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Western Reaction Keeps Moscow From Annexing South Ossetia

By Paul Goble

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About this blog

Window on Eurasia covers current events in Russia and the nations of the former Soviet Union, with a focus on issues of ethnicity and religion. The issues covered are often not those written about on the front pages of newspapers. Instead, the articles in the Windows series focus on those issues that either have not been much discussed or provide an approach to stories that have been. Frequent topics include civil rights, radicalism, Russian Islam, the Russian Orthodox Church, and events in the North Caucasus, among others.

Author **Paul Goble** is a longtime specialist on ethnic and religious questions in Eurasia. Most recently, he was director of research and publications at the Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy. He has served in various capacities in the U.S. State Department, the Central Intelligence Agency and the International Broadcasting Bureau as well as at the Voice of America and Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty and at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. He writes frequently on ethnic and religious issues and has edited five volumes on ethnicity and religion in the former Soviet space.

Eduard Kokoity, president of the breakaway republic of South Ossetia, says he is "in principle" ready to have his country absorbed by the Russian Federation but the near certainty that the West would accuse Moscow of both "annexation" and "imperialism" has put that project on hold, at least for now.

In an interview published in Itogi on Monday, Kokoity said his "republic is not ready to reject independence. But we want a union with Russia. Like the one which it has with Belarus." These comments show how committed Kokoity remains to closer ties, though he explains that "the forms of union can be different."

"The main thing," Kokoity added, "is that our border with Russia be more transparent, but for this, our southern frontiers must be strengthened. The question of the creation of a single Ossetia is not on the agenda."

"But just imagine," the president of the partially recognized state continued, "what a storm would arise in the world" if any of those things were to happen anytime soon. "They would accuse Russia of annexation. But Russia does not want foreign territory, and we understand this."

This is not the first time that Kokoity has spoken about this issue. Over the past year, he has said he would like to see South Ossetia become part of the Russian Federation and even combined with North Ossetia. But in this interview, he was less definitive, reflecting what appears to be nervousness in Moscow about how the West would react.

In a comment to Kavkaz-uzel.ru on Monday, Gennady Kokoyev, a member of the Unity Fraction of the South Ossetian parliament, amplified this point. He said "Russia is interested in strengthening the independence of South Ossetia" in order to "help it block accusations that [Moscow] suffers from imperial ambitions."

To that end, he said, "the cooperation of the two states based on equal rights is the most optimal variant." Indeed, the deputy suggested, "the establishment of a democratic and legal state in South Ossetia" is in the interests of both the people of that republic and the government of the Russian Federation.

That is because such a state represents "a worthy answer to the negative attacks of the Western community which accuses [Moscow] of wanting to support a dictatorial regime." Including South Ossetia within Russia's borders now would be "counterproductive and impossible" but might be the subject of discussions "after about 100 to 150 years."

Vissarion Aseyev, a political scientist in the region, agreed. He said the possibility of including South Ossetia is "not being discussed at a serious political level." Russia, he said, "does not need South Ossetia within its borders, because the incorporation [of that republic] would not be profitable for Russia and would contradict its interests."

By raising this issue, Aseyev continued, Kokoity is playing with Moscow in much the same way Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili is playing with Washington. "Both presidents are using this method for the single goal of keeping themselves in power" rather than promoting broader national interests.

But Aseyev said he very much "agrees with Kokoity that Russia will never regret that it recognized South Ossetia," adding that as a result, the people of South Ossetia, with Russia's help, will continue "to build a self-standing and independent state." What will happen in the distant future is impossible to say.

Not everyone in South Ossetia agrees that the republic should ultimately seek to become part of the Russian Federation. Timur Tskhovrebov, who heads the independent opposition newspaper 21 Seculare, said he remains "categorically against" such a move given the South Ossetian struggle for independence.

Whatever the attitudes of the people of South Ossetia on this score may be, Kokoity's interview yesterday underlines the importance of what Western leaders say about South Ossetia's situation. Their words, even if they do not and, indeed, cannot prevent all of Moscow's actions, can restrain the behavior of the increasingly revisionist regime

in the Russian capital.

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