

Fence Stirs Calls for Georgian Boycott of Sochi

By [The Moscow Times](#)

October 28, 2013

The  Moscow Times

DVANI, Georgia — The Russian border guards were clear: Georgian villagers said they told them that if they wanted to salvage anything from two homes they had better do it quickly.

Soon, the houses will end up on the other side of a new border fence topped by barbed wire.

The fence being built through this and other Georgian villages has divided neighbors and stirred sharp debate over whether the former Soviet republic should take part in the 2014 Winter Olympics in the Russian resort of Sochi. About 28,000 people in Georgia have already signed a petition calling for a boycott and the government has said it might be forced to reconsider sending a team.

One Georgian minister, Alexi Petriashvili, said Friday that the fence appears linked to Russian security plans for the Sochi games.

The controversy over the Olympics, which Russia is hosting in February in the Black Sea city just up the coast from Georgia, has also highlighted political divisions ahead of this weekend's Georgian presidential election.

The new fence marks the boundary of South Ossetia, a breakaway Georgian republic that fell under full Russian control after the two nations fought a brief war in 2008. After the war, Georgians had to abandon their homes in 120 villages and towns in South Ossetia. The new fence, however, pushes even deeper into Georgian territory, placing family cemeteries, orchards, grazing land and some homes beyond reach.

"We were told that the occupation line is moving 50 meters, or about 165 feet, deeper and if we did not take our belongings, it would be impossible once the barbed wire was erected," said Zaal Akhalkatsi, a 50-year-old farmer in the village of Dvani. "So we all helped our neighbors take everything we could from the houses."

Russia insists the fence is being built along the administrative border that existed in Soviet times.

Just south of Sochi lies Abkhazia, a second breakaway Georgian republic now under full Russian control. To the east of Sochi is Russia's North Caucasus, a patchwork of predominantly Muslim republics where a simmering insurgency has produced terrorist attacks.

Russia built part of the South Ossetian fence after the 2008 war and then resumed building in earnest this summer. But in the past couple of weeks, the work was halted, at least temporarily, apparently due to some pressure from the European Union, the U.S. and NATO.

Georgia has aligned itself with the U.S. and the EU, but the new government also has reached out to Russia in an effort to reduce tensions.

Russia stirred further anger in Georgia when a Russian military pilot decorated for his role in the 2008 war took part in the Olympic torch relay earlier this month.

Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili has accused President Vladimir Putin of using the 2014 Olympics to show his scorn for Georgia, and his party has called for a boycott of the games. With Saakashvili's near decade in power coming to an end, his party's candidate needs to finish a strong second in Sunday's presidential election for his team to retain political relevance.

The election is expected to be won by the candidate supported by Georgian Prime Minister, Bidzina Ivanishvili, whose coalition defeated Saakashvili's party a year ago.

Ivanishvili's government decided to send a team to Sochi in a goodwill gesture toward Russia, but now says it may reconsider.

Georgia sent eight athletes to the 2010 Winter Games in Vancouver, its largest contingent ever, but one athlete died in a training run crash on the luge track.

For the Sochi games, the Georgian team will consist of up to six athletes, with four already qualified. Georgia, which participated in its first Olympics as an independent country in 1994,

has never won a medal in the Winter Games.

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