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## « Georgia's NATO membership will be a heavy burden on its relations with Russia »

Interview taken by Besik Pipiya  
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Russia's Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary to Georgia Vyacheslav Kovalenko told RIA Novosti about the future of Russian-Georgian relations, Russia's peacekeeping mission in the conflict areas, and potential consequences of Georgia's NATO entry.

Question: What do you think about the current state of Russian-Georgian relations? What are the prospects of their development in the near future?

Answer: Few sober-minded people can be satisfied with our relations today.

Neighbors should be friends; they should nurture their friendship and think of the best ways of using it in their national interests and for promoting regional stability. Of course, it is important to have friends everywhere, but next-door neighbors are worth more than far away friends. This does not apply to our bilateral relations, however. During the past year, I was directly involved in this sphere, and I have to say that I didn't feel any interest on Georgia's part in improving bilateral relations. The Georgians can probably explain why. It is not appropriate to discuss it here.

Yet, I don't think that our relations are in a dead end. There is still time to change the course of events. But Georgia needs to display its political will for this. Russia is demonstrating its readiness for better relations. Direct air flights and maritime transportation have been resumed. We could develop important educational and cultural projects. It is time Georgia fulfilled its commitment not to host foreign military bases, and consider the formation of a joint anti-terrorist center with Russia. For the time being, these questions have been shelved. Incidentally, a failure to abide by commitments is bad form.

It is vital to change it as soon as possible.

Now the ball is in Georgia's court. I hope that Georgia will reciprocate our moves. It is important to preserve the first signs of improvement.

I would like to explain why I'm optimistic. I can tell that the Georgians have a good feeling for Russians. They miss communication with Russia and Russian culture; they are again interested in the Russian language. This is a good sign. People tell me emotionally about this heartfelt attraction, and emphasize our Orthodox community. Their disarming sincerity is an earnest of better times in the future.

Q: Recently, Russia has been accused of failing in its mission of a mediator in Georgia's conflicts with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. There are proposals for changes in the negotiating and peacekeeping formats.

A: I don't believe it is right to accuse any side in Georgia's territorial split. Each side of the conflict has its own truth. Instead of establishing who is to blame, it is important to try and understand what needs to be done.

The reality is that the conflicts are more than 15 years old; they have developed their own centrifugal dynamics, and the time of threats is obviously gone. Both sides should be helped to resume constructive dialogue.

Some people claim that the current negotiating formats have exhausted themselves. I cannot agree with this, if only because one side of the conflict objects to this idea.

Insisting on changing the format means driving the talks into a desperate impasse. It is necessary to include a package of measures into the existing format of the negotiating process, which would promote trust and a search for compromise.

Militarization should give way to economic development; we must restore the economic and humanitarian contacts that have been destroyed. Regrettably, we are now witnessing the formation of parallel administrative bodies. Instead, we should be spanning bridges to build up confidence. Political mentality should not be aggravated by far-fetched allegations and attempts to give up the internationally recognized negotiating formats - it is vital to use them as far as possible in the interests of settlement.

Needless to say, this requires patience and political will. There are no easy solutions but we should think about prospects.

Q: What could you say about Georgia's stormy response to Russia's decision to withdraw from the CIS sanctions against Abkhazia?

A: Russia is interested in peaceful settlement of the Abkhazian problem. It is not indifferent to developments in a neighboring area. Russian citizens also live there. Whatever is said, but Russia and its peacekeepers have preserved peace in this conflict zone for many years. Is this not necessary any more? It is horrible to even think what the situation would be like without the peacekeepers. It is worth considering this. Fully aware of this serious problem, I'm certain that peacekeepers should remain there until a comprehensive settlement is reached.

At the same time, Russia cannot sit and wait when this happens because it is a responsible mediator, and is trying to guarantee security of its own territory.

The process of settlement is deadlocked, and Russia decided to withdraw from sanctions against Abkhazia in order to revive the negotiating process. I'm surprised that the emphasis was made on the military dimension, and that this step was not seen as constructive.

I'd like to stress that Russia firmly abides by its international commitments, which ban supply of weapons and military hardware into conflict zones.

Allegations to the contrary are unfounded. The economic dimension is vital for settlement, but economic projects should have no political strings attached.

This will not help. Emotions are running high in the current situation. They can be removed by time and careful confidence-building measures. I think that the region's future will improve if Russia, Georgia, and Abkhazia create joint economic space, a common market of sorts. Then we could move to political settlement.

Q: What could you say about the frequently repeated idea that Georgia's NATO entry will help it resolve its territorial conflicts?

A: I don't understand why Georgia is demonstrating such great desire to join NATO. I often ask my interlocutors about benefits of Georgia's membership in the alliance, and receive the following answer: This is a way to enhance security, restore territorial integrity, and continue democratic reforms.

It's not for me to judge about this, but I believe the situation is far from unequivocal. Forgive me for saying so, but I think that the hope that NATO will return Abkhazia and South Ossetia to Georgia is rather naive. Incidentally, no NATO official has spoken of any such guarantees. It would be worth keeping in mind here that both republics are emphatically negative about Georgia's NATO entry.

It goes without saying that it's up to Georgia to decide which blocs and organizations to enter. It is an independent country. However, potential consequences of this decision should be thoroughly considered. It is not simply a geopolitical move. It deals with important historical legacy, which cannot but be cherished. It should be clear that Georgia's NATO membership will be a heavy burden on its bilateral relations with Russia. I'd like to hope that our relations will develop in a different, more natural way.

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