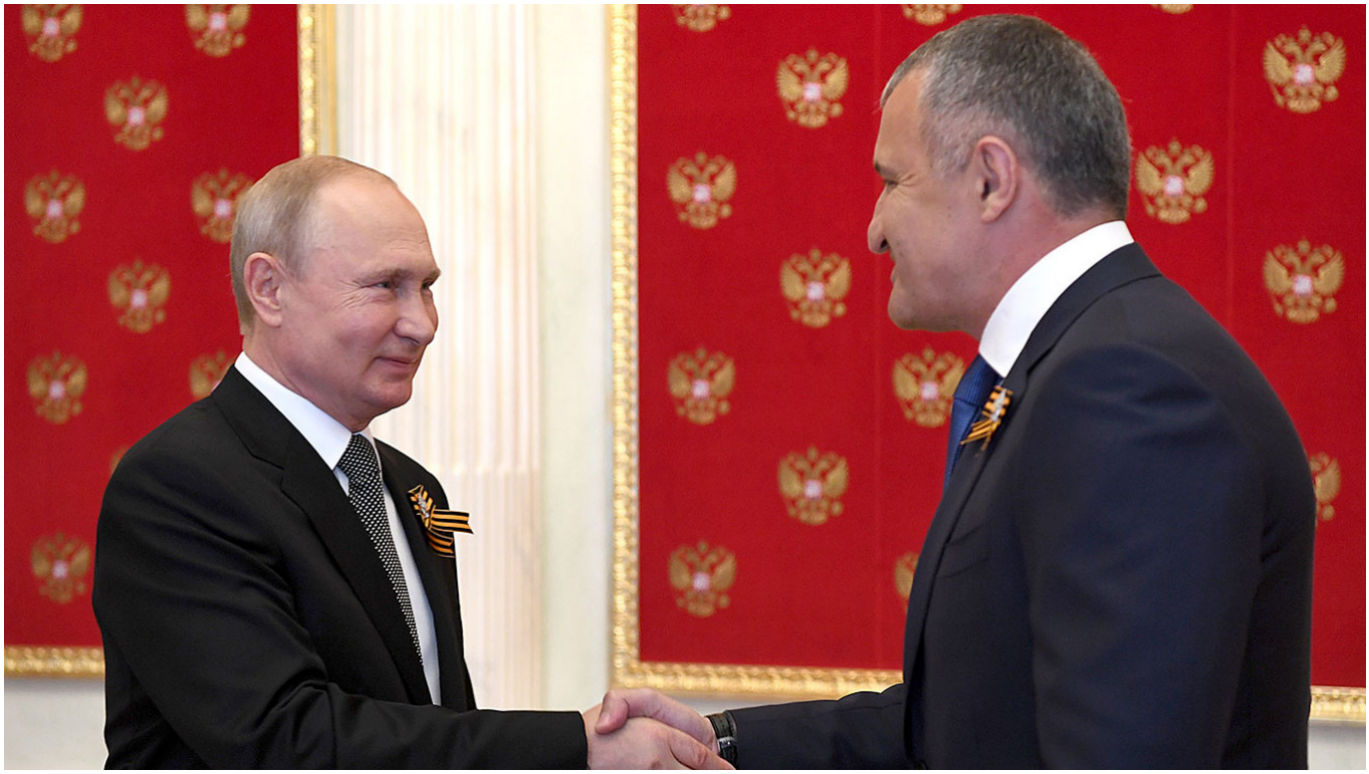
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Kremlin Plays Down South Ossetia Leader's Call to Join Russia

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Russia's President Vladimir Putin and South Ossetia's President Anatoly Bibilov. **Alexei Nikolsky / Russian Presidential Press and Information Office / TASS**

The Kremlin has played down a suggestion by the president of South Ossetia, a breakaway region of Georgia, that the unrecognized state could become part of Russia.

"We have not taken legal or any other measures," Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov told journalists Thursday. "This concerns the choice of the South Ossetian people, which we respect."

On Wednesday, South Ossetian president Anatoly Bibilov had said that he would begin the legal process for the self-proclaimed state to join Russia via a referendum on unity.

"I believe that unification with Russia is our strategic goal," said Bibilov.

Related article: South Ossetia Leader Wants Public Debate on Joining Russia

The government of North Ossetia, a Russian region with close links to its much smaller southern neighbor, backed the unity proposal.

South Ossetia – a tiny territory of less than 50,000 people – gained de facto independence from Georgia amid a bloody ethnic conflict after the Soviet collapse and has repeatedly expressed its wish to join Russia.

The breakaway republic largely functions as a part of Russia, relying on Moscow for its defense and using the ruble as its currency.

Russia recognized the territory as independent after a brief but bloody war with Georgia in 2008, but has since consistently downplayed South Ossetian attempts to join Russia.

Bibilov's comments come amid talk of Russia absorbing the Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, two other self-proclaimed post-Soviet states, amid the war in Ukraine.

Leonid Pasechnik, head of the Luhansk People's Republic, which declared independence from Kyiv in 2014, said Sunday that his government may hold a referendum on unity with Russia.

But in South Ossetia, opposition figures slammed Bibilov's proposal as a political stunt ahead of presidential elections on April 10.

Former president Eduard Kokoity, who has spoken in favor of merger with Russia, denounced "populist games" by a president who is thought to be unpopular amid a stagnant economy and political scandals.

"Bibilov has pulled this trick a couple of times," said Ruslan Totrov, political editor of Osnova news, an Ossetian news site.

South Ossetian forces have taken part in Russia's invasion of Ukraine, with around 2,000 Russian and local troops based in the territory redeployed to Ukraine.

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