russia declared that it would begin charging a market price for electricity supplies that had previously been subsidised or provided free of charge. Similarly, it halted the transfer of top-up payments (*dobavki*) to various categories of Abkhazian state employees (Vits, 2024). The message to President Bzhania was unmistakable: it was time to deliver on his previous promises.

To appease Moscow, Abkhazian authorities shifted their focus from the real estate sector to the broader investment sphere. On 30 October 2024, while the Abkhazian parliament was still debating the issue, the Abkhazian Minister of Economy travelled to Moscow to sign an agreement that granted unprecedented concessions to Russian investors, including liberal tax exemptions. Back home in Abkhazia, the signing triggered a storm of protests.

### Showdown

The conflict came to a head in November 2024 when the government attempted to have the agreement ratified in parliament. The opposition parties called for standing up to protect Abkhazia's national interests. Based on their experience with the Pitsunda deal, they were wary of foul play and mobilised not only in parliament but also in the streets of Sukhumi. As the parliamentarians gathered to discuss the ratification, large crowds formed outside the gates of the government compound. The conflict peaked as some demonstrators broke through the gates, stormed into parliament and the presidential administration, and subsequently occupied the compound.

President Bzhania sought to restore calm by announcing that the legislation would be removed from consideration. However, the parliamentary opposition was not

satisfied. Backed by the demonstrators, they demanded his resignation. After a few days of intense standoff and negotiations, on 19 November, Bzhania agreed to step down and called for early elections.

### The Election Campaign

These elections were scheduled for 15 February 2025. By the deadline, five candidates had registered to run. However, three of these candidates were relatively unknown or peripheral politicians, leaving them with little chance of success.

Consequently, the battle was to be fought between representatives of the two abovementioned political blocs. The powers-that-be fielded acting president Badra Gunba as their candidate. Gunba had previously served as Bzhania's vice president since 2020 and as Minister of Culture from 2011 to 2014. He was therefore seen as being close to former presidents Ankvab and Bzhania. Officially, Gunba ran as an independent, but he received the endorsement of several Abkhazian political parties and influential civil society actors. The opposition rallied around Adgur Ardzinba, the leader of the Abkhaz People's Movement and a former Minister of Economy from 2015 to 2020 under President Raul Khajimba.

While Gunba could draw on administrative resources and the powerful network around former President Bzhania, Ardzinba was also able to mobilise the necessary resources to establish himself as a credible challenger. Notably, Ardzinba could fly the banner of defender of Abkhazian interests against those (read: Gunba's allies) who had 'sold out' to the Russians.

### The Role of Russia

Ever since Russia's 2004 attempt to orchestrate the transition of power from Abkhazia's first post-secession president, Vladislav Ardzinba, to its preferred successor, Raul Khajimba—an attempt that ended in a humiliating failure—Moscow had maintained a low profile during subsequent succession crises. This is not unique to Abkhazia; Moscow has generally refrained from openly interfering in presidential elections in its other de facto state clients as well (that is, in Transnistria and South Ossetia) (Kolstø, 2021). This reluctance is likely partly related to some early embarrassing defeats, where the local population had turned against Moscow's preferred choice. More importantly, it has been argued that Russian authorities have remained aloof because they realised that they did not need to intervene; regardless of who wins, the president-elect would have to curry favour with Moscow (Kolstø/Blakkisrud, 2017). Rather than signalling its support for a specific candidate, Moscow has there-

3 'Zakon ob apartamentakh otovzan. Vlast' takticheski otstupila?', *Ekho Kavkaza*, 25 July 2024. Available at: <https://www.ekhokavkaza.com/a/zakon-ob-apartamentah-otovzan-vlastj-takticheski-otstupila-/33050864.html> (accessed 23 May 2025).

fore typically allowed presidential hopefuls to fight it out between themselves before endorsing the winner.

Not this time. On the contrary, from the beginning of the campaign, Moscow openly supported Badra Gunba. Apparently, Gunba himself was not particularly concerned about a potential repetition of the 2004 scenario or about appearing too beholden to Moscow, as he himself actively sought to enlist support from the patron. With only two weeks left before the elections, Sergei Kirienko, Deputy Head of the Russian Presidential Administration, paid Abkhazia a visit from 31 January to 1 February. Subsequently, Gunba travelled to Moscow on 6 February, where he was received by, among others, Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergei Lavrov. At this stage, Gunba had already stepped down as acting president to campaign for election. Thus, he travelled as a candidate, but was received as Abkhazia's next president.

When Gunba travelled home to Sukhumi, it was on the first test flight to the now-restored Sukhumi Airport, which had been closed since the war of secession in the early 1990s.<sup>4</sup> Upon his return, Gunba announced that he had persuaded Moscow to reassess the existing investment agreement and replace it with a new draft that would better address the interests of the Abkhazian side. He also noted positive developments in Moscow's stance on electricity supplies and payments to Abkhazian state employees. Indeed, following Gunba's visit, Russia's Ministry of Finance promptly released 340 million roubles that were earmarked for pensions and salaries but had been withheld since the previous autumn.

Moreover, Moscow did not limit itself to openly exhibiting its preference for Gunba; it also attacked Ardzinba's supporters. Kan Kvartchia and Levan Mikaa, who together with Ardzinba had led the overthrow of President Bzhania, were for example both stripped of their Russian citizenship as a punishment for being 'putchists'.

The first round of the vote, on 15 February, failed to produce a winner: Gunba received 47.8% of the votes, whereas Ardzinba garnered 38.0%. The three remaining candidates trailed far behind, polling between 7.8% and 0.9%. In the runoff that took place on 1 March, Gunba won 54.7% of the votes against Ardzinba's 41.5%. The next day, Russian President Vladimir Putin congratulated Gunba on his victory.

### What Now?

With a relatively convincing victory and the Kremlin's backing, the question arises as to whether Gunba will be able to stabilise the situation. The answer remains unclear. While he secured a mandate from the electorate for the next five years, the underlying question regarding the future regulation of the real estate sector and Russian investments—and thus how best to protect Abkhazian sovereignty—remains unresolved. Russia is not likely to ease the pressure. Indeed, the elections may have signalled a watershed in this respect: For the first time in years, Russia not only voiced threats but also demonstrated its willingness to follow up these threats with concrete actions. Even more importantly, though, unlike in 2004, Moscow's heavy-handed tactics paid off. Hence, Gunba is not in for a smooth ride.

The Abkhazian presidential elections clearly illustrate the dynamics of de facto state agency and the patron-client dilemma: while a de facto state might bark, it can be dangerous for it to bite. The de facto state must balance its defence of perceived red lines with its fundamental dependence on its patron. In normal times, a patron may grant a de facto state some leeway and agency; however, when push comes to shove—such as during Russia's current war against Ukraine—the client becomes even more vulnerable (Kolstø, 2024). In such situations, de facto states have few options other than to comply.

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<sup>4</sup> The airport officially opened for regular commercial flights from Russia in May 2025.

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