

# Russia's Opposition to Georgia's Quest for NATO Membership

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Over the past year, Tbilisi has made serious strides towards its long stated goal of joining NATO. However, Moscow has made it clear that Russia will not tolerate a NATO member state in its own “near abroad.” As Georgia has been moving closer towards NATO membership, its relationship with Russia has rapidly deteriorated. Although relations between the two estranged neighbors are slowly improving, analysts believe that as long as Tbilisi pursues NATO membership it will continue to face increasingly hostile attitudes from Moscow. The Kremlin's deep displeasure with Tbilisi over this issue also signifies Georgia's growing detachment from its Soviet past and Russian influence.

## Russia's Opposition to Georgia's Overtures to NATO

Moscow opposes NATO's eastward expansion because it weakens Russia's already tenacious grip on its “near abroad.” According to statements by former Russian Defense Minister Sergei Ivanov, while Georgia has the “sovereign right” to join the North Atlantic alliance, Russia is doing everything in its power to “protect” its borders from the potential enemy that Georgia would become should it join. “We are actively developing two alpine brigades with the latest equipment. Both brigades will be stationed right by the border with Georgia...Therefore, Russian security will not suffer if Georgia joins NATO,” Ivanov told journalists on September 22, 2006.<sup>1</sup>

The Russian reaction to NATO expansion as a security risk is a reflection of its Cold War reflexes. In fact, Russia has maintained an uneasy relationship with the military Alliance over the past two decades. NATO, on its part, has been pursuing a policy of remolding itself into an alliance that is built around shared ideals, not shared arsenals. However, Russians and most Georgians today continue to identify NATO

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<sup>1</sup> “Georgia's NATO Accession No Threat to Russia – Ivanov,” *RIA Novosti*, September 22 2006.

primarily as a military organization. In particular, Georgians think that Alliance membership will bring an end to Russian dominance in the country and a resolution of the Abkhaz and South Ossetian conflicts.

According to Levan Nikoleishvili, the newly appointed Georgian First Deputy Defense Minister, NATO membership is part and parcel of being associated with the “civilized world.” In an interview with the BBC, Nikoleishvili noted that while national security is still the main goal in the Georgia-NATO relationship, the Alliance would also foster development of strong democratic institutions.<sup>2</sup>

Georgian officials handling the issue of NATO membership complain that while Moscow obviously does not want them to proceed with their relationship with the Alliance, no alternative option is offered. The Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) format proved to have little benefits for Georgia; today the country is the only CIS member that is subject to the Russian visa regime. Moreover, following recent political showdowns between both governments, the Russian Foreign Ministry significantly reduced the number of visas granted to the Georgian citizens.

The biggest bone of contention between the two is Russia’s perceived role in the frozen conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Tbilisi has long accused Moscow of antagonizing the conflicts, an accusation Moscow has thus far ignored. In addition to ignoring Georgia’s attempts to internationalize the peacekeeping process, Russia has issued Russian citizenship to thousands of ethnic Abkhaz and South Ossetians living in the conflict zones.

The Georgian government is seeking security from NATO in an effort to temper Russian influence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. According to Tbilisi, the conflicts have been frozen for over a decade and could be easily resolved once Russian peacekeeping officers are removed from the conflict zone and when Moscow’s role as a mediator is reduced. While NATO has tried to distance itself from the conflicts and Brussels has stated that Georgia does not need to resolve the conflicts in order to be considered for membership, Tbilisi is nevertheless hoping that once it becomes part of the Alliance, it will be harder for Russia to influence the processes in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Tbilisi originally joined the CIS in an effort to resolve the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. By proving its willingness to cooperate with Moscow, the Georgian government hoped that Russia would be more willing to help bring the conflicts to an end. Formally, the CIS’s Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) has an official status of a transnational security organization similar to NATO. While its stated purpose was to ensure the security of its members, Georgia, along with

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<sup>2</sup> “Georgia’s Nato Bid Irks Russia,” *BBC News*, November 28 2006.

Uzbekistan<sup>3</sup> and Azerbaijan, withdrew their memberships in 1999 because it was perceived that the organization was unable to realistically operationalize its stated objectives.

