

Georgia-Russian Relations at Boiling Point

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Moscow and Tbilisi in war of words over South Ossetia, visas and the gas pipeline.

As has been the case for most of the past decade, the biggest focus of the fury has been over Russia's support for the two breakaway territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. On February 15 the Georgian parliament raised the stakes by calling for the Russian peacekeepers force in South Ossetia to be replaced.

The rhetoric from both sides has been exceptionally harsh. Giorgy Targamadze, chairman of the Georgian parliament's defence and security committee, told journalists, "Russia is effectively waging an unofficial war against us. The Russians would eagerly start combat operations in Georgia under the pretext of protecting its own citizens - most of the population in Abkhazia and South Ossetia have Russian passports."

Targamadze said that if the peacekeepers fail to heed demands to leave Georgian territory, Tbilisi should declare the military "occupants" and resort to evicting them. "We have sufficient force to do this," he said.

Russian foreign minister Sergei Lavrov said that the Georgian attitude "exceeds all limits", and said that the Georgian leadership was trying to "blame Russia for everything" because it cannot hold a direct dialogue with the South Ossetian authorities.

Over the past week the Russian government postponed the Georgian prime minister's visit to Moscow and stopped giving visas to Georgian citizens, while Tbilisi did not give visas to Russian soldiers serving in Georgia.

"The situation in relations between the two countries is extremely tense and is deteriorating further," Russian ambassador to Georgia Vladimir Chkhikvishvili told IWPR.

As often happens in situations like this, ordinary citizens suffered most. Tbilisi resident Tina Zagashvili who came to the embassy in search of a visa said that her husband lived in Russia. She is a Georgian citizen and had been waiting for an official invitation for four and a half months. "When will my husband and I be able to meet again?" she lamented.

On the Georgian side there have been long delays in giving Georgian visas to Russian military servicemen working at the two Russian military bases that remain on Georgian soil until 2008. "Only 55 officers of the Russian troops in Transcaucasus have Georgian visas now, the rest of them are in fact serving illegally," a Russian military representative told IWPR.

This particular confrontation has now eased with both sides beginning to issue visas.

The new cold war between the two countries started in January when the Georgian president accused Moscow of having intentionally blown up the Russian gas pipeline that supplies Georgia. Ever since then, both sides have concentrated far more on the question of "who is to blame" rather than "what is to be done".

Political experts differ as to what is happening and how it will end. Many say that Georgia has ambitions to join NATO and imperial Russia cannot forgive it and is punishing Georgia. Others believe that this explanation is too simple.

Former Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze who governed this country for almost 30 years before November 2003 when he resigned as a result of the Rose Revolution does not agree with this analysis and saw much of the problem in a breakdown in communication between the leaders.

"I do not think that Russian president Vladimir Putin whom I know well ordered the blowing up of the pipeline," Shevardnadze told IWPR. "Not just Georgia but also Armenia which has a special relationship with Russia gets gas through this pipeline. We shouldn't rule out the possibility that a quite unknown group of evil people who do not want any good either for Russia or for Georgia blew up the gas pipeline and the electricity transmission line.

"Mikheil Saakashvili and Vladimir Putin should meet and discuss the situation. Everything is possible in politics if there is a sincere will on both sides."

Konstantin Kemularia, secretary of the Georgian Security Council, told IWPR that Tbilisi was ready for "consultations with Moscow at various levels. We are in favour of improving relations with Russia and we believe that there are no insurmountable obstacles for this".

The situation in South Ossetia is now the source of the greatest tension between the two countries. President Vladimir Putin has publicly hinted that Russia might recognise the independence of Abkhazia and South Ossetia if Kosovo is granted independence after United Nations-sponsored talks (see accompanying articles).

Talks on the disputed territory are currently deadlocked. A meeting of the four parties of the Joint Control Commission on South Ossetia was to due take place at the initiative of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe in Vienna on February 20-21. However, in the end talks were held in Moscow instead, but without either Georgian representation or the OSCE.

And the Georgian parliament openly challenged Moscow by calling on February 15 for a new international peacekeeping force to be deployed in South Ossetia. Since 1992, when the conflict ended with the loss of 2,000 lives, the territory has been home to a mixed contingent of Russian, North Ossetian (which is in fact also Russian), and Georgian battalions.

Georgian experts argue that Tbilisi can withdraw from the 1992 Dagomys agreement that established the peacekeeping format because it was not ratified either by the Russian or Georgian parliaments. The Georgian government also maintains that the Russian peacekeepers have been actively helping South Ossetia hold military exercises and acquire Strela portable anti-aircraft systems.

Georgian defence minister Irakly Okruashvili who has previously promised to celebrate the year 2007 in the South Ossetian capital Tskhinvali piled on the pressure by saying that "the stop-watch has been turned on" for the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity.

The Georgian parliamentary resolution drew an angry reaction both from Russia and from South Ossetia itself. The Russian foreign ministry said that "the decision by the Georgian lawmakers points to the fact that Georgia may take the path leading to the destabilisation of the entire region".

Inside Georgia, some opposition politicians criticised the resolution for not setting a deadline for the replacement of Russian peacekeepers.

While many fear some kind of violence destabilising South Ossetia, Georgian accused Moscow of violating its airspace during military exercises in the North Caucasus on February 18. They said a Russian plane and a helicopter had crossed into their airspace twice. Moscow denied the accusations.

Georgians' answer was more theatrical. Demonstrators came to the Russian embassy and violated the diplomatic mission's airspace with paper planes.

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