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Preventing a Russian–Georgian Military Confrontation

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The pending appeal of Eduard Kokoity, leader of the secessionist territory of South Ossetia, to the Russian Federation's Constitutional Court to allow his territory to join Mother Russia could trigger destabilization in the Caucasus, sparking a Russian–Georgian military confrontation and unpredictable consequences for the region and the world. The tasks ahead for Georgia's leaders are perilous, and they need as much assistance as Washington and other Western allies are able to offer.

Russian–Georgian relations have deteriorated to the point that some Kremlin officials are seriously weighing a military operation, which they hope will hand Georgia a military defeat and topple President Mikheil Saakashvili.

“It's springtime—a time to start a war with Georgia,” said a veteran foreign policy adviser who often speaks informally for the Kremlin. He mentioned Ossetia (and not secessionist Abkhazia) as the potential flashpoint.

Last week, a prominent Duma member from Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's Liberal Democratic Party concurred that a February statement by Kremlin political strategist Gleb Pavlovsky about a Saakashvili assassination was more than boasting—it was a warning.

Georgians are persistently irritating Russia. They have successfully negotiated the withdrawal of Russian military bases and are applying to join NATO. They threaten to raise objections to Russia's membership in the World Trade Organization. And Saakashvili has asked UN Secretary-General Kofi

Annan to “internationalize” peacekeeping operations in Abkhazia and Ossetia, an idea Moscow so far rejects.

Christian Ossetians, say the Russians, are Russian citizens and want to join their brethren in North Ossetia, a part of the Russian Federation. “Saakashvili is out of control, and needs to be brought to heel,” said the Kremlin's informal spokesman. “If Georgians keep quiet and behave, we may even tolerate their joining NATO, but if they are loud, we'll take measures.”

However, other Moscow insiders note that this rhetoric parallels invective directed against the previous Georgian president, Eduard Shevardnadze. “Russia needs to realize that it has a problem with Georgia, not with Saakashvili or Shevardnadze,” said the editor of a leading foreign policy magazine who spoke on condition of anonymity.

If Kokoity's appeal to the Russian Constitutional Court, not known for its independence from the executive branch, is accepted and a referendum in formal secession and then accession to Russia follows, Georgia might take military measures to prevent its disintegration. But such steps, Moscow hopes, would trigger a massive Ossetian response,

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supported by “volunteers” from the North Caucasus and beyond.

In addition to Ossetians, some also mention Ramzan Kadyrov’s Chechens. “We armed Ramzan, who now controls between five and seven thousand bayonets,” one Russian expert said. “He is eager to go to Georgia and fight—all the way to Tbilisi. He is smelling loot, and Moscow is very uneasy about his de facto pro-independence policies.”

Georgian officials now visiting Washington to coordinate Georgia’s NATO application acknowledge that Russia, upset with Tbilisi’s push to receive a NATO Membership Action Plan in the fall, is planning a “provocation.” “Russia is focused on [the] NATO issue in a negative way, which makes her more aggressive,” said Giorgi Manjgaladze, the Georgian Deputy Foreign Minister who is managing his country’s NATO accession.

However, Georgia does not desire to be dragged into a military conflict. “We will protest by diplomatic means but will not take military steps if a referendum or other provocation in South Ossetia takes place,” said Nika Rurua, Deputy Chairman of the Defense and Security Committee of the Parliament.

All members of the delegation to Washington, including Mamuka Kudava, First Deputy Minister of Defense, agree that their country is a target of a Russian “black PR campaign.” However, the Georgian delegation followed the advice of Ambassador Juri Luik, Estonian envoy to Washington, to ignore Russian threats—just as the Baltic states did in the 1990s.

But there is a fundamental difference between the Baltic accession in 1999 and Georgia’s today. First, in 1999, Russia was digging itself out from under the rubble of the 1998 economic crisis and was still adrift in the post-Yeltsin transition. Moscow had not yet made taunting America its foreign

policy priority, despite efforts by then-foreign minister and prime minister Yevgeny Primakov.

Second, the Kremlin was not sitting on \$200 billion in extra cash, as it is now. Today, as always, governments and bureaucracies do things not only because they need to but because they can.

Third, while Russia is still uneasy over the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan main export pipeline (MEP), Gazprom is livid over the forthcoming Baku-Erzurum gas pipeline, which may allow Turkmenistan and even Kazakhstan to export gas to Ukraine and Europe, bypassing Gazprom’s pipeline network.

Finally, the Baltic candidates to NATO had strong and vociferous supporters in Poland, Hungary, and other Central European countries, as well as from powerful Central European natives living in the U.S. Georgia lacks all of these.

Russia today is determined to prevent Georgia and the Ukraine from joining NATO. The Russian military feels that it is losing face by being pushed out of its former Soviet dependencies—first from its Georgian military bases, then from Ossetia and Abkhazia, and eventually from the dachas and sanatoria along the Black Sea coast. Military leaders may even hope for promotions, decorations, and more money if the next Caucasus war erupts.

Spring does not bring political sunshine to the Caucasus this year. Georgia will need the political wisdom and support of friends in Washington and elsewhere as it negotiates the latest Ossetian crisis and the larger political minefield of the Caucasus.

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