

Russia and Georgia: a resumption of talks with no prospect of a breakthrough

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Russia's deputy foreign minister, Grigory Karasin, and the Special Representative for Relations with Russia, Zurab Abashidze, met for talks on 14 December in Geneva. These have been the first direct official talks between representatives of the two countries since the Russian-Georgian war in 2008. The two politicians declared that dialogue in this format would continue and that it would cover issues linked with economic relations, including Russian investments in Georgia and the return of Georgian wines to the Russian market.

Commentary

- It should not necessarily be expected that this resumption of dialogue will lead to a political breakthrough in bilateral relations in the foreseeable future, which would result in the resumption of diplomatic relations. Russia and Georgia are divided by fundamental differences over the question of the status of Abkhazia and the South Ossetia (Moscow recognises their independence, whereas Tbilisi – along with almost the entire international community – considers the two territories to be its own provinces occupied by Russian troops) and by the fact that Georgia is seeking integration with the Euro-Atlantic structures. Bearing this in mind, the two parties limited the agenda of their meeting to economic and social issues. This does not, however, diminish the importance of the talks.
- Georgia's prime minister, Bidzina Ivanishvili, had already announced an improvement in Georgia's relations with Russia during his electoral campaign. After he came to power following the election on 1 October this year, he made several symbolic gestures, including his announcement that Tbilisi would not boycott the Winter Olympics in Sochi in 2014 and the establishment of the post of a representative for relations with Moscow. Russia did not respond to those gestures, which provoked Ivanishvili to make a public declaration of his disappointment. This may mean that he overestimated the anti-Russian rhetoric of President Mikheil Saakashvili and expected that a change in power in Tbilisi alone would contribute to a normalisation of relations between Russia and Georgia.
- Moscow expected (and still expects) the new Georgian government to completely change its policy and, above all, to commit to the cessation of the use of violence

towards Abkhazia and the South Ossetia. This was stated in a straightforward manner by the secretary of the Russian Security Council, Nikolai Patrushev, as he announced that co-operation with Georgia would be possible only if Tbilisi took the first “genuine steps” towards a rapprochement. In the optimum scenario, according to Russia, Tbilisi should take, inter alia, the following measures: repeal the law relating to occupied territories, agree to the Russian military’s land transit to the base in Gyumri in Armenia, and resume the Moscow-Tbilisi railway connection through Abkhazia which has been closed for over 20 years. The new Georgian government has signalled its readiness to introduce only a small correction of its orientation, above all in the verbal and symbolic sphere, for example to change the name of the Ministry of Reintegration or to rearrange the Museum of the Soviet Occupation of Georgia.

- In the immediate future it seems realistic that Moscow and Tbilisi will co-operate on specific issues, for example with regard to regular flights between Russia and Georgia or on lifting the embargo on exports of Georgian wines to Russia. Such co-operation has occurred in recent years (Georgia withdrew its veto on Russia entering the WTO, charter flights were launched and land border crossing opened), however, the two parties have now demonstrated more openness to it.