

Tbilisi Links WTO Entry to Border

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GENEVA — Russia must reach a deal with Georgia over customs controls on their internationally recognized border if it is to pursue its goal of joining the World Trade Organization, Georgia's first deputy foreign minister, Giorgi Bokeria, said late Thursday.

Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin said Georgia's demands were absurd and failed to reflect changed realities in the region.

Bokeria's comments suggested that the August 2008 war between Russia and Georgia, resulting in two Georgian regions seceding with Moscow's recognition, continued to dog relations and could impede Moscow's 17-year bid to join the WTO.

But Bokeria repeated Georgian government assertions that they did not seek to block Russian WTO membership.

"In principle, we are in favor of Russia joining the WTO — anything which would bring Russia closer to a civilized community of the world," he said.

Russia's membership bid has recently picked up momentum, and Russian and U.S. officials

have been working to resolve differences, although Washington says Moscow must do more to tackle piracy and counterfeiting of U.S. goods.

Georgia is already a member of the WTO, and under the organization's consensus rules, it has an effective veto — like all 153 members — on Russia's accession bid.

Tbilisi argues that its customs posts are now deep in Russian-controlled territory, so that its own customs officials cannot control trade flows across its northern border.

Bokeria told a briefing that Georgia would not raise issues unrelated to trade when discussing Russia's application.

"One of the fundamental principles of the WTO is transparency of borders. Right now there is no transparency on the Georgia-Russia border," he told a briefing after a round of internationally sponsored talks between the foes.

Georgia has proposed to Russia that the two states should operate joint customs controls along the internationally recognized border, he said. Other compromises involving international organizations were possible, he said.

Karasin, too, said compromises were needed over the issue, not least in Georgia.

"We are counting on right-mindedness winning out in Tbilisi and on their allies and sponsors explaining to them how unconstructive their position is," he told the briefing, speaking through an interpreter.

If the two sides genuinely wanted a practical solution rather than turning the question into a fundamental status question, one model could be the European Union's border assistance mission between Moldova and Ukraine.

Moldova is unable to control part of the border because the Russian-speaking region of Transdnestr, backed but not recognized by Moscow, has declared unilateral independence.

In contrast, Russia has given diplomatic recognition to Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and promised to help prevent Georgian attempts to regain them by force.

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