The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russians Won't Need Visa To Enter Georgia Anymore

February 29, 2012



TBILISI, Georgia — Georgia will abolish visas for Russians in an effort to attract more investment, President Mikheil Saakashvili said Tuesday.

The offer is a rare gesture of goodwill between the former Soviet republics.

The Kremlin has refused to have any contact with Saakashvili since Russia crushed an assault by Georgia's U.S.-trained military in the Russian-backed rebel region of South Ossetia in August 2008.

In his annual address to parliament Tuesday, Saakashvili proposed unilaterally dropping the visa requirement.

There was no immediate comment from Moscow, but Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov said last year that Russia has no intention of dropping its visa requirement.

"It's necessary that every Russian businessman knows that he can come to Georgia, spend

money, take money out, do business," Saakashvili said. "A more convenient regime for this will be created." Georgia and Russia broke off diplomatic relations after Russia recognized the independence of two Georgian separatist regions that split off after the five-day war.

Saakashvili said Georgia's decision not to block Russia's entry into the World Trade Organization showed that Tbilisi wanted to improve ties with its former imperial ruler.

"Let all Russian businessmen know that Georgia is as attractive a country for them as any other," he said, adding that Georgia's aspirations to join NATO and the European Union remained firmly in place.

However, Vladimir Putin's expected victory in Russia's March 4 presidential election is unlikely to usher in an improvement in ties with Georgia.

(Reuters, AP)

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