

Georgia Devises New Plan for South Ossetia

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The rebel administration dismisses the latest Georgian initiative as an attempt to sow division and seek recognition for a pro-Tbilisi faction in the region.

A new Georgian initiative on South Ossetia has been met with deep suspicion in the unrecognised republic, where it has been dismissed as a ploy to promote a rival pro-Tbilisi entity. In Georgia, the plan has been seen as a credible transitional arrangement that could help end the long-running territorial dispute.

President Mikheil Saakashvili has proposed that South Ossetia should be run by a new, interim administration pending an end to the present impasse.

The 1991-92 conflict left South Ossetia a self-declared independent republic, a state of affairs that Georgia does not accept. Tbilisi believes a negotiated settlement should keep the region within the Georgian state, albeit with a degree of devolution.

Under the new plan, President Saakashvili would pick the people to run the interim entity and define the rules by which the entity operates. The question of the entity's final status would not be addressed at this transitional stage, although it is clear Tbilisi envisages that it will ultimately regain control of the wayward territory.

The three-page bill describes its aims as "promoting a peaceful resolution of the conflict, restoring constitutional order on the former South Ossetian autonomous territory, protecting the rights, freedoms and interests of people and ethnic groups living on that territory, determining the [final] status of the former South Ossetian autonomous entity, and creating the appropriate conditions for democratic elections."

The bill has now been submitted to the Georgian parliament, and from what legislators have said so far, the signs are that it will be approved. Only then will it become apparent when and how the proposed administration is to take shape, but government sources say that should happen soon.

Tbilisi has hinted that it is open to negotiations with South Ossetia's current leaders if they are interested in the plan. The speaker of Georgian parliament Nino Burjanadze said the authorities were prepared to "talk to anyone - including de facto president Eduard Kokoity - who claims to represent the interests of South Ossetia's people".

Most of all, though, Tbilisi's plan looks like a way of raising the status of the "alternative" - and friendly - government of South Ossetia. Dismissed by the South Ossetian rebel authorities as a "puppet administration", the "alternative government" sits in the ethnic Georgian village Kurta.

Its leader Dmitry Sanakoyev, who set up the "alternative government" last autumn, has been described by Saakashvili as "a hero who does everything he can to bring about reconciliation between the Georgian and Ossetian peoples". But the Georgian authorities have studiously avoided ascribing the role of political leader to Sanakoyev, referring to him merely as the head of a public organisation. Significantly, perhaps, the bill says that either political leaders or representatives of public organisations will be selected to run the proposed administration.

Sanakoyev, meanwhile, has taken up the plan for an interim administration with enthusiasm.

“I think it’s a good move for furthering the negotiating process,” he said. “I welcome the initiative and declare that we are ready to assume the responsibility for further resolution of the Georgian-Ossetian conflict.”

Some analysts believe that by installing a pliable interim administration, Tbilisi would be better placed to undermine the Tskhinval government’s claim to act for everyone in South Ossetia, and therefore to reduce the international impact of demands for the region to be recognised as an independent state, or even annexed to Russia.

In Tskhinval, the de facto South Ossetian authorities suggested Saakashvili had “lost his grip on reality”.

Their foreign ministry issued a statement saying that “the authorities in South Ossetia are determined not to allow the creation or operation... of any ‘temporary’, ‘alternative’ or other governing structures whose activities would lead to the further exacerbation of Georgian-Ossetian relations”.

South Ossetian first deputy prime minister Boris Chochiev told IWPR that that the Georgian plan was designed to win greater recognition for Sanakoyev’s pro-Georgian group, and then provoke the rival administrations into “a civil war in which Ossetians will be pitted against each other”.

“All this is aimed at undermining the [formal] talks, and getting the authorities in the Kurta collective farm recognised as the voice of the Ossetian people. What Saakashvili forgets is that Sanakoyev represents neither the interests of the Ossetian people, nor those of the Georgian people,” said Chochiev.

Nor does the Georgian plan sit well with Moscow, which has good relations with the South Ossetian rebels. In a statement issued on March 29, the Russian foreign ministry urged Tbilisi “to abandon its plans to accord legitimacy to the alternative government of South Ossetia and adopt a constructive position on taking the negotiating process forward”.

“The foreign ministry has been watching with concern the growing propaganda emanating from Tbilisi in relation to the so-called movement of Dmitry Sanakoyev. The aim is clear – to make untutored observers inside and outside the country come to believe in the respectability of what is in fact a network of agents set up by the Georgian secret services”.

The Georgian authorities responded by saying that Moscow’s angry reaction only proved they had chosen the right course.

The United States Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian affairs, Matthew Bryza, appeared upbeat about the Georgian initiative.

“As I understand it... the goal is to build contacts between South Ossetians and other citizens of Georgia to the point that tensions reduce, people feel that they’re all together in one common political family, and then it’s possible to define and establish autonomy,” he told a press conference in Tbilisi.

In Georgia, politicians and analysts have given the South Ossetia plan a mixed response. Most political parties, including opposition ones, have given the bill their backing, but some fear it is merely a PR exercise by the authorities.

“If it’s possible to create an administrative entity where Ossetians and Georgians can show the world that they can live together, run an administration and maintain cultural ties, of course we will support such an initiative,” said Zviad Dzidziguri, leader of the opposition Conservative Party.

Political analyst Paata Zakareishvili believes the Georgian authorities are trying to find a way out of the situation they put themselves in by creating the “alternative government” of South Ossetia, instead of making real progress on resolving the conflict.

“It was wrong to rely on Dmitry Sanakoyev, who had neither public support nor other leverage. Now the authorities are trying to give him some status,” said Zakareishvili. “It seems they [the Georgian authorities] are unable to undertake real projects and confine themselves to PR exercises.”

Zakareishvili said it would be difficult to persuade the international community to recognise Sanakoyev as a party to negotiations.

Another analyst, Ramaz Sakvarelidze, said the key to the new initiative would be persuading Russia to recognise Sanakoyev’s role – but he added this would not happen in the near future.

Archil Gegeshidze of the Georgian International Relations and Strategic Research Fund said the president’s initiative was interesting, but would achieve nothing unless the international community gave it the green light to it and the Georgian authorities regained the trust of the Ossetian population.

South Ossetia has recently seen an upsurge in tensions following a series of armed clashes, the most recent of which, on March 25, left two Georgian policemen dead. Each side accuses the other of provoking these incidents.

In South Ossetia, local people had heard of the Georgian initiative but were largely sceptical.

Svetlana, a 47-year-old teacher in Tskhinvali, said she did not believe that Tbilisi’s intentions were peaceful.

“I’m sure that all the recent initiatives from the Georgian government have been undertaken not because they want to make it up with us, but because they want to achieve their own ends,” she said.

Tskhinval resident Alexander, 33, said, “A civil war [between South Ossetian factions] would play into the hands of the Georgian authorities, since if that happened they would have a real opportunity to bring in their troops and launch hostilities.”

He gave his own explanation for Georgia's haste to come up with new initiatives, saying, "Georgia wants to become a NATO member as soon as possible, but before that it must resolve its territorial disputes. That's why they have been devising all these plans."

A 56-year-old pensioner in South Ossetia who withheld his name expressed guarded optimism that a new interim administration might "bring order to the region at last".

"We're all tired of the uncertainty and chaos around us," he said. "I think it will lead to changes for the better. Russia will never recognise us, and living in a state of suspense is difficult."

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