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How Far Will the Thaw in Russia-Georgia Relations Extend?

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Opposition activists protest against the arrival of a plane heading from Moscow. **Irakli Gedenidze / Reuters**

Russian President Vladimir Putin's surprise move to scrap visa requirements for Georgian nationals and resume direct flights between the two countries puts Tbilisi in a difficult position. The ruling Georgian Dream party needs to respond to Russia's overture to improving relations in a way that will protect it from attacks by the opposition and preserve Georgia's European trajectory.

Georgian Dream representatives have welcomed the Russian proposals, eliciting the ire of not only the opposition, but also a large part of Georgia's political class. President Salome Zourabichvili, who was herself elected with the help of Georgian Dream, called the Kremlin's decision a "provocation."

The country's main opposition force, the United National Movement (UNM), held a rally in

Tbilisi at which the Georgian government was accused of turning the country into a "province of Russia." Critics insist that the decision on flights and visas is Russia's way of rewarding Georgian Dream for its anti-Western policies, and that it jeopardizes the country's prospects of joining the EU.

The credibility of such claims is somewhat undermined by Georgia's previous actions, however. The flights between the two countries have been suspended for several times over the past decades and previously, they had been restored under none other than the UNM founder, then president Mikheil Saakashvili. It was done in 2010 — less than two years after Russia and Georgia fought a war over Georgia's breakaway territory of South Ossetia.

In 2012, Saakashvili also unilaterally abolished visa requirements for Russian nationals, which had been imposed immediately after diplomatic relations between Russia and Georgia were severed in 2008. "We will never close the border for Russian businessmen and tourists because where there is active business, there is no place for tank treads," Saakashvili said at the time.

It's true that the international context and Russia itself were very different back then, and Saakashvili's decisions concerned Georgia only. Now relations with Moscow are a far more fundamental issue. This is why President Zourabichvili first cited "aggression against Ukraine" and only then "the occupation of Georgian territories" when explaining why Russia's proposals are "unacceptable" to Georgia.

An even greater threat to Georgian Dream — both domestically and internationally — could be posed by Western reactions to Russia's initiative. An overwhelming majority of Georgians support their country's EU journey, and see Russia as a threat. Closer ties to Moscow, therefore, will not earn Georgian Dream any additional votes. In fact, the party may end up losing the 2024 parliamentary elections if the EU declines to grant Georgia candidate status due to its excessive flirting with Moscow.

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The Georgian government's initial welcoming of the Russian announcement did not go down well with either the EU or the United States. Brussels and Washington referred to the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine, and reminded Tbilisi of its obligations to its Western partners. Tbilisi, however, apparently hopes to make use of Russia's gestures while also respecting the red lines drawn by the West. Representatives of Georgian Dream have already said that only Russian airlines that are not on sanctions lists will be permitted to fly to the country.

Still, Georgian Dream has few practical reasons to keep drifting toward Moscow, even though pragmatic and nonconfrontational relations with Russia have always been one of the party's principles. That goal has already been accomplished, and further pro-Russian steps will only create tension, both in relations with the West and inside the country. Progress toward EU integration, on the other hand, increases the chances that Georgian Dream could stay in power. But what can Moscow offer Georgia?

What Georgia is really interested in seeing is concessions on its Moscow-backed breakaway

regions, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, but there is no indication that Russia is ready for that. The April round of Geneva discussions — a negotiating format that brings together Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Georgia, as well as Russia, the U.S., and international organizations — once again failed to yield any results, other than routine recognition that "the parties continue to exercise restraint."

In any case, relations between Moscow and Abkhazia have been strained in recent months, and the Kremlin's influence there is not absolute. Abkhazia prohibits the sale of real estate to Russian nationals, but early last year, under pressure from Moscow, Sukhumi agreed to transfer a government dacha in the resort town of Pitsunda to Russia. The decision caused such public uproar that the Abkhazian parliament has still not ratified it, despite Russian threats to cut aid to Abkhazia and close a military base there.

One argument for closer cooperation with Moscow that the Georgian government readily uses is economic benefits. Yet the economic boom Georgia has experienced since last year happened without any intentional assistance from the Russian government, though it is directly linked to Russia.

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Georgian GDP grew a record 10.1% last year, mostly due to tens of thousands of Russians fleeing to Georgia to escape the war and mobilization. Cash remittances from Russia increased fivefold and, with revenues from tourism and exports to Russia, comprise almost 15% of the country's GDP now, as opposed to 6% in 2021. Georgia has therefore been able to benefit from the situation in Russia without taking on any additional obligations.

Georgian Dream has unsuccessfully tried to establish stable relations with Russia in the past, most recently in 2019. Back then, the Georgian authorities hosted Russian Duma deputy Sergei Gavrilov, and even seated him in the parliamentary speaker's chair. The Georgian opposition organized street protests in response, prompting Moscow to suspend flights to Georgia once again.

All in all, the Georgian Dream's gains from rapprochement with Moscow are quite nebulous, while the risks are very real. But the party itself might see things differently. It has made a number of illogical and unforced errors lately, some of which may have serious consequences.

The most obvious example is Georgian Dream's disastrous attempt to pass a draconian law in March that would have made it possible to penalize civil society organizations as "foreign agents," a label that Russia adopted over a decade ago. The controversial bill was withdrawn amid public outrage, and the ruling party gained nothing from its bid, while sustaining major damage to its reputation, both at home and abroad.

A more recent blunder was when Georgian Dream withdrew from the Party of European Socialists, which has the second-largest faction in the European Parliament and nine out of 27 seats in the European Commission, upon whose recommendation Georgia's EU candidate status depends. The withdrawal came in response to the European party's criticism of Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili for making a speech at the Conservative Political

Action Conference in Budapest.

It cannot be ruled out, therefore, that Georgian Dream may enter into another questionable deal: this time with Moscow. But if it does decide to go down that route, it is unclear how much longer the party will be able to remain in power.

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