



Published in Tbilisi 24 Saati April 21, 2008

No Time to Go Wobbly!

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Western reaction to Russian President Vladimir Putin's April 16 grab for the Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia was stiffer than he apparently expected. Two days later, he publicly called upon his government to "normalize" relations with Georgia. Western countries and institutions gained Putin's attention. Now they must press Moscow to rescind Putin's April 16 Instruction.

Putin directed the Russian government, its ministries and regions to open "representations" in Abkhazia and South Ossetia to protect the interests of Russian citizens living there and to promote cooperation on a wide range of subjects.

Russia will now claim that it has many citizens to protect in the two Georgian territories after it illegally distributed its passports to anyone who remained after the civil wars and ethnic cleansing that it promoted in the nineties. The April 16 Instruction would also install in the two Georgian territories bureaucratic structures typical to Russian autonomous republics, and it would practically bring Abkhazia and South Ossetia into the Russian legal and economic space.

This is big—tantamount to Russian annexation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia—and Putin appears to have miscalculated the western reaction.

NATO Secretary General Jaap de Hoop Scheffer spoke the first courageous words: "The Russian steps undermine Georgia's sovereignty. I urge the Russian Federation to reverse these measures."

US State Department Spokesman Sean McCormack said, "We urge Russia to live up to its statements of support for the principles of Georgian sovereignty and territorial integrity and to repeal the April 16 instructions."

American presidential candidates John McCain and Hillary Rodham Clinton piled on.

"Such a move is in violation of international law," McCain said. "Russia is furthering its policy of *de facto* annexation that undermines security and stability in the region. Unfortunately, Russia's leaders have chosen a course of confrontation rather than cooperation."

Clinton said, "Georgia is a small democratic state in a turbulent region. It must not be allowed to be undermined."

The Slovenian presidency of the European Union said, "The EU reiterates its firm commitment to the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognized borders as reaffirmed in the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1808 of 15 April 2008. The decision of the Russian Federation jeopardizes the implementation of these principles."

Putin hastened to limit the damage, ordering “practical steps to normalize relations with Georgia,” according to the Russian Foreign Ministry.

Of course, “normalization” is a sham. Putin offered only to lift visa restrictions, restore postal links and to discuss—discuss—lifting his illegal embargo on Georgia. It is a familiar Soviet diplomatic ploy—make things bad, worse, worst; then offer to negotiate from worst back to worse.

No, thank you. Putin must rescind his April 16 Instruction. If he does not, the western countries and institutions that have taken a principled stance should prepare to ratchet up diplomatic pressure on Moscow. Here are some directly relevant, unprovocative, easily reversible ideas.

First, since 1993, Russia has sought membership in the World Trade Organization (WTO), but it must still win Georgian approval. Interestingly, the remaining issue is restoring Georgian control over the Gantiadi and Roki checkpoints at the Georgia-Russia border in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The US and the EU could coordinate statements recognizing that rescission of the April 16 Instruction is prerequisite to resolution on Gantiadi and Roki and, therefore, to Russian WTO membership.

Second, member states of NATO could request a North Atlantic Council meeting explicitly under Article 4 of the 1949 Washington Treaty, which any of them may do if it believes its security is threatened. It is no stretch of the imagination for countries such as Bulgaria and Romania to believe that the latest Russian bullying threatens the stability of the Black Sea region. The Baltic countries would no doubt join the consultation, familiar with the consequences of Moscow’s mischievous hand reaching into their territory. These countries could then request a meeting of the NATO-Russia Council at which, instead of the usual Russian bellyaching about NATO, Russian representatives would listen to NATO’s grievances about Russia.

Third, Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt warned, “A political conflict in the immediate neighborhood of the future Winter Olympics is not in anyone's interest, least of all Russia's.” Just a few western leaders coloring in the implications of that statement for one of Putin’s pet projects would focus Kremlin attention.

Let us hope that the principled statements already made by western capitals and institutions will convince Moscow to demur on the April 16 Instruction. Otherwise, having seen that a firm, united stand can have effect, the west must persist. If necessary, the steps outlined here would send Moscow an unprovocative but unmistakable signal that its international juvenile delinquency is growing tiresome.

To borrow the words of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, “This is no time to go wobbly.”

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