

Georgia's Leader Warns of Russian Expansion

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Georgia's President Georgy Margvelashvili (R) and his Austrian counterpart Heinz Fischer arrive for their joint news conference in Tbilisi, Georgia, May 18.

TBILISI — Georgia's president said Tuesday that Russia is poised to use its armed forces to expand further into former Soviet states and called on the West never to accept any Russian aggression.

Russia's 2008 war with neighboring Georgia and its seizure of Crimea from Ukraine in 2014 showed that Moscow is ready to exploit any instability in countries it still considers to be in its sphere of influence, President Giorgi Margvelashvili said in an interview with The Associated Press.

"They are the fastest and the first to bring in their tanks," he said, speaking near-fluent English. "So that's why we can say that half of the Eurasian continent is living under constant threat. If they have some kind of unstable environment in their country, their sovereign country, the neighbor will be quick to solve the problem through Kalashnikov[s]."

Georgia, which aspires one day to join the 28-nation European Union and NATO, is a member of the EU's Eastern Partnership, which holds its annual summit this week in Riga, Latvia. Other members are Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova and Ukraine.

About 300 U.S. troops are in Georgia this month holding joint exercises, and NATO is opening a training center in Georgia later this year. Georgia has been a reliable contributor of troops to NATO-led operations, including campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Margvelashvili said Georgia still feels the military threat from Russia after losing 20 percent of its territory to Russian-supported separatists after the 2008 war. Russia has border guards and troops stationed in the breakaway territories of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Just like Russia did in Georgia in 2008, Margvelashvili said Russia exploited instability in Ukraine following the ouster of a Russia-friendly president to seize Crimea in March 2014 and foment an armed rebellion in Ukraine's Russian-speaking east. The president warned if there were not a stronger condemnation from the West, the pattern could be repeated in other countries along Russia's border.

"What we are hoping to see is a more stronger, principled message that this is unacceptable — and this will stay unacceptable even after the cease-fire [in east Ukraine]," Margvelashvili said.

Georgia also sees a threat across Europe from the vast Kremlin propaganda machine as Russia conducts what the EU sees as a disinformation campaign to change perceptions of Russia's involvement in Ukraine.

Russia's new government-funded Sputnik news agency began operating in Georgia this week, providing news in Georgian and Russian. Russian state television channels also are widely available.

In Georgia, Margvelashvili said, Kremlin propaganda aims to make Georgians question their choice to integrate with Europe, given that the EU and NATO are not offering membership anytime soon.

"The basic message is that Europeans don't care about you, you are abandoned, you don't have a choice and the Georgian European choice is doomed," the president said.

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