Georgians Protest Russia-Abkhazia Province Deal

November 16, 2014

Tens of thousands of people rallied in Georgia's capital on Saturday to protest a planned agreement between Russia and Georgia's separatist province.

The demonstrators were denouncing the deal to be signed by Russia and Abkhazia province as a step toward annexation of the Black Sea region by Moscow. Abkhazia has been running its own affairs since a separatist war in the early 1990s, and Moscow bolstered its military presence there following a 2008 Russian-Georgian war.

The proposed agreement envisages the creation of joint Russian and Abkhazian military forces.

The protesters carried posters saying "Stop Russia!" and crossed out pictures of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Many were carrying U.S., EU and Ukrainian flags, the latter to back Ukraine regarding Moscow's decisions to annex Crimea and support the pro-Russian insurgency in eastern Ukraine.

The rally of about 30,000 people was organized by former Georgian President Mikhail Saakashvili's United National Movement. It has been in opposition since losing the 2012 parliamentary election to the Georgian Dream party, which was founded by billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, who made his fortune in Russia.

Saakashvili, speaking to the rally via video link, accused government officials of taking advice from Moscow and failing to defend national interests, obediently "bowing their heads and following the (Russian) bear." He said, "On the one side, there is Georgia that is fighting for its dignity, despite enormous pressure. But on the other side there is Georgia that is bowing its head and trailing the bear."

Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili sought to deflect such criticism by saying in a statement on Friday that the government is aware of the threat posed by the Russia–Abkhazia deal and has appealed to the West to help oppose it.

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