

SERGEJ BAGAPSH

Sergej Bagapsh, the second president of the Republic of Abkhazia, died in office on 29 May in a Moscow hospital of complications following lung-surgery the previous week. He was 62.

Bagapsh was born in Abkhazia's capital, Sukhum, on 4 March 1949. He trained as an agronomist at the local Institute of Subtropical Agriculture. After military service, however, he made his career in the structure of the Soviet Communist Party, serving in various capacities during most of the 1970s in the youth-organisation known as the Komsomol. But his first prominent position was as First Secretary of the Ochamchira District, home to his family's native village of Dzhgerda in the south-east of Abkhazia. He occupied this post from 1982 to 1989, which year saw critical developments in Abkhaz-Georgian relations, leading to Abkhazia's long-desired secession from Georgia in the wake of their bitter war (14 August 1992 – 30 September 1993).

Reacting to the threat emanating from Georgian nationalism as the Kremlin's grip on the Soviet republics slackened under *perestrojka*, the Abkhazians took steps to protect their interests and opposed the establishment in Sukhum of a branch of Tbilisi State University. The Abkhazians saw this as an attempt to undermine the viability of the Abkhazian State University, only the second institution of higher education in what was then Soviet Georgia. On the night of Saturday 15 July, fatalities occurred in Sukhum as the communities came to blows. Large numbers of armed men rallied to the cause in the neighbouring Georgian province of Mingrelia. Forewarned of the influx into Abkhazia's south-easternmost Gal District, Bagapsh and others hastily arranged early on 16 July for a tanker to be exploded on the bridge across the R. Aaldzga (aka Ghalidzga) just outside the town of Ochamchira. This preemptive action prevented the horde gaining access to the Abkhazian-populated settlements along the highway to Sukhum and undoubtedly saved many lives. The following day Soviet Interior Ministry troops were ferried in to keep the communities apart while tempers cooled (temporarily).

In the build-up to war and during the difficult decade of the 1990s Bagapsh held various administrative offices in Abkhazia under the leadership, and eventual presidency, of the late Vladislav Ardzinba.

Ardzinba saw out his second (and final) term, but ill-health forced him gradually to withdraw from public view, allowing one-time KGB operative Raoul Khadzhimba to be promoted as successor. Bagapsh, however, with the support of the socio-political movements *Amtsakhara* 'Kinship Military Group' and *Apsny Ak'zaara* 'United Abkhazia', stood against Khadzhimba in the presidential elections of October 2004. Though the Kremlin-favoured Khadzhimba was initially declared the winner, the Supreme Court overturned the results. The consequent dangerous stand-off was resolved when the two opponents declared a readiness to put themselves before the electorate on a joint-ticket for a re-run in January 2005. Bagapsh duly became president and Khadzhimba vice-president, the two forming an uneasy partnership with a strict division of competences. This relationship continued until the run-up to the 2009 elections, when

Khadzhimba resigned to lead a portion of the opposition in what proved at times a distasteful campaign. That summer, Vladimir Putin paid his long-awaited first visit to Abkhazia, setting aside time to meet Khadzhimba and his colleagues on the day. The results of the December 2009 election were unchallengeable, and Bagapsh was returned to a second term with one-time Interior Minister and businessman Alexander Ankvab as his deputy; Ankvab now takes over for the three months within which new elections must be held.

Endowed with a different kind of charisma from that of his predecessor, Bagapsh always conducted himself with quiet dignity and modesty. He was prepared patiently to keep restating the case for Abkhazia's independence from Georgia in his meetings with visiting politicians, diplomats and journalists, in the full knowledge, based on personal experience in 1989 and 1992-93, of what any compromise would mean for the fate of his small nation. Though willing for negotiations with Tbilisi on good-neighbourly relations, as indicated by the production of a set of proposals called *Key to the Future* in May 2006, he broke off talks later that year after the Georgian president, Mikheil Saak'ashvili, illegally introduced militia into Abkhazia's Upper K'odor Valley. Though Abkhazia feared in the spring of 2008 to be the target of renewed Georgian aggression, it was South Ossetia which suffered the assault on 7 August that year. When Russia came to South Ossetia's aid, Bagapsh grasped the opportunity finally to retake the K'odor Valley, which had remained under Georgian control since 1993. After a weekend of bombardment from the air, Bagapsh announced that Abkhazian ground-troops would wait 24 hours before their ascent. Again, Bagapsh can be credited with saving lives, as this hiatus saw the flight of the Georgian militia (and most of the local Svan community), so that the Valley was recaptured on 12 August without a battle; all non-combatant locals were welcome to return. The crowning glory of Bagapsh's presidency came on 26 August 2008, when Russian president Dmitriy Medvedev formally recognised Abkhazia (and South Ossetia).

Bagapsh was married to a Mingrelian — outside Abkhazia, Mingrelians (and Svans) are generally described as 'Georgians' — and this connection was widely seen as boosting his support among those Mingrelians eligible to vote in Abkhazia's 2004/5 elections. It has been argued that it was to counter any suspicion of excessive sympathy for the Mingrelians (?Georgians) that he proved too accommodating to Russian interests in Abkhazia. Bagapsh himself, however, maintained that the concessionary leases to allow Russia to provide security along the border with Georgia and to upgrade the railway and Sukhum's airport, the most capacious in the whole Caucasus, were entirely practical, as Abkhazia itself did not have the wherewithal to undertake these essential tasks, and he could thus concentrate on rebuilding the war-damaged infrastructure and health-service. Given the USA's and EU's continuing support of Georgia's determination, however unrealistic, to re-establish its Soviet borders, it is difficult to see how any Abkhazian president could have acted (or, indeed, act) differently.

Shortly before his death, Bagapsh was able to visit for the first time the Abkhazian diaspora in Turkey, with which country Abkhazians have high hopes of establishing pragmatic relations as a Black Sea neighbour. Nicaragua, Venezuela and the Pacific island-state of Nauru followed Russia in recognising Abkhazia's independence. As

Bagapsh lay unconscious, the diplomatic efforts of his administration were about to be declared to have paid dividends, for on 31 May the Abkhazian Foreign Minister announced another UN member-state, the Republic of Vanuatu, had been added to the list, convinced of the validity of the proposition that, at the time Georgia won its own recognition after the collapse of the USSR, Abkhazia had no legal ties to it.

Sergej Wasil-ipa Bagapsh, agronomist, businessman, politician; born Sukhum (Abkhazia) 4 March 1949; First Secretary of the Ochamchira District 1982-89; Deputy Chairman of Abkhazia's Agricultural Committee 1989-91; Chairman of Ochamchira District Council of People's Deputies 1991-92; First Deputy Chairman of Abkhazia's Council of Ministers 1992-95; First Vice Premier of Abkhazia 1995-97; Prime Minister of Abkhazia 1997-99; Director General of the State Black Sea Energy Company Chernomorenergo 1999-2005; President of Abkhazia 2005-9/2009-11; married Marina Shonia; one son, one daughter, two grandchildren; died 29 May Moscow.