
Georgia's Friends Hold Strategy Session in Lithuania

By Vladimir Socor
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The New Friends of Georgia group of countries conferred in an enlarged and upgraded format at ministerial level on September 13-14 in Vilnius. This meeting shows that a strong nucleus of eight countries has developed within the European Union and NATO (alongside the United States in the latter case), supporting an active policy by the two organizations in Europe's East generally and toward Georgia in particular.

Initiated in 2005 in Tbilisi by the three Baltic states, Poland, Ukraine, Romania, and Bulgaria, the New Friends' group has matured this year. Georgia's Black Sea neighbors Romania and Bulgaria joined the EU, while the Czech Republic and Sweden have joined the New Friends of Georgia group. The meeting in Vilnius was the first held at the level of ministers of foreign affairs in full format. The EU's Special Representative for the South Caucasus, Peter Semneby, participated as an observer, while his Swedish compatriot, Minister of Foreign Affairs Carl Bildt, brought Sweden to the table for the first time (BNS, February 13-15).

Reviewing proposals presented by Georgian Minister of Foreign Affairs Gela Bezhuashvili, the New Friends group of countries agreed to work jointly as well as in their national capacities to promote the following Euro-Atlantic and Georgian goals:

Regional Security and Stability

Noting that Georgia's security, democratic stability, and integrity constitute major European and Transatlantic interests, the group calls for policies to be premised on that fact. Georgia's internal reforms, 'a successful example in the region and beyond,' substantiate Georgia's aspirations to closer Euro-Atlantic ties. Strengthening Georgia's ties with NATO and the EU would importantly contribute to regional security and also help stabilize Russia-Georgia relations, the group noted.

NATO Agenda

The New Friends (except Sweden, which is not a NATO member) support Georgia's goal to advance to a Membership Action Plan (MAP) at NATO's summit in Romania in the spring of 2008. Based on Georgia's performance on military reforms and its troop contributions to allied missions, the group concludes that Georgia already forms a significant element in Euro-Atlantic security and is prepared for the MAP. The Abkhaz and South Ossetian secessionist conflicts must not be turned into 'an inhibiting factor or an excuse' for temporizing on Georgia's integration into NATO. No country outside NATO [read: Russia] has a right to veto the alliance's decisions, the group noted, as an indirect reminder to several West European governments in the context of the MAP debate.

EU Neighborhood Policy

The group calls for adjusting the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) more closely to Georgia's internal reform performance and to the EU's own interests in the region. Facilitation of travel visas and access of Georgian exports to the EU are priority goals. The EU's current visa policy toward Georgia inadvertently offers easier access to Russian passport holders (from Abkhazia and South Ossetia as well as from Russia), as compared with Georgian passport holders. This policy is 'unfair and counterproductive, it undermines Georgia's territorial integrity and European security interests,' the group observed. It calls on the EU countries to give the European Commission a mandate to negotiate trade and visa facilitation agreements

with Georgia.

Unresolved Conflicts

In his intervention, Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Adrian Cioroianu noted the parallels between the unresolved conflicts in Georgia and Moldova. He underscored the common interests of Romania and Georgia in resolving those conflicts on the basis of Georgia's and Moldova's territorial integrity and, as part of that process, ensuring Russia's compliance with the 1999 Istanbul agreements to fully withdraw Russian forces from Georgia and Moldova. However, 'Russia wants a new treaty [on conventional forces in Europe] that would consign Russia's commitments to oblivion. Romania wants no foreign troops unlawfully stationed in its neighborhood, and we have a common interest with Georgia in this regard,' Cioroianu affirmed (Mediafax, September 14).

The Romanian minister announced his country's full support for Georgia to advance to MAP at NATO's Bucharest summit. Such support is procedurally important, as the summit's host country significantly influences the event's agenda.

Shortly before the Vilnius meeting, Georgia's New Friends acted practically as a group already at the EU's meeting of foreign affairs ministers in Portugal on September 8-9. There, the group's countries called on the European Commission to begin negotiations with Georgia on travel visas and trade and on the EU to adopt a stronger collective position toward Russia's ongoing intrusions into Georgia's air space.

The New Friends are stepping into a role vacated by the old group of 'Friends of Georgia.' Formed a decade ago by the United States, Germany, Britain, and France, that group soon lost its effectiveness and ultimately its relevance by admitting Russia into its ranks and reinventing itself as the United Nations Secretary General's Friends on Georgia. As a result, the old group failed in its task to mediate a resolution to the Russia-Georgia conflict in Abkhazia. From that group, only the United States consistently adheres to the original policy priority while the other three Western powers have (in varying degrees) relegated Georgia to lesser priority status in their policies.

The Vilnius meeting amounts to a political signal that a new center of gravity has evolved within Euro-Atlantic organizations regarding policies in Europe's eastern neighborhood. The United States and the New Friends of Georgia can together form a critical mass for shaping strategy and policy toward Georgia and in Europe's East.
