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Georgia Opposition Foresees WTO Deal

By Lena Smirnova

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Georgia will announce within days that it is removing its conditions on Russia's entry into the World Trade Organization, the leader of the Georgian opposition party said, citing a source close to President Mikheil Saakashvili's administration.

Manana Manjgaladze, Saakashvili's press secretary, denied the rumor in an interview with Ekho Moskvy radio on Wednesday. Georgia's position on Russian accession to the 153-member organization remains unchanged, she said.

Georgian authorities have demanded since the August 2008 war that Russia allow Georgian border guards at customs checkpoints on the Abkhaz and South Ossetian sections of the Russian-Georgian border.

Moscow opposed the demands as incompatible with its recognition of the regions' sovereignty.

A withdrawal of the demands would be a major concession from the Georgians, said Alexei

Portansky, a professor at the Higher School of Economics' department of trade policy.

"Georgia naturally considers Abkhazia and South Ossetia its own," he said. "[The withdrawal of the demands] would be a difficult decision for the Georgians."

Kakha Kukava, leader of the Free Georgia party, said Saakashvili decided to withdraw the demands after he met U.S. Vice President Joe Biden in Rome on June 1.

Biden said publicly after the meeting that the United States will not pressure Georgia to change its position, but Kukava speculated that this statement was only made to maintain Georgia's appearance of sovereignty.

"They didn't want it to look as though it was a demand from the U.S.," Kukava said in a telephone interview with The Moscow Times.

He added that the government's new stance would be confusing for Georgians.

"This is not a popular decision," Kukava said. "Saakashvili carried out lots of propaganda on anti-Russian themes. It will be difficult for him to explain to Georgian citizens why he is now giving Russia such a present."

In a possibly unrelated incident, Saakashvili and Georgian Economic Development Minister Vera Kobalia were pelted by egg-wielding protestors after leaving a restaurant in a small Georgian town. The ministry declined to provide any motive for the act.

Portansky did not rule out that Kukava's tip may be accurate, but cautioned that the opposition party has its own motives for publicizing this information.

"In this case, the opposition wants to say that Tbilisi has bowed before the U.S.," he said. "They are accusing the government of lacking patriotic ideas."

He said it's not possible to predict how the rumor will play out in the future. Russia and Georgia are still engaged in informal talks and decided to announce major developments only by mutual agreement.

The two countries were set to discuss Russia's entry into the WTO on June 2 in Switzerland, but the talks were postponed until later this month. New dates for the talks have not been announced. The previous round of talks was held on April 28.

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