

# Abkhazia's Leader Dies in Moscow

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Bagapsh

Sergei Bagapsh, the “perfect president” who governed Georgia’s breakaway republic of Abkhazia for the past six years, died of heart failure in a Moscow hospital early Sunday. He was 62.

Bagapsh’s sudden death might spell changes for local Abkhaz politics, but foreign policy analysts said it would not upset Abkhazia’s strategic alliance with Russia, one of only four countries to recognize the independence of the slice of Black Sea territory after the 2008 Russia-Georgia war.

Abkhaz officials confirmed Bagapsh’s death but said the cause was expected to be released Monday. Bagapsh had suffered from lung cancer and underwent surgery earlier this month. He died of complications following the operation, Interfax reported.

“I am still in shock over his death. It was unexpected that such an energetic and active man could pass away so soon,” State Duma Deputy Konstantin Zatulin, a United Russia member

and a CIS affairs expert who personally knew Bagapsh, said by telephone.

His praise was echoed by President Dmitry Medvedev, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, Chechen leader Ramzan Kadyrov and Eduard Kokoity, who leads Georgia's other breakaway region, South Ossetia. Acting Federation Council Speaker Alexander Torshin called Bagapsh the "perfect president of Abkhazia and a great friend of Russia," without elaborating.

Medvedev will attend Bagapsh's funeral Monday at a military cultural center on Suvorovskaya Ploshchad, Abkhazia's envoy to Russia, Igor Akhba, told Interfax. Bagapsh will be laid to rest in his home village of Dzhgerda on Thursday, he said.

Three days of mourning were declared in Abkhazia, an area of 250,000, which equals the population of an average Moscow suburb and is slightly less than the population of Iceland.

Vice President Alexander Ankvab became acting president, and an election is to be held within three months.

Georgian officials remained silent on Bagapsh's death Sunday, reflecting the tensions between Tbilisi and the breakaway region. But former Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze expressed his regrets.

"Despite the fact that the Georgian-Abkhaz relationship is complicated, I have respected Sergei Vasilyevich Bagapsh very much as a person," Shevardnadze said in a statement.

Shevardnadze, 83, had known Bagapsh since the 1970s, when the future Abkhaz leader held a senior post in the Georgian branch of Komsomol, the official youth league.

An agronomist by education, Bagapsh received his first government post in 1991, a year before the start of a bloody two-year conflict between Abkhazia and Georgia that resulted in 5,000 deaths, some 250,000 Georgians fleeing Abkhazia, and the republic proclaiming independence.

Bagapsh, who was married to an ethnic Georgian, Marina Shonia, who survives him, never took a hard line on Georgia, at one point calling the Georgians a "talented people." This was used against him by Raul Hadzhimba, whose 2004 presidential campaign was explicitly endorsed by then-President Putin. Hadzhimba eventually withdrew his candidacy and ran as vice president on Bagapsh's ticket.

"Moscow supported a different person, but Bagapsh won. He was not a puppet but a man who had his own view of things," said Maxim Yusin, deputy head of the Institute of Political Research.

Bagapsh proved himself a reliable ally in the 2008 war despite his reluctance to take direct commands from Moscow in times of peace, Yusin said by telephone.

Bagapsh cut all ties with Tbilisi after the war in August 2008. At the time, Abkhazia opened a second front against Georgia, whose forces tried to seize South Ossetia but were repelled by Russia. Russia, Nicaragua, Venezuela and the tiny Pacific island of Nauru later recognized the regions as independent.

For Bagapsh's successor, "it would be good for Moscow not to look for absolute loyalty but to try to support a figure with a similar stance," Yusin said.

Hadzhimba will be one of the three main contenders in the upcoming presidential race, along with acting president Ankvab and acting prime minister Sergei Shamba, said Alexei Vlasov, a CIS policy expert with the Moscow State University, RIA-Novosti [reported](#).

Duma Deputy Zatulin said whoever succeeded Bagapsh would be elected democratically. "Unlike Georgia, where presidents are removed from power by uprisings, Abkhazia has a [tradition of] a democratic transition of power," Zatulin said, in a reference to the fact that Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili removed Shevardnadze in the peaceful 2003 Rose Revolution.

Bagapsh's successor is expected to continue his pro-Russian policy, said Konstantin Kosachyov, who heads the Duma's International Affairs Committee, RIA-Novosti [reported](#).

"I don't have any fears for the future of the Russian-Abkhaz relationship. There might be some nuances, but it will remain friendly on the strategic level," Kosachyov said.

About 3,000 Georgians protested Saturday against a decision to break up an opposition rally on May 26 that left at least two dead, Reuters reported.

Georgian riot police used teargas, water cannon and rubber bullets on Thursday to halt five days of demonstrations against Saakashvili, who blamed the unrest on Russia.

Two people were killed when cars carrying opposition leaders left the scene and at least 37 people were wounded, the Interior Ministry has said.

The Interior Ministry said Saturday that the bodies of two other people, apparently protesters, had been found on the roof of a shop near where the police had dispersed the demonstration.

"According to preliminary information, they died after touching electric cables on the roof," the ministry said. "Police are investigating the possible connection between the deaths of these two men and the protest on May 26."

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