### **Georgia's Progress in NATO**

Georgia's success in achieving NATO's Intensified Dialogue (ID) stage in September 2006 represented the highlight of President Mikhail Saakashvili's move towards the Alliance. However, days following that announcement Moscow imposed economic sanctions including a transportation blockade, suspension of diplomatic relations, and the aggressive deportation of ethnic Georgians from Russia. The formal explanation for the series of sanctions that Moscow imposed on Georgia was the arrest of four Russian military officers accused of espionage on September 27 and deported on October 2, 2006.

Despite NATO's repeated demands that Georgia make larger strides towards strengthening its democratic institutions such as the judicial system and improving on human rights issues, the Alliance has been quick to react to geopolitical developments. In spring 2006, Georgia had hoped to skip the ID stage and move right to the Membership Action Plan (MAP), which is an official step toward joining the Alliance. While the ID is a step forward for Georgia towards closer relations with NATO, there is no guarantee of subsequent membership. On the other hand the MAP stage would secure Georgia's eventual ascension to NATO as a full member.

Following an evaluation the NATO leadership called on the Georgian government to make greater strides in institution building, and noted that the planned parliamentary elections in October 2006 would be a litmus test on the country's progress towards democracy. However, there were noted irregularities in the elections process. Furthermore, President Saakashvili announced the date of elections one month earlier than it was expected, which meant that neither international observers nor opposition groups had time to prepare. Nonetheless, the ID was still granted.

To date, among all other countries currently under ID status, Georgia has one of the weakest track records in democracy building. Thus, while the ID is not the MAP, it is nonetheless a serious step towards ascension.

### **Russian-Georgian Tensions over Military Affairs**

In May 2005, the Russian and Georgian governments reached a seemingly unprecedented breakthrough when the former agreed to

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<sup>3</sup> Uzbekistan rejoined the organization in summer 2005, following worsened relations with the U.S.

abandon its military bases. However, while Russia has followed through with the withdrawal, its importance in Abkhazia and South Ossetia has only grown stronger. Now with Georgia moving closer towards NATO membership, the Kremlin is threatening to pull its trump card and officially recognize the de facto territories.

Although the Duma has, in the past, repeatedly turned down requests to recognize either of the Abkhaz or South Ossetian separatist governments, it passed a resolution acknowledging the referendum for independence held in South Ossetia on November 12, 2006. In addition, the Duma called on the Russian government to heed the Abkhaz separatist government's request that Russia foster relations with the unrecognized territory. Part of the reason for such a call is the fact that thousands of Russian citizens live in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Over the past three years, the de facto governments in Abkhazia and South Ossetia have grown louder in their calls for national independence and Russia has been supporting them more openly. Although both the U.S. government and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) spoke out against the internationally unrecognized November 12, 2006 elections in the de facto territory of South Ossetia, the Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin issued a statement publicly supporting the de facto leader Eduard Kokoiti on November 17. "[Karasin] wished him [Kokoity] success in his activities in the top-level position (...) Both sides have expressed the belief that the unanimous support of voters during the [presidential] elections and [independence] referendum will contribute to peace, stability and the economic rehabilitation in the Georgian-Ossetian conflict zone," Karasin stated.<sup>4</sup> According to press reports, high-ranking Russian officials also attended the inauguration of the de facto leaders on November 25, 2006.

According to Russian President Vladimir Putin, the pending independence of Kosovo would lead to an international precedent for all unrecognized states seeking self-determination. While this strategy proves effective for Russia in its short-term interests, it might in the longer-term lead to domestic instability. For example, if Russia sets a precedent with Abkhazia and South Ossetia, there is nothing to stop Ingushetia, Chechnya, Dagestan or any of the other potential trouble spots within the Russian Federation from also declaring independent. Internationally, Moscow has little to fear aside from a few accusations in mass media outlets. Even if Russia receives Western criticism about its policies, these are generally not translated into any practical ramifications.

Russia's growing influence in the EU as a result of its oil and gas reserves averts Western criticism against its policies in the "near

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<sup>4</sup> "A Balancing Act," *Georgian Business Magazine*, December 6 2006.

abroad.” Both the EU and the U.S.’s passive responses to the Kremlin’s intimidation of Georgia proved that Moscow can get away with its hard line and confrontational politics. The recent G-8 summit in Moscow is a good example of such international dynamics when high ranking Georgian officials, including the president, spent weeks lobbying Western governments in an effort to garner support to condemn Russia’s heavy-handed treatment of Georgia at the 2006 G-8 summit. While the Georgian government assessed its own international campaign in a positive light, its efforts were in reality largely ignored by France, Great Britain, and the U.S. when Moscow’s support in the Israeli-Hezbollah war became essential for these states.

