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(Zugdidi-Ochamchire-Gali) + 2

David J. Smith*

NATO's failure to grant Membership Action Plans (MAP) to Georgia and Ukraine at its April 2-4 Bucharest Summit proved an instant geopolitical blunder. Russian President Vladimir Putin slammed the alliance's compromise on MAP before leaving Bucharest and went home to implement his plan to annex the Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The west recovered quickly, however, rejoining in stiffer terms than Putin apparently expected. Now Putin waits to see if western words translate into action. They must—with a bold proposal for Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

On April 16, Putin directed the Russian government to install in the two Georgian territories bureaucratic structures typical to Russian autonomous republics and practically to bring Abkhazia and South Ossetia into the Russian legal and economic space.

After the craven behavior of some NATO members at Bucharest, Putin no doubt expected a muted response to his land grab. Instead, it drew many stiff responses such as the statement of France, Germany, the United Kingdom and the United States as members of the Group of Friends that works on the problems of Abkhazia.

The four countries "reaffirm their commitment to the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of Georgia." They continue, "We call on the Russian Federation to revoke or not to implement its [April 16] decision."

"We, therefore, welcome that the Georgian President has recently put forward a new initiative for the peaceful resolution of the conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia...we feel that there are now many useful ideas on the table for the sides to come together and to agree on steps of common interest."

The statement is strong and clear but insufficient.

Putin has already told some leaders that he is unmoved by western statements. (His reported words only befit the basement of Lubyanka Prison, but you get the point.)

The west must now follow its words with a bold, broad proposal for Abkhazia and South Ossetia—a diplomatic challenge to Russia. The proposal is a Zugdidi-Ochamchire-Gali free trade zone for Abkhazia and a new negotiating format called 2+2+2 for South Ossetia. This proposal would maintain western diplomatic momentum, strike a positive note into an otherwise dismal situation and explore whether we can improve relations with Russia under President-elect Dmitry Medvedev.

"In Russia we have a new president and I think the European Union wants to put its ties with Russia on another footing," said Luxembourgish Foreign Minister Jean Asselborn, emerging from a March 6 NATO meeting that failed to resolve the MAP issue ahead of the Summit.

Asselborn expressed a widely held and not unreasonable desire. However, western leaders must not allow this desire to tarry, recurring as an excuse to duck difficult decisions. Rather, they should test whether Medvedev reciprocates their desire to get along him.

Western diplomats should scurry to Tbilisi to help Georgia develop a negotiating package along the following lines.

1. Building upon the statement of the western members of the Group of Friends, the EU and the US would jointly declare support for Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili's offer of sweeping autonomy for Abkhazia in Georgia. They could underscore their commitment by naming high-level diplomats to facilitate negotiations based on Saakashvili's proposal, challenging Russia to do the same.
2. The EU and the US would endorse Georgia's proposal to change the negotiating format for South Ossetia from the dysfunctional Joint Control Commission to the promising 2+2+2 formula. 2+2+2 would bring together the 2 interested nation-states—Georgia and Russia—plus the 2 administrations in South Ossetia—Moscow-backed Eduard Kokoity and Tbilisi-backed Dmitry Sanakoyev—plus the 2 most involved and respected international institutions—the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the EU. The EU could name its representative and join with the US to propose that the OSCE do likewise, again, challenging Russia to name its representative.
3. Georgia should develop a proposal for a free trade zone in Mingrelia and eastern Abkhazia—Zugdidi-Ochamchire-Gali. Then, western members of the Group of Friends would invite Russia, the Group's other member, to broker talks among Georgia, the *de facto* authorities in Abkhazia, local governments and international organizations to establish the zone. Such talks could sidestep the political quicksand that envelopes all talk about Abkhazia, showing that people of all nationalities can work together to bring economic prosperity to the region.
4. If the free trade zone takes off, the area will need law enforcement officers, not peacekeeping soldiers. The western members of the Group of Friends could invite Russia to join them in sponsoring a UN resolution thanking the Russian peacekeepers for their service and calling upon member states to contribute to a UN-supervised and trained police force for the free trade zone.

If this works, the concept could spread to all of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Already, one can almost hear the nattering nabobs of negativism—to borrow a moniker crafted by venerated *New York Times* columnist William Safire—saying that this is too bold, too much; Sukhumi will disparage it, Moscow will reject it...

Perhaps.

However, three things are sure. First, we cannot know unless we try. Second, nothing worth doing is easy. Third, only a bold proposal such as this will give us the measure of the man Medvedev.

And, maybe we can take some steps forward for all the people of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

*David J. Smith is Director, Georgian Security Analysis Center, Tbilisi, and Senior Fellow, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, Washington.