

Ethnic Cleansing and Honor

*David J. Smith

On a vote of 14 to 11, the United Nations General Assembly on Thursday passed a resolution recognizing the right of refugees, internally displaced persons and their descendants, regardless of ethnicity, to return to Abkhazia. This is a significant diplomatic step. However, the 14-11 vote in an organization of 192 members says as much about the international community as it does about the problems of Abkhazia.

During the early nineties, Russian-backed ethnic cleansing—murder, rape, torture, pillage—forced hundreds of thousands of Georgians, Greeks, Estonians, Jews and others to flee their native Abkhazia. Now, the UN resolution recognizes not only their right to return home, but also their right to property restitution. In parallel, the resolution calls for a guarantee of the rights of the Abkhaz population. The General Assembly directs UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon to report on the implementation of the resolution during its next session, which begins in September.

Of course, this resolution might have carried more weight if there had been more than 25 active participants in its adoption. However, international politics is never black and white. It proceeds step-by-step and UN resolutions are important steps, or at least steps that one should not miss. The dynamic of each vote is different—the diplomatic skill is to count prospective yes and no votes and abstentions to devise a strategy to get the resolution passed. Irakli Alasania, Georgia's representative in New York outmaneuvered his Russian counterpart.

The result was to put the UN on record—even countries that abstained from the vote are unlikely to turn their backs on a UN resolution. The debate left the Russians to defend their imperialistic support for the consequences of ethnic cleansing. And it set up a mechanism to keep return to Abkhazia on the UN agenda.

However, this resolution is just one step. The UN General Assembly passes hundreds of hollow resolutions each year. And hundreds of follow-up reports slosh around the hallways of UN Headquarters. Resolving the conflict in Abkhazia will still require sustained, purposeful diplomacy, particularly from the western countries. In this regard, last Thursday's vote tally is instructive.

Among the older NATO or European Union countries, only the United States and Sweden stood up for this resolution. These countries must take the lead in the diplomatic push that must now follow. They will have the support of most of the newer NATO or EU countries. Albania, the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania and Slovakia voted for the resolution. They will have a tougher time stirring the older NATO or EU countries to look Moscow straight in the eye.

Predictably, Georgia's neighbors Azerbaijan and Ukraine supported the resolution.

Another observation that bears on the challenge of assembling a coalition of countries to follow up on this UN resolution is that among Balkan states, only Albania and Romania voted for the resolution. Traditionally, Balkan NATO allies and prospective NATO members have supported Georgia;

however, we must understand that in that region, ethnicity, refugees and their rights are still electrified issues.

Of course, Russia led the opposition to the resolution, supported by steadfast ally Armenia.

“It is clear that the given initiative has been designed by the authors to pressure the Abkhazian side in order to resolve political, but not humanitarian tasks,” said Russian representative Ilya Rogachev. In apparent self-contradiction, he continued, “The draft submitted by the Georgian side actually tears off the issue of the return of refugees and displaced persons from the complex of tasks to ensure peace in the region and thus only complicates the solution of the problem.”

Never mind the logic, “the adoption of such a selective resolution,” Rogachev said, “will further aggravate confrontation in Georgian-Abkhazian relations”—an outcome Moscow can virtually guarantee.

The most interesting outcome of the vote on this resolution, however, is the list of 105 countries that abstained. With the important exception of Sweden, the great and the good of Western Europe joined Bhutan, Bolivia and Botswana in having no opinion on this weighty matter in their own neighborhood. Worse were some of the statements they made.

Mimicking the Russian statement, the German representative explained that his country abstained because the resolution ignored many other aspects of the situation in Abkhazia.

With dazzling disingenuity, France and Italy abstained because the UN Security Council regularly considers Abkhazia. (Recall that Moscow waited to unleash its most recent moves to annex Abkhazia until April 16, the day after the Security Council reaffirmed Georgia’s territorial integrity and renewed the mandate of the so-called Russian peacekeepers in Abkhazia. Recall also that Russia wields a veto in the Security Council, which it will use to paralyze any move that threatens its imperial pretensions in Abkhazia.)

All speakers reiterated their support for Georgian territorial integrity, peaceful conflict resolution and the rights of refugees, but among the older west European countries, only Sweden found the gumption to vote for the resolution.

Of course, sorting through what Winston Churchill called “the tormenting dilemmas” of international power politics is never easy. “There is, however, one helpful guide,” said Churchill, “this guide is called honor.”

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