

Wider Europe

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Biden's Critical Trip to Ukraine and Georgia

by David J. Kramer¹

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Obama clearly laid out his views on the region while in Moscow, rejecting the notion of spheres of influence and stressing the importance of sovereignty and territorial integrity. "Just as all states should have the right to choose their leaders," he said in a speech, "states must have the right to borders that are secure, and to their own foreign policies...we must apply this principle to all nations -- and that includes nations like Georgia and Ukraine."

The right for Ukraine and Georgia to determine their own foreign policies extends to the sensitive issue of NATO as

well. NATO allies welcomed Ukraine's and Georgia's aspirations for membership in NATO in their April 2008 Summit Declaration, stating, "We agreed today that these countries will become members of NATO." In his Moscow speech, Obama did not back away from the Bucharest Declaration. On the contrary, Obama's comments should largely reassure countries along Russia's borders that they will not be treated as "pieces on a chess board." While NATO membership should not be the centerpiece of Biden's trip, the vice president should stress that the door remains open to both Ukraine and Georgia consistent with the 2008 NATO Declaration and his boss' comments in Moscow. Both countries, after all, have contributed troops and trainers to multinational efforts in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, and if they reform according to NATO standards and meet NATO's conditions, their membership prospects should not be ruled out.

In both countries, Biden should encourage the governments to focus on political and economic reforms and institution-building, for such reforms are the best way to ensure these countries' sovereignty and territorial integrity. He should come prepared to follow through on the Charters on Strategic Partnership signed with both Georgia and Ukraine at the end of the Bush Administration, including formalizing a high-level commission

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on bilateral relations with Ukraine, a process launched two weeks ago with Georgia during their foreign minister's visit to Washington. Biden should also explore the possibility of free-trade agreements with both countries.

Biden's task will be particularly challenging in Ukraine, which holds presidential elections next January. For quite some time, sniping among the various party leaders has produced political chaos and distracted Ukraine's leaders from what should be their primary focus: pulling the country out of its economic crisis. Just last week, the IMF lowered its GDP forecast, predicting a staggering 14 percent decline instead of an earlier eight percent drop. The country also needs to get more serious about energy security – including energy efficiency, transparency in deals, and development of its own resources. Biden should have this issue at the top of his agenda. He should also stress how important it will be for Ukraine to conduct its third free and fair national election in a row, which would further underscore the contrast between Ukraine and its neighbor to the east. Biden's visit will not end the political bickering in Kyiv, but it will underscore that the United States wants to deepen relations with the country and its people regardless of the messy politics.

When he arrives in Tbilisi, where opposition protests have petered out after relatively little violence, Biden should stress U.S. support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity while simultaneously making clear that under no circumstances will the United States back military means as a way to solve the separatist problems of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. He also should come prepared to discuss the possibility of U.S. participation in the unarmed European Union monitoring mission that, with the forced withdrawal of the UN and OSCE presence, is the only entity standing between Georgian and Russia-South Ossetian-Abkhazian forces. Biden should also stress the need for institutional reforms, including a truly independent judiciary, and constructive engagement with the opposition. As in Ukraine, Biden should meet with the full spectrum of opposition leaders as well as representatives of civil society. Biden's message should stress that we want to build relations with all key stakeholders in Georgia, not just one man (President Mikheil Saakashvili), though he should obviously meet with Saakashvili, too.

Doing so would send an important message to Moscow, where some Russian pundits still feel confident about a Russian sphere of influence along its borders. Medvedev's visit to South Ossetia, his first since Russia invaded Georgia last August and recognized South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent, will reinforce that confidence, which could, in turn, lead to Russian

miscalculations. As quoted in *The Economist*, Vyacheslav Nikonov, a prominent pro-Kremlin commentator, smugly predicted: "All the sanctions that were imposed against Russia after the war in August 2008 are in the past. This shows that America realizes the necessity to work together with the Russian Federation. America has understood what was going on last August. Today nobody in Washington would shake Saakashvili's hand." Biden should prove those like Nikonov wrong by shaking Saakashvili's hand and the hands of other figures in Tbilisi and Kyiv and thus demonstrate unwavering U.S. support for independent, democratic Georgia, Ukraine, and other countries in the region.

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As a Senior Transatlantic Fellow, David J. Kramer works on issues related to Russia/Eurasia and wider Europe as well as democracy and human rights. He came to GMF after more than eight years at the U.S. State Department in various capacities, most recently as assistant secretary of state for democracy, human rights, and labor. Before that, he was a deputy assistant secretary of state for European and Eurasian Affairs, responsible for Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus affairs, as well as regional nonproliferation issues. He also served in the Office of Policy Planning and as senior advisor to the Under Secretary of State for Global Affairs.

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