

EU's Van Rompuy Says Georgia, Moldova to Sign EU Pact Next Month

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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European Council President Herman Van Rompuy

European Council President Herman Van Rompuy said Wednesday that Georgia and Moldova would sign European Union association agreements next month, despite Russian disapproval of former Soviet republics moving closer to the West.

Russia intervened in Ukraine in March, seizing and annexing its Russian-majority Crimea region, after protesters overthrew Kiev's Moscow-backed president who had rejected closer EU ties.

Rompuy spoke in the Georgian capital after visits earlier this week to Moldova and Ukraine, where he backed the Kiev authorities in condemning a makeshift referendum by pro-Russian rebels in the east that threatens to dismember the country.

Since the early 1990s Russian troops have shielded breakaway statelets in a sliver of Moldova

and two provinces of Georgia, and the crisis in Ukraine has heightened anxiety in both nations about Moscow's approach to its former Soviet-era vassals.

"I see that there is a lot of pressure to prevent you and others sign[ing] those agreements," Van Rompuy told a joint news conference with Georgian Prime Minister Irakly Garibashvili.

Van Rompuy said an association agreement tightening trade and political ties between Georgia and Moldova and the EU would be signed on June 27, earlier than originally planned.

EU leaders agreed earlier this year to aim to have the deals sealed by June, rather than by the end of the year, because of fears that the two countries could come under Russian pressure.

Georgia, a Caucasus state of 4.5 million that fought a five-day war with Russia in 2008 over its breakaway regions, hosts pipelines that pump oil and gas from the landlocked Caspian Sea to world markets.

Since the Ukraine crisis erupted, causing the worst East-West crisis since the Cold War, EU leaders have increasingly looked to these gas routes as an alternative to the 28-nation bloc's dependence on Russian supplies.

The war with Russia was partly a result of Tbilisi's long-running efforts to build links with the EU and join NATO.

Garibashvili described the Association Agreement as a "milestone." He added: "Georgia follows its European integration course. ... It is our people's choice."

The interim Kiev government's Western allies accuse Moscow of sowing rebellion in Ukraine and illegally annexing Crimea. Russia denies this, describing the unrest as popular uprisings against what it calls an illegitimate Kiev government installed via a coup. Kiev aims to hold a presidential election on May 25.

Van Rompuy repeated warnings that the EU was ready to introduce more sanctions against Russia if Moscow continued to support pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine.

"The European Union remains committed to further increase the cost for Russia should it take more steps to destabilize the situation," he said.

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