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U.S. Politician Says No WTO for Russia Until Georgia Issue Is Resolved

By The Moscow Times

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Rep. John Boehner, speaker **J. Scott Applewhite**

WASHINGTON — The speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives said President Barack Obama's administration should not consider Russia's decades-long bid to join the World Trade Organization until Moscow settles its border dispute with Georgia.

In a hard-line speech to a conservative think tank on Tuesday, Rep. John Boehner said Russia has displayed an inclination to "restore Soviet-style power and influence," using its wealth of natural resources such as oil, natural gas and metals as a political weapon.

Boehner pressured the administration to rethink its "reset" policy with Russia and specifically questioned the U.S. role in the border dispute weighing heavily on Russia's bid to join the WTO by year's end.

"The administration should resolve this stalemate in a manner that respects the territorial

integrity of Georgia," Boehner said. "Then — and only then — will movement on the WTO question be worth considering."

Despite being in talks to join the WTO since 1993, Russia remains the largest economy still outside the organization, which regulates trade among 153 member states. It needs to negotiate its accession with individual WTO member states, and its conflict with Georgia has left talks in a deadlock.

Boehner said there have been "alarming reports" of the Obama administration pressuring Georgia to accept Russian boundaries set after their 2008 war.

The White House disputed Boehner's criticism, with spokesman Tommy Vietor arguing that the administration "remains unwavering in its commitment to Georgia's territorial integrity. We have made clear, both in private channels and in public statements, that the United States will not support Russia's WTO accession until Russia and Georgia reach agreement on their outstanding trade-related issues."

In August 2008, Georgian troops tried unsuccessfully to regain control over the Moscow-backed rebel province of South Ossetia. Russia sent troops that routed the Georgian military in five days. Georgia lost any control of both South Ossetia and another separatist region, Abkhazia.

In Russia on Tuesday, President Dmitry Medvedev's economic adviser said Moscow would never meet Georgia's demands. Georgia alleges that the two regions that split off in the war are occupied territory used as staging points for Russian terrorist incursions.

If Russia should join the WTO, Congress would have to vote on approving permanent normal trade relations.

The WTO requires members to extend unconditional most-favored-nation trade status to all other members. But the United States currently denies this status to Russia under Jackson-Vanik, a law passed in 1974 in an effort to pressure the Soviet Union to allow emigration, primarily of Jews.

Boehner, who spoke at a daylong symposium at the Heritage Foundation titled "The Risks of the Reset," invoked former President Ronald Reagan and former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and their toughness in dealing with the former Soviet Union.

He said Russia will soon be led by Vladimir Putin, who is "known to harbor intense Soviet nostalgia" and could remain in power until the middle of the next decade.

"I think it's only appropriate to ask whether the Obama administration will now reconsider its policy toward Russia," Boehner said. "Let me be clear: I'm not here to argue for open conflict, or against productive engagement."

The speaker said the United States could work with Russia on arms control, counterterrorism and trade. But he argued that the administration must push Moscow to limit its relationship with Iran, specifically its nuclear program, and pressure the Kremlin on its human rights record.

"The United States should insist Russia 'reset' its own policies," Boehner said. "If those appeals require teeth, the House stands ready to provide them."

In response, Vietor said Obama's policy toward Russia has ensured supplies for U.S. troops in Afghanistan, sanctions against Iran, a new START II treaty to reduce nuclear weapons and resume inspections and securing nuclear materials to prevent them from falling into the hands of terrorists.

Georgian and Russian negotiators adjourned seven hours of talks on Russia's entry into the WTO shortly after midnight Tuesday and will resume negotiating on Wednesday, sources involved in the talks told Reuters.

The WTO working party on Russian accession will meet on Wednesday and Thursday to carry out a final review of Russia's accession agreement. If that goes smoothly and Russia can clear the Georgian hurdle, a meeting on Nov. 10 is likely to approve the overall package.

The United States criticized a Russian plan for a "blacklist" barring senior American officials from the country in response to U.S. efforts to similarly block Russian officials tied to lawyer Sergei Magnitsky's death.

"We do not believe that there is any basis for visa restrictions of this kind against U.S. officials," State Department spokeswoman Victoria Nuland said Tuesday in remarks posted on the department's web site.

She said U.S. law required the denial of visas "to individuals involved in serious human rights violations."

Russia has dismissed the "Magnitsky list" as "political provocation" and responded last weekend by announcing that it would create a list of U.S. officials involved in the "uninvestigated murders of civilians in Iraq and Afghanistan" and the detention of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay.

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