
Problems in the South Caucasus cannot be resolved without Russia - Solana

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Fifteen EU ambassadors headed by EU High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Javier Solana have completed a two-day visit to the region of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict.

During the visit Solana held a working meeting with Sergei Bagapsh, the head of the unrecognized republic of Abkhazia.

Before the meeting, the Abkhazian leader's press secretary, Alkhaz Cholokua, said: "If Mr. Solana is able to influence Georgia on the withdrawal of troops from the Kodor Gorge and conclusion of a ceasefire agreement, he will be able to promote the negotiations."

He added that "talks are possible only after Georgia resumes the implementation of the earlier accords, including the 1994 Moscow agreement, which provides for the withdrawal of all Georgian troops from the Kodor Gorge, and the signing of the ceasefire agreement." Mr. Cholokua said that Abkhazia would not change its course, and that Russia remained the main guarantor of regional stability.

After meeting with Mr. Solana, Mr. Bagapsh said: "There is no alternative to the Russian peacekeepers in the region. Their replacement with any other troops will not be discussed with anyone... If Georgia wants them out of its territory, we will do everything for them to remain in Abkhazia."

The negotiating process in the conflict zone stalled several years ago. In the meantime, Georgian officials have agreed to talk with their Abkhazian counterparts as representatives of an independent country.

After the meeting, Mr. Solana stressed that Russia must be involved in the settlement of the Georgian-Abkhazian conflict. He said he did not see any possibility of resolving the conflict without Russia, and called Russia a key player in the peace process.

At the same time, he expressed the confidence that the EU will also play a constructive role in the settlement, and said that the situation in the region would be discussed again at the Russia-EU summit in Khanty-Mansiysk (scheduled for July).

Another significant statement came from George Baramidze, the Georgian deputy prime minister and minister on European and Euro-Atlantic integration: "Georgia is ready to sign a ceasefire agreement with Abkhazia if it is guaranteed by the European Union."

To buttress his position, he said that earlier agreements without an effective guarantor had resulted in the loss of Gagra, and deprived Georgia of Sukhumi; it also lost control over the main part of Abkhazia.

"We are not going to repeat the mistakes of our predecessors," he said. "We are ready for constructive dialogue both with the Russians and the separatists. We want to carry out our peace plan, which primarily entails the introduction of neutral and genuinely peace-oriented European and international peacekeepers, and decent, safe and unconditional return of refugees."

"We are not going to bow to separatist ultimatums. Georgian troops will be stationed where they should be - on Georgian territory. We are not going to ask the separatists or their patrons for permission. Unlike Russia and the separatists, Georgia is not violating a single treaty," he said.

What should be expected of the visit of EU bigwigs to the troubled region? One of the consistent features of Georgia's conflict with Abkhazia and South Ossetia are loud statements and provocations, which sometimes result in a loss of life, made for the benefit of foreign countries. They are almost always more indicative of the current state of affairs than they are productive. Visits by high-ranking guests like Mr. Solana, however well intentioned, can only pour more oil on the flames. Paying attention to Georgian and other regional politicians may trigger off another round of provocations and inflammatory rhetoric. Considering that these incidents involve the military, young nationalists and the police, there is a real danger that the situation in the region could change for the worse.

Will Mr. Solana's visit help bring the sides closer together? A whole raft of problems prevent Georgia and Abkhazia from starting negotiations. Possibly the most serious is that the Georgian president has staked his reputation on the restoration of Georgia's territorial integrity. Neither the general public nor the political elite in Abkhazia will agree to even formal unification with Georgia, fearing that it would pave the way to new restrictions on the republic's autonomy and the return of a considerable number of Georgian refugees. A non-military EU presence in the conflict zone is not likely to resolve these issues.

Georgia also has major internal problems to address. When Mr. Solana met opposition leaders on national television, Shalva Natelashvili, the leader of the Georgian Labor Party, made a sensational request. The Novosti-Gruzia new agency reports that he asked for a political asylum for his family.

"The country is in the grip of tyranny; the secret services are running the whole show, and it is not even possible to dream of democracy," Mr. Natelashvili said during the prime time show. He said that he needs asylum for his family and the families of his colleagues, while he and his supporters will remain in Georgia to continue the struggle.

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