

Georgia Hopes Ukraine Crisis Will Spur West to Robust Reaction

March 25, 2014



A soldier standing guard near a tank positioned close to the Russian border near the Ukrainian city of Kharkiv.

Six years after losing land in a war with Russia, Georgians believe the struggle for Ukraine will decide their own fate, and hope NATO and the European Union will now speed up their integration into the Western fold.

Alone among the former Soviet republics of the Caucasus, Georgia is pursuing a pro-Western course and the nation feels a strong kinship with Ukrainians who toppled Russian-backed President Viktor Yanukovich last month.

This solidarity was clear when Georgians scored a rare victory over their former Russian masters, albeit on the sports field rather than the battlefield.

To shouts of "Ukraine!," Georgia's rugby team convincingly beat Russia 36-10 a few days after Yanukovich's overthrow during pro-Western protests. "It was our victory and a victory for Ukraine," one fan, David Eristavi, said of the match. "We finally showed Russians how

strong we are."

Hundreds of Georgians have staged protests in support of Ukraine, seeing events there as a mirror image of their own fight for closer ties with the EU.

The country of 4.5 million people — which also hopes to join the NATO military alliance in the long term — now wants a strong Western response to Moscow's annexation of Crimea. This was sealed after people in the Ukrainian region overwhelmingly voted for union with Russia in a referendum denounced by Kiev and the West as illegal.

"The outcome of the Ukrainian crisis defines the future of Georgia's freedom, security and sovereignty," said Helen Khoshtaria, an independent political analyst in Tbilisi. "It will define whether Russia succeeds in imposing its exclusive sphere of influence and creates dividing lines in Europe or not."

She believes Moscow is trying to reconstitute a kind of Soviet Union, without the communism.

"If the international community fails to stop and reverse Russia's actions it will be a message to Russia that despite some noise its actions have no real costs and it will encourage Russia to finalize creation of the 'Soviet Union,' including through dragging Georgia in it," Khoshtaria said.

Georgia, like Ukraine, has long had a rocky relationship with Moscow.

Russia reacted to Georgian independence in 1991 after the Soviet Union collapsed with measures ranging from trade sanctions to supporting separatists to keep the country in what Moscow considers its traditional sphere of influence.

Those policies culminated in the five-day war over Georgia's breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 2008. Russia remains in control of both to this day.

After initial statements carefully worded to avoid irritating Moscow, the parliament in Tbilisi passed a resolution on March 6 criticising Russian policy toward Ukraine and calling on the EU and NATO to speed up the process of Georgian integration.

Russia's "aggressive acts" were posing "a serious threat not only to our friend Ukraine, but to Georgia and the whole of Europe as well", the resolution said.

Moscow says the people of Crimea exercised their right to self determination. But Georgian Prime Minister Irakly Garibashvili told the Atlantic Council in Washington this month that he hoped the foreign governments would send a clear message "which will underpin the notion that no third party can influence the aspirations of regional countries striving to fulfil their choices of foreign alliance."

ROBUST RESPONSE

So far, the U.S. and EU have imposed visa bans and asset freezes on leading Russians. But Georgians hope the West will react more robustly on Ukraine, a nation with a population 10 times greater than their own.

"Russia cut Crimea off from Ukraine the way it cut Abkhazia and South Ossetia off from Georgia," said 19-year-old student Levan Gabrichidze. "Ukraine is more important to Europe than Georgia is, of course ... I hope Europe and the U.S. will be more active now, although I do not see serious action so far."

Despite its relatively small economy, Georgia is home to pipelines that carry Caspian gas and oil to Europe and is driving a push to deepen cooperation with Brussels and Washington despite Russian concerns. Tbilisi initialled an accord on trade and other cooperation with the EU at a summit in the Lithuanian capital of Vilnius last November.

It had been due to sign the agreement along with another former Soviet republic, Moldova, by the end of this year. However, EU leaders agreed last week to aim to have the deals sealed by June because of fears that the countries could come under Russian pressure.

Yanukovich was scheduled to sign a similar deal at the Vilnius summit but pulled out at the last minute after Russia tightened checks on Ukrainian imports and threatened to cut off its gas supplies in the depth of winter. His decision to opt for closer ties with Russia instead set off the protests that brought him down three months later.

The EU wants to avoid a repeat of the Russian trade action, which included cutting off imports of Moldovan wine last year.

"We are being extremely active with Moldova and with Georgia. We are concerned about things that can suddenly happen — how their wine is suddenly not accepted, what can happen in terms of pressure, and we are ready for that," EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton said at the weekend.

Relations with NATO are more complex, although the Crimean crisis has put the question of whether Georgia might eventually be admitted into the alliance back on the agenda.

Tbilisi was once offered the prospect of eventual NATO membership but its bid has been effectively on ice since the 2008 war. A NATO summit in September is due to discuss the position of four countries — Georgia and the former Yugoslav republics of Montenegro, Macedonia and Bosnia — under the alliance's "Open Door" policy.

Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen would make no direct comment when asked last week if NATO might consider expanding its membership, but indicated that the crisis would influence discussions at the summit in Wales.

"The formal answer [is] that it is premature to answer your question. Now, having said that, I think what we have seen in recent weeks may have an impact on this," he said.

While countries such as Ukraine that border the EU and NATO are keen for closer ties, Georgia is alone in its ambitions among the former Soviet republics to the east in the Caucasus.

Neighboring Armenia, which hosts a Russian military base, plans to join the Moscow-led Customs Union. Azerbaijan has used Crimea as a possible model for restoring control over Nagorno-Karabakh, an enclave controlled by ethnic Armenians since a war in the early 1990s.

In a telephone conversation last week, the presidents of Russia and Armenia said

the referendum in Crimea was "another example of the exercise of peoples' right to self-determination through a free expression of popular will."

Azeri President Ilham Aliyev repeated last week that his country was ready to gain control over Nagorno-Karabakh. A ceasefire was signed in 1994, but sporadic violence flares along Azerbaijan's borders with Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/03/25/georgia-hopes-ukraine-crisis-will-spur-west-to-robust-reaction-a33300>