

# **Annex E.8.34**

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## MOSCOW HINTS IT MAY FORMALIZE INCORPORATION OF SOUTH OSSETIA

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Russian Prime Minister Mikhail Fradkov's aide, Gennady Bukayev, told a joint session of North Ossetia's and South Ossetia's leaderships in Vladikavkaz on March 22 that Moscow has "decided in principle" to merge the two entities into a single one within Russia. The question is not whether, but when, Bukayev declared, indicating that "a united republic would soon appear" under the name Alania as a unit of the Russian Federation. Referencing a decision by the "Russian leadership," Bukayev told both leaderships to accelerate the two entities' economic integration in preparation for the political move. His speech met with enthusiasm by the delegates to the session, who sensed that the issue has entered a decisive stage in the direction they desire.

In that context, the delegations headed by North Ossetia's president Teimuraz Mamsurov and South Ossetia's Moscow-installed leader Eduard Kokoiti discussed the plan to build a new road from the Roki Tunnel (on the Russia-Georgia border, Russian-controlled on both sides) to Tskhinvali, bypassing the Georgian villages that are strewn along the existing road. They also approved plans to build a gas pipeline and electricity transmission line from Vladikavkaz in the north to Tskhinvali in the south.

The proposed road would be completely out of Georgian reach and could be used for unimpeded smuggling and arms deliveries to South Ossetia. The gas pipeline plan was first made public in Tskhinvali in September 2005 when a Russian group initiated construction work on what is legally Georgian territory. The OSCE Mission in Georgia had full knowledge of this development and was genuinely concerned, but dared not speak out.

Bukayev's remarks were cited by Mamsurov's press service and the Vladikavkaz correspondent of Itar-Tass and were reported by independent Moscow media, but not by official ones. Bukayev is the senior official handling frozen conflicts as part of the Russian Prime Minister's Office. He supervised the agitated "presidential" election in Abkhazia in 2004-2005 and went to Transnistria in March 2006 with the official Russian delegation that devised countermeasures to the customs and border regime, recently introduced there by Moldova and Ukraine under European Union guidance.

In Moscow, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs seemed somewhat embarrassed by Bukayev's statements. MFA spokesman Mikhail Kamynin tried to cast the Vladikavkaz meeting in an innocuous light by claiming that it only discussed a reconstruction program for the "conflict zone" that is currently being considered by the OSCE and European Union under the auspices of the Joint Control Commission (JCC, consisting of Russia, North Ossetia, South Ossetia, and Georgia, with the OSCE as observer). However, earlier this month, Russia and its two proxies on the JCC torpedoed a scheduled meeting in Vienna of the JCC that was to have discussed that very issue. Kamynin restated the known position that South Ossetia's political status is to be discussed at the final stage of negotiations within the JCC.

The idea of merging North and South Ossetia within the Russian Federation is almost as old as the conflict itself (1990) and has been examined by the Duma and other Russian authorities several times, without a decision being taken. However, Bukayev's statements are unprecedented in that they seem to reflect for the first time a serious intent to pass from words to deeds. President Vladimir Putin and his government have systematically proceeded toward incorporation of South

Ossetia de facto, apparently preparing to formalize annexation de jure at some convenient time. They may now calculate that the time is drawing near.

Concurrently with the Vladikavkaz meeting, Abkhaz forces conducted exercises involving artillery, helicopters, armored vehicles, and coast guard boats, under the command of officers seconded from Russia: the "Abkhaz defense minister" Sultan Sosnaliev, "chief of staff" Anatoly Zaytsev, and coastal guard commander Alexander Voinskiy (NTV Mir, March 24). De facto annexation of Abkhazia is also well under way. However, Moscow is likely to drive the process in South Ossetia faster. It apparently calculates that the international stakes and visibility are lower in South Ossetia, compared to Abkhazia; and it aims to thwart Georgia's strategy, which envisages a peaceful political solution in South Ossetia first and in Abkhazia later.

Bukayev's declaration reflects the official policy and strategic timetable, but leaves the tactical decisions open for adjustment. The declaration may also be intended as a trial balloon to test the international response. Almost certainly, it also seeks to provoke Georgia into some rash moves in South Ossetia as the weather turns favorable to operations on the ground. Tbilisi will certainly display sufficient maturity not to be drawn into a risky confrontation. The real test of maturity is for international organizations and Georgia's Western allies and partners to make clear to Moscow that its intentions are intolerable and have consequences on Russia's relations with the West.

(Vedomosti, Ekho Moskv, March 23; Interfax, March 23, 24)