

Last Post for Russians in Georgia

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The withdrawal of Russian troops from Georgia inspires mixed emotions across the region

While the Kremlin withdraws its troops from Georgia with evident misgivings, politicians in Tbilisi can barely hide their eagerness to escape from the skirts of their powerful neighbour.

Last month a convoy of 49 tanks, artillery and armoured vehicles rolled out of the Vaziani base in the suburbs of Tbilisi under the watchful gaze of international observers. The ordnance was then loaded on to ships of the Black Sea Fleet and ferried to the Russian ports of Novorossiisk and Tuaps.

By the end of the year, a total of 35 tanks, 358 armoured vehicles and 27 artillery units will be taken out of Georgia under an agreement between the two states signed at last November's OSCE summit in Istanbul.

At the same time, 25 tanks, 90 armoured vehicles and two artillery batteries are currently being broken up at the Tbilisi tank repair factory.

Georgia inherited four Russian military bases from the USSR -- in Vaziani, Akhalkalaki (a town in southern Georgia), Batumi (in the Adjarian Autonomous Republic) and Gudauta (in Abkhazia, a region bordering Russia that tried to break away from Georgia in a 1992 war which claimed more than 7,000 lives).

An attempt to formulate their legal status was undertaken in 1995, when the two countries signed a 25-year agreement on the bases. Then, according to Georgian president Eduard Shevardnadze, Tbilisi simply had no other option than to agree.

But in Istanbul last year, with the political and diplomatic involvement of the USA, Russia agreed to close its military bases in Vaziani and Gudauta by July 1, 2001. Talks were also supposed to be held on the closing of the other two bases by 2003-2004. Washington pledged \$10 million towards assisting Russia in removing its troops from the bases.

The Russian military has opposed the withdrawal. "Russian bases on Georgian territory are a stabilising factor for Georgia itself, as is the presence of Russian peacekeeping forces in the zone of the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict," Leonid Ivashov, the head of the Department for International Military Collaboration of the Russian defence ministry, said during a visit to Armenia in May.

The Russian military is concerned that NATO will step into the vacuum created by the closure of its bases. Ivashov said Moscow would never accept that NATO influence should reach as far as Sochi (a Russian resort on the Black Sea, a few dozen kilometres from the border with Georgia).

The Russians are concerned at the loss of the strategically important military airdrome in Vaziani and are talking of maintaining it as a separate site from the adjoining base. They say it would be used to supply the Russian forces remaining on Georgian territory.

Georgia insists that the base and the airdrome are one site, and the closure of the bases entails the evacuation of the airdrome personnel. At the same time, Georgia is offering to take on all the services provided by the airdrome, including those for the Russian armed forces, right up until the time when the

last Russian soldier leaves.

There is also resistance to the withdrawal from Gudauta, where, apart from the permanent Russian military contingent, there are Russian peacekeepers brought in to the zone of the Georgia-Abkhazia conflict in 1994.

Russian vice-premier Ilya Khlebanov, visiting Tbilisi in June, said the possibility of handing over the Gudauta base to Russian peacekeeping forces in Abkhazia for the training of new "blue berets" was being discussed. "Today, this would be the most rational and sensible decision," he said.

Tbilisi has long been unhappy about the role of the peacekeepers, accusing them of being pro-Abkhazian in their outlook. "Liquidating the base in Gudauta, Tbilisi will kill two birds with one stone - it reduces the Russian military presence and creates the conditions necessary for the removal of the Russian peacekeepers," the influential Moscow newspaper Kommersant commented.

The Abkhazian authorities have not hidden the fact that they are keen to prevent the withdrawal of Russian military forces. "The threat of a new armed conflict with the Georgian army exists, and so the forces and equipment located in Gudauta remain at the disposal of the Abkhazian military," said the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the self-proclaimed republic, Sergei Shamba.

He warned that, if necessary, Abkhazia had the military capability to obstruct the removal of Russian military forces from the Gudauta base.

Abkhazia's defence minister, Vladimir Mikanba, has said that the Russian forces will stay in the area until Tbilisi signs an agreement not to start any new armed conflicts or threaten security in Abkhazia.

But President Shevardnadze insists that the conditions of the Istanbul agreement have to be met, and that the resolution of these issues will contribute to a growth of trust in Russia among the Georgian population.

Adjarian leader Aslan Abashidze has also joined the argument. He has demanded that a representative of the autonomous republic be allowed to take part in the Russian-Georgian talks on military issues, and in particular on the removal of the Russian base from Adjara. Unless this is agreed, he warns, "the movement of military technology across the territory of Adjara will not be as easy as it was in August."

The costs of the operation are also an issue. Georgia, in the midst of a deep economic crisis, simply has no financial resources to pay for such operations. Russia also claims it cannot meet the costs and the West has come to the rescue, financing the withdrawal process under the final act of the Conventional Forces in Europe (CFE) treaty.

This week, 10 T-72 tanks, 19 armoured vehicles, five motor vehicles, and 27 items of specialised equipment were due to head out of the Vaziani base as the withdrawal continued.

Nevertheless, the demands of the Georgians for a part of the Black Sea fleet -- 40 naval vessels and two submarines based in the Georgian port of Poti -- and compensation for other military equipment removed from Georgia in 1991-1992 and costing some \$10 billion, serve only to antagonise Moscow and remain unanswered.

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