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EXPERT COMMENT

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What tools are available for Georgia to respond to Russia's borderization of the administrative boundary lines demarcating Abkhazia and South Ossetia? What is the most appropriate and effective response for Georgia to take?

On July 3, Russian soldiers moved the barbed wire fence demarcating the breakaway region of South Ossetia roughly 700 feet further into Georgian territory. That was only the most recent instance of a now commonplace practice. The act of sporadically grabbing portions of Georgian territory – commonly referred to as “borderization” – has been used by Russia since June 2008 to increase the size of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, both breakaway regions occupied by the Russian armed forces.

In each instance, Russia’s military has taken a small chunk of Georgian territory: enough to intimidate Georgia’s government and citizenry, but not enough to provoke a significant international backlash. The illegal practice of borderization continues to pose a problem for Georgia and its government is under growing pressure to take a firm stance.

At the request of the Georgian Institute of Politics, a selection of experts from Estonia, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States commented on potential actions the Georgian government can take to counter the practice of borderization.

DR. SVANTE E. CORNELL, *John Hopkins University’s Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS), US.*

Georgia has been facing an unprecedented challenge of “borderization” since the 2008 war. This term is a euphemism for what are in fact continuous acts of war: the unilateral advance by one country’s military forces onto the territory of another country. Moscow, of course, uses this both as a punishment against Georgia’s independent stance and as leverage

- with the very threat of further advances being used to try to affect Georgia’s behavior.

Any state faced with what is essentially a military threat has numerous options which may be more or less realistic. These range from the purely diplomatic – i.e. demarches and statements – to economic and military means. Since the 2008 war, Georgia has only utilized one instrument – the diplomatic. Moreover, this has tended to be on an ad hoc basis. In other words, the Georgian

authorities have reacted to each of Russia's territorial grabs, but has not created a visible long-term and sustained diplomatic campaign that seeks a defined outcome among its friends and partners. Nor has Georgia deployed a military presence along the administrative boundary lines that could make Russia's land grabs costlier.

In principle, the Georgian government appears to have rested on the assumption that because it seeks a dialogue with Russia, Moscow will reciprocate and refrain from hostile actions. This clearly has not happened. In theory, any country exposed to this threat would deploy military forces to the boundary line to make another land grab costlier. Understandably, Georgia correctly fears that Moscow would use such a presence as an excuse to manufacture a new, larger conflict. But given the presence of the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM), Georgia could deploy an unarmed military presence to its own boundary lines and erect defensive infrastructure to make land grabs costlier.

The above option should definitely be considered. Beyond that, an obvious step to take would be to develop a sustained campaign to raise attention among its partners to the long-term pattern of Russian behavior, and seek active western actions in response, such as targeted sanctions against Russia or the strengthening of EU monitoring of the boundary lines. For example, the permanent stationing of EUMM personnel in territories at risk of further borderization could constitute a deterrent to Russian actions that at present appear to carry no cost at all.

DR. NINO KEMOKLIDZE, *Leverhulme Fellow at the University of Birmingham, UK*

There is no doubt that the Georgian government faces an extremely difficult task in managing its northern neighbor and its continued attempts to destabilize the country. Incidents such as installing "border signs" and moving deeper into Georgian-controlled territory have become so frequent that they now constitute a "new normal." This, in itself, is one of the biggest threats - the normalisation of Russia's tactics; and that these actions, it seems, are still not taken seriously enough by many in the West. Moscow might be testing Georgia's tenacity to see how far it can push the country's policy of "strategic patience." However, while emotions are high, more than ever is there a need to treat the issue level-headedly; Georgia cannot afford to fall victim to another provocation.

There are still ample diplomatic tools available to the Georgian government that can and should be utilised fully and more effectively. In fact, there is an urgent need for more proactive action both domestically and internationally, and a more forward-looking plan with regards to Russia. While the EU and US might be preoccupied with other more urgent crises at home or abroad, Georgia cannot sit still; it needs to constantly remind the West why it matters and why Western inaction and complacency may be costly in the long run.

In this regard, the international platforms at the Geneva International Discussions and Incident Prevention Response Mechanism meetings should be used more effectively. In addition, serious consideration needs to be given to renewed calls for sanctions against Russia, similar to those that were imposed amidst the annexation of Crimea. With any military action on Georgia's part off the table, sanctions would be the only viable tool to

send strong enough signal to Russia that the West is firmly behind Georgia. The West should not wait for a further deterioration of the situation on the ground in order to consider these sanctions. Rather, they should be used as a preemptive measure and an indication that what is happening in Georgia cannot and will not be tolerated by the international community.

DR. ROBERT E. HAMILTON, *US Army War College*

Russia's war against Ukraine and the debate in the U.S. over how to respond to the Kremlin's interference in the 2016 US election have obscured another Russian attack on security and stability: its so-called "borderization" activities in Georgia. "Borderization" refers to the construction of barriers along the boundary lines of the former Autonomous Oblast of South Ossetia with the intent of turning it into a de facto international border. Georgia and the clear majority of the international community see this as a violation of international law: first because Russian forces now occupy regions that were well within uncontested Georgian territory before the 2008 Russia-Georgia war; and second because Russia has refused the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) access to the territory it controls.

Russia has multiple objectives in this silent war against Georgia. The first is to improve its military position in the event of a resumption of hostilities. Russia's persistent shifting of the boundary further into territory previously controlled by Georgia has put Russian forces within a few hundred meters of Georgia's main east-west highway, a key Russian objective in any renewed conflict.

Next, the incremental nature of Russian "borderization" is designed to remain below

the threshold for the legal definition of military aggression, while presenting Georgia with a dilemma. If it fails to respond to what it calls Russia's "creeping annexation", Georgia risks losing ever-more territory, and eroding the confidence of its people in the ability of their government to protect them. If it responds too forcefully, Georgia gives Russia a justification for renewing its military aggression. The third, and overarching Russian objective is to keep Georgia from joining NATO and the EU by portraying Georgia to the members of those organizations as unstable and militarily indefensible, and therefore a potential liability as a member.

Unfortunately, there is no simple solution to this dilemma, but there are things that Georgia can do to minimize its effects. The first of these is to keep the "borderization" issue and Russia's refusal to allow EUMM access to South Ossetia on the international agenda. Georgia should ensure these issues are grouped with Russian intervention in Ukraine wherever possible, as part of a more general pattern of Moscow's attempts to intimidate and destabilize its neighbors in violation of international law.

A second strategy might be to respond to Russian "creeping annexation" with "creeping reintegration." This would involve peaceful, incremental actions aimed at incentivizing the residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to rejoin Georgia of their own accord. Admittedly, this strategy will demand extensive patience and considerable time - probably decades. But, like the U.S. Cold War strategy toward the Baltic Republics, such a "soft power" strategy could pave the way for the peaceful restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity.

DR. ANDREY MAKARYCHEV, *University of Tartu, Estonia*

Georgia should fortify its infrastructure along both Administrative Boundary Lines so that Russia cannot physically move the demarcation line further into Georgian territory. Should protection of the Administrative Boundary Lines be strengthened, Russia would simply have fewer opportunities to manipulate the boundary. Besides, the Georgian government might appeal to international organizations (the EU, Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe, and the Council of Europe) to enhance the monitoring of developments along the Administrative

Boundary Lines by international observers who could publicly report on all irregular cases and make them as visible as possible. At any rate, the best Georgian strategy would promote greater transparency and visibility of Russia's practice of borderization, which can also be used as an argument for the necessity of closer security relations with NATO.

GEORGIAN INSTITUTE OF POLITICS (GIP)

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