Following Georgia’s futile attempt to convince the G-8 to condemn Russia’s peacekeeping missions in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, diplomatic relations between both states significantly deteriorated. In addition, in July-August 2006, the Saakashvili government launched an effective offensive against a renegade former militia in the Kodori Gorge. This is a slice of mountain villages surrounded by the territory controlled by Sergei Bagapsh, the *de facto* leader of the Abkhaz separatist government. In response, Russia threatened to use military force to “maintain the peace” while Georgia insisted that it sent only policing forces and not armed troops.

A similar scenario was played out in October 2006 during the bi-annual discussion of the UN mission in Abkhazia. In order to secure Moscow’s support during the North Korea nuclear stand-off, Russian-Georgian relations gained less attention. In fact, the UN’s resolution on Abkhazia included harsh critiques against Georgia’s July 2006 operations in the Kodori Gorge.

Although Georgian high ranking officials have lobbied Western countries in order to drum up international support for its victimization by Russia, Georgia has nevertheless paid a high price for its open confrontation with Russia. In addition to the Russian embargo, which virtually closed the Russian market for Georgian exports, the country now pays the highest prices for gas among CIS members.

### **Georgia vs. Russian WTO Membership**

Considering Georgia’s uneasy relations with Russia and its wish to join NATO, the country might well be overestimating its own strategic importance among its allies. According to some analysts, the battle for Russia’s admission to the World Trade Organization (WTO) is an example of Georgia pursuing a dangerous political path because of its own misconceptions about its own status. Although Georgia has publicly supported Russia’s application to the WTO, Tbilisi nonetheless demanded that Moscow fulfill its 2004 agreement to legalize all trade

coming through Abkhazia and South Ossetia in exchange for its vote of support.

While WTO membership proved to be the most effective and only lever for Georgia to use against Russia, the latter undeniably has greater geopolitical weight. If Georgia pursued its WTO demands for Russia, Moscow could quickly move to officially recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia in retaliation. That would be a strong blow to Tbilisi. Moreover, the U.S. has already dropped its objections to Russia's ascension to the WTO, stating repeatedly that it is up to each country to determine its WTO criteria. Georgia's objection in this situation is close to being absurd since it clearly lacks the support of key allies on its usage of trade negotiation as leverage against Russia on the territorial disputes.

As noted in *The Economist* magazine: "America has dropped its objections to Russia's membership of the World Trade Organization—seemingly in return for support on Iran and North Korea."<sup>5</sup> Today both the U.S. and the EU are interested in Russia's admission into the WTO as it could potentially strengthen eastern Ukraine's pro-Western stance as well. Kiev's struggle to firmly integrate with the West has faced growing obstacles from its large Russian minority; *The Economist* speculated that if Russia becomes part of the WTO, it will help the pro-Western factions within the Ukrainian government move back to their Orange Revolution policies.

This is not the first time Georgia's Western allies have worked contrary to its interests. In October 2006 Georgia lobbied for the UN Security Council to help lay the groundwork for introducing international troops in Abkhazia. However, after days of intense discussions, the U.S. agreed to a decidedly pro-Russian version of the resolution that would only provide CIS troops. This decision came after Moscow agreed to back Washington in its policy toward North Korea and Iran.

Another recent example of Georgia's disappointment with the West came on January 22, 2007 when the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly was scheduled to discuss the massive deportation of ethnic Georgians and the on-going economic sanctions against Georgia. After President Putin announced his decision to restore diplomatic ties with Tbilisi, the Assembly dropped the debate and promised to revisit it in the following months, thus leaving Moscow plenty of time to "show its good intentions."

## Conclusions

While the Kremlin's decision to restore diplomatic ties is a step toward better relations, as long as the two countries continue to pursue radically

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<sup>5</sup> "Georgia blocks Russia's WTO entry," *The Economist*, November 23 2006.

different political orientations, it will be difficult to maintain any productive bilateralism. As Georgia continues to build up support for NATO membership in Europe, it faces serious obstacles from Russia. While Georgia itself has much to do in the way of institutional reform, without more direct support from the NATO members, it could be difficult to outmaneuver Moscow's continued influence over Georgia's two weakest areas – the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.