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Georgian Boycott of Olympics Is a Bad Idea

By Paul Rimple

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Shortly after Russia invaded Georgia in 2008, Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili appealed to the U.S. and European Union to punish Russia and boycott the 2014 Sochi Winter Olympics. Then, his plea fell on deaf ears abroad and lost momentum at home. In December, as a demonstration of the new government's willingness to "normalize ties" with Russia, the Georgian Olympic Committee announced Georgia would participate. But now, one week before the presidential election, the government is starting to sing a different Olympic tune.

Russia's decision to pass the Olympic flame to Ivan Nechayev, a decorated army pilot who helped torch Georgia during the five-day war in 2008, and the encroaching fences demarcating the South Ossetian border through Georgian villages, have fueled a growing national movement to boycott the Sochi games. Backed by local civil society groups, musicians and politicians, the campaign has gathered about 10,000 signatures in an online petition and could become the first real test of the government's Russia strategy.

Proponents of the boycott believe it is an appropriate response to Russia's failure to meet its international obligations to the six-point peace plan to end the 2008 war — particularly the obligation to remove Russian forces from South Ossetia and Abkhazia. They add that it will also send a strong message to the international community that Georgia will never tolerate the "occupation of its territories by Russia."

The ruling Georgian Dream coalition, which has made restoring economic links with Russia a cornerstone of its foreign policy, is so far playing it cool. Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili urged the need for emotional constraint. At the same time, however, he said Georgia had time to snub the Olympics if it believed its participation would be humiliating.

But Ivanishvili intends to step down after the presidential election next Sunday, leaving a hodgepodge coalition government on its own. As pressure to boycott mounts, parliament will have to weigh the demands of its constituents against Georgia's reset policy. In an August poll, 76 percent of respondents approved of Georgia's decision to participate in the Sochi Olympics, but that was before the Kremlin demonstrated its take on normalization.

Russia lifted its ban on Georgian wine and mineral water in June and has added fruits to the list this month. But Gennady Onishchenko, Russia's chief sanitary inspector, is quick to remind us how tenacious this economic cooperation is. Seven Georgian beverage companies are still prohibited from Russia for "low sanitation standards." Onishchenko warned that Russia can change its attitude to imports if Georgia did not change its "business and partnership relations." Onishchenko is also obsessed with the Richard G. Lugar Center for Public Health Research, a Georgia-based biological research lab he is convinced is a secret biological weapons facility. Again, he threatens Georgia with a ban if it does not shut down the center.

"Normalizing relations with Russia" is an oxymoron. Georgia knows it cannot just sell it wine. What the new government is learning is how to respond to Russia's relentless pushing. A Sochi boycott might be justifiable, but it would also be wrong. The last time Russia was a target of an Olympic boycott was in 1980, when U.S. President Jimmy Carter protested the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that year. Sixty-one countries joined him, but that did not stop the war nor the games. Georgia is not the U.S., and the world has de facto recognized the Russian occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia already, so what really is the point?

There are better ways to demonstrate against Russian provocation, like sending Georgian athletes to compete in Sochi.

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