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Russia on brink of WTO deal with Georgia

By Catherine Belton and Isabel Gorst in Moscow

Russia was on the brink of finally agreeing terms for entering the World Trade Organisation on Sunday night after Moscow said a deal could be reached with Georgia “within hours”.

Swiss mediators were winging their way from Moscow to Tbilisi, the Georgian capital, to hammer out the last remaining details of an agreement that could finally see Russia enter the WTO by December after 18 years of talks.

Georgia, the former Soviet state that went to war against Russia in 2008, has been the only remaining member of the 153-nation trade organisation blocking Russia’s accession.

But following Swiss mediation last week it said it was offering what it called a final compromise deal to allow international observers to supervise trade across the borders of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the two breakaway regions that have been occupied by Russian troops since the war. Georgia dropped its insistence that only it would monitor trade across the regions’ borders with Russia.

Russia had said on Thursday it needed several days to review the proposal. But on Sunday evening Arkady Dvorkovich, senior economic aide to Dmitry Medvedev, the Russian president, told journalists that Moscow expected “all pending issues to be decided within hours”.

Speaking after a hastily arranged meeting between Mr Medvedev and the Swiss mediators at the Russian president’s residence, Mr Dvorkovich said: “There aren’t any big questions remaining: Just a few things that need to be clarified.”

“Our Swiss colleagues who are heading for Tbilisi today will raise them in talks with the Georgian side,” he said “If there is a positive decision we don’t see any obstacle to approving all the working group documents on Russia’s accession to the WTO.”

Russia’s entry could be approved in time for the WTO’s December ministerial meeting, although its parliamentary elections, scheduled for December 4 could delay the process.

Speaking of the compromise deal, Giga Bokeria, the head of the Georgian National Security Council, said, “We know this agreement is important for the world economy and our partners.”