

Georgia-Russia Row Intensifies

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An upsurge of fighting on the Georgian-Chechnya border had sparked the worst quarrel in years between Tbilisi and Moscow.

Georgia and Russia have turned up the heat in a quarrel that began over Chechen fighters and has led to a mutual ban of passenger aircraft from each other's airspace.

The cause of the latest row is the upsurge in fighting between the Russian army and Chechen rebels in the mountainous Itum-Kale region of Chechnya, near the border with Georgia.

Tbilisi has accused Moscow of taking the war across the border and bombing Georgian territory, while the Russian government has angrily condemned Georgia's refusal to hand over 13 Chechen fighters, detained in the Pankisi Gorge region after they crossed into the republic.

The Georgians refused to give up the Chechens, even though the Russian prosecutor general Vladimir Ustinov personally visited Tbilisi on August 6 with a request for their extradition.

The 13 Chechen fighters, five of them wounded, have been charged with illegally crossing into Georgia and the illegal possession of firearms and explosives. If found guilty by the Georgian courts, they could be sentenced to up to ten years in prison. The Tbilisi authorities say they are prepared to send them to Russia, but only if Moscow provides reliable evidence proving the men's involvement in crimes committed inside Chechnya.

Georgia's decision led Russian foreign minister Igor Ivanov to accuse the Georgians of being soft on terrorism. "Once again the deeds of the Georgian leadership have not matched their words," he said. "It has used a formal pretext to refuse to hand over the criminals."

Moscow stepped up the pressure by imposing a ban, in force until September 1, on Georgian aircraft using Russian airspace, except between the hours of 3 and 8 AM. The Russians say this is because they are conducting missile-training exercises in southern Russia and cannot guarantee the safety of the airplanes. However, the ban does not apply to Russian or Armenian aircraft.

On August 8, the Georgian aviation ministry retaliated and closed Georgian airspace to Russian aircraft between 2 and 8 AM. The Georgians say they will lift the ban, if Moscow removes its own restrictions.

Russia and Georgia already require each other's citizens to obtain visas to travel to the other country - in contrast to the visa-free travel still possible between Russia and Armenia and Azerbaijan.

A string of Russian politicians have called recently on President Vladimir Putin to extend Russia's war in Chechnya across the border into Georgia to areas where Chechen fighters have taken refuge. Over the last week, Russian planes have bombed Georgian territory three times in raids, which have been confirmed by OSCE monitors.

The crisis has plunged Georgian-Russian relations - already soured by disputes over Abkhazia, military bases, gas supplies and visas - to a new low. The media in both countries has been shrill and neither side

seems ready for compromise.

Putin stirred things up by saying that "the Georgian people as a whole have a better attitude towards Russia, than the Georgian authorities do" - a remark which did not go unnoticed in Georgia.

The Russian president's comments gave pro-Russian politicians in Georgia a new lease of life and the Socialist Party, headed by Vakhtang Rcheulishvili, has embarked on a campaign of collecting signatures for a petition calling for better relations with Moscow.

"I've come here because I feel a real nostalgia for the times when we were friends with the Russians," said Natela Nozadze, adding her name to a list in one of many specially opened petition stands in Tbilisi. "I have very many dear friends there, whom I can't see because of the fault of our and their politicians."

"It's not only us Russians who live here, who are suffering because of the awful visa regime," said an ethnic Russian Irina Stoletova. "The Georgians themselves, who have lots of relatives in Russian who went there to live and work, are also suffering."

The media war waged against Tbilisi in Russia has meant that many Georgians have begun talking and writing about the humiliations they suffered in the 19th century, when Georgia was part of the Russian Empire and about its enforced Sovietization in the 20th century. Doing so, they ignore the treaty signed by King Irakly of Georgia in 1783 with Russia, which saved it from its Persian and Ottoman enemies.

"I am Russian by nationality, a third generation citizen of Georgia," said Svetlana Mikheeva, who is married to a Georgian. "My ancestors were born here and lived their lives here. My children are Georgians but they speak good Russian and know about Russia. That makes it all the harder to see how Moscow is trying to bring this country to its knees and lead it like a dog."

Zurab Chiaberashvili, a political scientist with the Liberty Institute in Tbilisi, believes that Russia cannot forgive Georgia for its military partnership with the West and in particular the new US Train and Equip programme, under which American soldiers are training Georgian special forces. (See the article by Mikhail Vignansky later in this issue)

Chiaberashvili said he thought it was no coincidence that the Russians had bombed the Pankisi Gorge during a visit to the country by US congressmen and senators. It made it all the more important for Washington to take into account Tbilisi's national interests, especially as Moscow was bent on showing the international community that Georgia was failing as a state.

President Shevardnadze sees the crisis within a long historical perspective. "Only ten years has passed since Georgia's independence," he told a government meeting on August 7. "It is a very small period to solve the problems which have piled up between us. Much more time should pass."

However, Chiaberashvili laid much of the blame for the latest crisis at the door of the Georgian government. "Neither Shevardnadze, nor the whole political elite of the country is capable of solving the internal problems, which are making Georgia so vulnerable before Russia, both politically and economically," he told IWPR.

The only constructive way of building good relations with Russia, he believes, is to change the governing political elite in Georgia.

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