

Russia is absorbing South Ossetia

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On 18 March, President Vladimir Putin and the leader of separatist South Ossetia Leonid Tibilov signed a Russian-Ossetian treaty of alliance and integration in Moscow. It resembles the agreement signed in November 2014 with Abkhazia, although the Ossetian treaty presupposes further integration. It states that South Ossetia, while maintaining the external attributes of independence, will become fully integrated with Russia in the spheres of customs, defence and homeland security, among others (the Ossetian institutions of force will be subordinated to Russia's, the Russians will take the responsibility for border protection, etc.). Border controls between the signatories will be abolished, and the residents of South Ossetia will be able to obtain Russian citizenship in a simplified manner. Russia has agreed to grant US\$150 million of financial assistance to Ossetia in the years 2015 to 2017, and will raise salaries and social benefits to the average level of the Ossetians in the North Caucasus federal district. Tbilisi has condemned the signing of the treaty, which it sees as the *de facto* annexation of South Ossetia, and a sign of Russia's aggressive policy. The West (including the EU, NATO and the US) also condemned the act as undermining the territorial integrity of Georgia.

Commentary

- The treaty on alliance and integration, together with the state border agreement signed in February, has sanctioned the effective incorporation of South Ossetia which, while maintaining the facade of statehood, has now become part of the Russian North Caucasus. The treaty does not constitute anything new, but formalises the Russian system of governance over the republic, which has long since ceased to be independent. This area only has around 35,000 residents, who have been cut off from the rest of Georgia by a tightly controlled border; it is economically undeveloped and completely dependent on Russia, and is a *de facto* military base and training ground for Russian troops.
- From Moscow's point of view, the signing of the treaty with South Ossetia, whose independence Russia recognised in 2008, ends the Georgian-Ossetian conflict. We should not expect that Russia will offer to return Ossetia to Georgian jurisdiction in the future, for example in exchange for Tbilisi abandoning its pro-Western course. However, Moscow has not decided on complete annexation (despite support for such a solution from most Southern Ossetians) due to the limited domestic propaganda advantage it would gain

(Russian society is largely indifferent towards the Ossetian issue), and the fact that this would clash with Moscow's current policy towards Georgia. This is mainly based on the use of 'soft' measures (media propaganda, the organisation and activities of pro-Russian political movements, cooperation with the Georgian Orthodox Church, building up ties between people and business) in order to stir up anti-Western and pro-Russian attitudes in Georgian society.

- The Georgian government's reactions to the treaty (a pro-forma protest from the Foreign Ministry) and the lack of public reactions (the issue was not raised during a demonstration by the opposition United National Movement in Tbilisi on 21 March) demonstrate Georgians' sense of powerlessness in the face of Moscow's actions. They also show that neither the elites nor the public believe it will be possible to regain control over South Ossetia and Abkhazia in the foreseeable future, nor that the West will help in achieving this goal.