

Tbilisi Seeks Border Deal Before WTO

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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TBILISI — Georgia is prepared to discuss Russia’s bid to join the World Trade Organization but insists on a deal over customs controls on their internationally recognized border, Prime Minister Nika Gilauri said Monday.

The European Union last week formally backed Russia’s 17-year-long bid for WTO membership, which could become a reality in 2011, but Georgia — which fought a war with Russia in 2008 — holds an effective veto.

In an interview with Reuters, Gilauri said Georgia was insisting on “transparency” on its border with Russia, parts of which lie outside Tbilisi’s control in the Moscow-backed breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

“We are ready without any preconditions to sit down at the table and talk with the Russian side,” the prime minister said.

“I don’t know if any country will veto or not. But the fact is, all we are asking for is transparent border crossings. It is a very normal request to have. It’s just part of WTO basic

rules and regulations,” he said.

Asked whether that could mean posting Georgian customs officials on the border, Gilauri replied: “Yes, why not?” Only Russia and three other countries — Venezuela, Nicaragua and the tiny Pacific island of Nauru — recognize Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent states with their own borders.

The rest of the world says they are part of Georgia, but Tbilisi lost its remaining footholds in the rebel territories in 2008 when Russia crushed a Georgian military assault on South Ossetia, launched after fatal skirmishes with separatists and months of Russian baiting.

Gilauri said no country had the right to “push” Georgia to act against its own interests to secure the accession of Russia and its \$1.2 trillion economy, the largest outside the WTO.

Georgia is already a member of the organization, which umpires global trade.

Under WTO consensus rules, all 153 member states have the right to veto Russia’s accession bid.

Investors deterred by the five-day war with Russia in August 2008 and the global crisis might have a fresh look at Georgia in 2011, Gilauri said, citing the power sector and tourism as the most attractive sectors for investors.

Georgia expects to attract about \$1 billion in foreign direct investment in 2011 and plans initial public offerings or eurobonds for a “couple” of state companies, the prime minister said.

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