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GUUAM MAKES COMEBACK BID WITH US SUPPORT

Taras Kuzio and Sergei Blagov

GUUAM, a long dormant group of former Soviet states, is trying to make a comeback. The catalyst for GUUAM's reemergence from oblivion appears to be the United States, which evidently hopes the organization can eventually act as a counterweight to Russian influence in the Caspian Basin and Black Sea regions. Official Moscow remains largely silent on GUUAM, while Russian media have struck a derisive note in its coverage of a recent GUUAM summit.

The GUUAM group – Georgia, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan and Moldova – has an aim to promote regional trade and security, but to date has accomplished little in practical terms. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archives]. During the July 3-4 GUUAM gathering in the Ukrainian resort of Yalta, participants offered assurances that the troubled group would overcome its organizational malaise. In his keynote speech, Ukrainian President Leonid Kuchma announced that the group has established “a sufficient foundation to secure a new quality of collaboration.”

“Today's realities place special demands on regional alliances,” Kuchma continued. “GUUAM must use its full potential to form an effective system of combating terrorism and other threats of a transnational nature.”

During the Yalta meeting, GUUAM members agreed to focus on developing trade and enhancing anti-terrorism cooperation. They also issued a joint statement with the United States on the need to take steps against international terrorism and weapons of mass destruction proliferation, as well as to intensify the battle against organized international criminal activity.

“Our activities are acquiring a new, practical dimension,” Georgian Foreign Minister Irakli Menagarishvili told Georgian television July 4. “From this day on, providing support for concrete projects, that is, funding the projects will begin.”

Apparently much of the support needed to promote GUUAM cooperation is coming from the United States. Washington’s interest in GUUAM has risen dramatically over the past year, and reportedly helped persuade Uzbekistan, which had suspended its membership in 2002, to rejoin the grouping. In addition to lending diplomatic encouragement, the US government is also reportedly providing economic assistance to foster GUUAM development. The joint GUUAM-US statement announced that both sides were “looking forward to a new level of joint cooperative projects.”

GUUAM-US cooperation began to accelerate in December 2002 with a program to develop trade and improve border and customs control to combat organized crime and narcotics trafficking. In early May, the United States agreed to allocate \$46 million to GUUAM to support joint projects. Three GUUAM-US initiatives were formally launched at the Yalta meeting. The first will deal with training mobile anti-terrorist units to guard pipelines and combat terrorism. In addition, Washington expressed its willingness to increase the number of special forces based in Georgia (which were funded to the tune of \$64 million last year) to assist in the training of border forces. The two sides will additionally develop a center to facilitate information exchanges designed to counter terrorism, organized crime and drug

trafficking. The third project will be the creation of a GUUAM Parliamentary Assembly.

According to Georgian President Eduard Shevardnadze, the US assistance is playing a vital role in GUUAM's development. "I will tell you straightforwardly," Shevardnadze told Georgian television, "without the support of the Americans it would be difficult to resolve the [development] issues."

That the United States would take an interest in GUUAM at this point is not especially surprising. GUUAM countries are located in the important Caspian Basin and Black Sea regions, which have emerged over the past decade as a zone of intense geopolitical competition between Washington and Moscow over energy development and export routes. In addition, most GUUAM members, especially Uzbekistan and Georgia, have prickly relationships with Russia, making the United States a logical strategic partner.

Officials in Moscow have remained largely silent about recent GUUAM developments. But Russian media left little doubt that the Kremlin takes a dim view of the organization. In general, Russian media sees GUUAM's prospects as limited. A commentary in *Nezavisimaya Gazeta* pointed out that only two heads of state – those from Georgia and host Ukraine – attended the summit, adding sarcastically that the gathering turned into Shevardnadze-Kuchma bilateral meeting under US sponsorship.

The business daily *Kommersant* predicted that GUUAM remained on the brink of collapse. Meanwhile, the *Zerkalo-Nedeli* online publication said the official reason for Moldovan President Vladimir Voronin's absence at Yalta was given as health problems. But, the web site added, "his illness strangely followed a visit to Chishinau by Russian Deputy Foreign Minister [Vyacheslav] Trubnikov," *Zerkalo-Nedeli* wrote. Moscow seeks to utilize

Moldova to undermine GUUAM's effectiveness, the web site claimed.

A primary source of tension for GUUAM and Russia is competing trade interests. GUUAM states have supported a trans-Caucasus transportation corridor, known as TRASECA, which would link countries in the Caspian Basin and Black Sea regions, effectively bypassing Russia. At the same time, Moscow is seeking to promote a so-called North-South transport corridor. [For background see the Eurasia Insight archive].

Apart from transportation projects, Russian leaders have been seeking to increase their influence in post-Soviet affairs. In his state of the nation speech in May, President Vladimir Putin named boosting cooperation with former Soviet states as his top foreign policy priority. Notably, the Kremlin has been promoting the Eurasian Economic Community (EEC), presumably as an alternative to GUUAM. Although on paper Moscow has just 40 percent of the vote in the EEC, (Belarus and Kazakhstan have 20 percent each and Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have 10 percent each) Russia is seen as having 85 percent of the economic potential within the EEC. Ukraine and Moldova have been given observer status in the EEC. With its considerable dependence on Russia, Moldova has largely dropped out of GUUAM activities.

Editor's Note: Dr. Taras Kuzio is a resident fellow at the Centre for Russian and East European Studies, University of Toronto and a visiting fellow at the Institute for Security Studies-EU, Paris. Sergei Blagov is a Moscow-based specialist in CIS political affairs.