

Georgia-Russia Relations Warming

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Georgia's Patriarch Ilia II, right, meeting with Putin in Moscow on Monday. **Maxim Shipenkov**

A cocktail-party chat that lasted only minutes has triggered hopes that the country's troubled relations with Georgia might be headed for substantial recovery.

Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev had a conversation with his Georgian counterpart, Bidzina Ivanishvili, during a reception at the Davos World Economic Forum late Wednesday, Medvedev's spokeswoman, Natalya Timakova, said Thursday. "Both prime ministers were at the reception and had a conversation," she was quoted as saying by Interfax.

Timakova downplayed the meeting by adding that Medvedev talked "with many delegation heads from other countries" during the forum, but national media were quick to point out that the encounter marked the first direct contact between governments of both countries in years.

Diplomatic ties between Moscow and Tbilisi were cut in 2008, after both countries fought a brief war over Georgia's breakaway region South Ossetia, followed by Moscow's recognition

of independence for that region

as well as nearby Abkhazia. Moscow has since adamantly refused any contact with Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili, whom it accuses to be a war criminal for ordering troops into South Ossetia.

But the outlook has changed since Saakashvili's United National Movement was defeated in parliamentary elections last fall by Ivanishvili's Georgian Dream coalition. Ivanishvili, a billionaire who made much of his wealth in Russia, has said he wants better relations with Moscow.

This week saw other symbolic high-level meetings of officials between both countries. On Wednesday, Georgian Patriarch Ilia II became the most prominent Georgian to be received by President Vladimir Putin in the [Kremlin](#) since the 2008 war.

The head of the Georgian Orthodox Church has maintained close ties with his Russian counterpart, Kirill, over the past years. Both church leaders met for talks Tuesday. Unlike the Kremlin, the Moscow Patriarchy has in the past supported Georgia's territorial integrity, arguing that under church law, the breakaway regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia remain part of Georgia.

No details of the Kremlin talks were published, but Ilia told RIA-Novosti that he would raise the issue with Putin.

Thursday then saw the first direct contacts between senior lawmakers from both sides, when the foreign relations committee heads from both countries met in Strasbourg.

Alexei Pushkov, chairman of the State Duma's International Affairs Committee, and his Georgian counterpart, Tedo Dzhaparidze, had an hourlong conversation at the sidelines of the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly winter session. Pushkov told Interfax afterward that the meeting was seen "as positive by both of us" and that they had agreed to meet again in April "in a broader format."

He added that the talk was about "getting to know each other personally and politically" and that they did not discuss any concrete questions. He added, however, that Dzhaparidze raised the issue of visa-free travel.

Tbilisi unilaterally scrapped visas for Russians last year, a move that has so far not been reciprocated by Moscow.

Dzhaparidze told reporters that both sides agreed on "red lines" that should not be crossed, Interfax reported.

Pushkov explained that Abkhazia, South Ossetia and security issues would be excluded from the agenda, because they would be discussed at UN-sponsored talks in Geneva.

In a signal that more substantial improvements are underway, Russia's chief sanitary official, Gennady Onishchenko, said Thursday that he was ready to visit Georgia after talks with Georgian experts scheduled for early next month in Moscow.

The Feb. 4 meeting will focus on resuming imports of Georgian wine and the famous Borjomi mineral water, he told Interfax.

Georgian food imports have been effectively banned since 2006, when the Federal Consumer Protection Service, headed by Onishchenko, deemed them to be of bad quality.

Earlier, Onishchenko said that almost 30 Georgian companies had submitted documents to resume shipments, and that the quality of wine had improved significantly. He has said he was hopeful to see imports start again in March.

Analysts have warned that a substantial rapprochement between both countries is hardly possible, because Moscow cannot revert its decision to recognize the two separatist provinces, while no Georgian government can be expected to give them up in the near future.

But this week's meetings were undoubtedly positive, said Felix Stanevsky, an expert with the Kremlin-connected CIS Institute, who served as ambassador to Georgia from 1996 to 2000.

Stanevsky argued that progress is likely to be slow because differences were based on non-tradable issues.

While Georgia has a lot to win economically by resuming exports to Russia, this is not the case in the other direction, he explained. "If economic ties are normalized, only Georgia will win," he said.

He added that Tbilisi would have to make political concessions, either over the separatist territories or over security policy.

Under Saakashvili, Georgia has forcefully lobbied for joining NATO, angering the Kremlin, which has argued that the Western military alliance should not expand in its sphere of interest.

Stanevsky explained that Tbilisi would not have to give up territorial claims but merely its previous argument that Abkhazia and South Ossetia are a Russian-Georgian problem.

"If they are honest they will stop speaking of Russian occupation and admit that it is the Abkhaz and South Ossetians who do not want to be inside Georgia," he said.

Georgian politicians accuse the regions' leadership of ethnic cleansing and demand the return of tens of thousands of ethnic Georgians that have fled those areas.

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