
EU gives glimmer of enlargement hope for South Caucasus states.

By Andrew Rettman
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EUOBSERVER / BRUSSELS - EU member states have agreed to insert subtle pro-enlargement wording into so-called action plans governing future relations with South Caucasus countries Georgia and Armenia, as regional tensions simmer over Georgian police action in the breakaway region of Abkhazia.

The EU action plans - set to be adopted in October - are now likely to carry the phrase that "The EU takes note that [these countries] have expressed their European aspirations" with member states' ambassadors finally coming to agreement after "some discussion" on Thursday (27 July).

The meaning of the wording is open to debate, with a Finnish EU presidency official saying "It's not that sensitive. I mean we are not talking about enlargement. It's semantics. You can ponder whether the aspirations refer to EU membership or European values in the metaphysical sense."

But diplomats from the South Caucasus states are reading the text as a step toward ever-closer EU integration with a potential target of membership 10 to 15 years from now. "This simply means that Armenia respects European values in the political and economic sphere," an Armenian diplomat said. "But membership is our ultimate goal."

Western European public opinion has turned against enlargement, especially in the Netherlands and France, following the no-votes on the EU constitution last year.

Ukraine is currently battling to get the phrase "the EU recognises the European aspirations" of Kiev into its draft partnership agreement with the EU for 2007 and beyond. Commenting on the South Caucasus wording, an EU diplomat said "That's not any commitment, but it's the minimum the EU could do."

The draft action plans also allow Georgia and Armenia the option to formally "align themselves" with "some" future EU statements on common foreign and security policy topics, despite objections from the French ambassador that this could lead to cherry-picking and loss of coherence on EU foreign policy issues.

Azerbaijan - the third South Caucasus country currently negotiating an action plan with the EU - was not included in the "aspirations" and foreign policy alignment discussion because it did not request to have either clause in its action plan text.

The South Caucasus is an important energy route for future gas and oil pipelines from the Caspian Sea basin to the EU, with a so-called "trojka" of high-level European Commission and EU presidency officials planning to go to the region to conclude the action plan deal in October.

Abkhazia shooting stops

Meanwhile, the Georgian ambassador in Brussels - Salome Samadashvili

- said shooting has stopped in the Kodori Gorge in the breakaway Georgian region of Abkhazia, but added Georgian police officers on Friday captured five more rebel fighters and will stay in the area "for some time."

Georgian police entered the gorge on Tuesday to unseat local militant leader Emzar Kvitsiani and reinstall Abkhazian local government officials after their 12-year long exile in Tbilisi. "Kvitsiani was running the gorge as a personal fiefdom, extorting money and goods from local people," the Georgian ambassador said.

Tbilisi has pledged it remains committed to a peaceful resolution of the Abkhazia conflict, but separatist leaders in the Abkhazian capital of Sukhumi broke off talks with Georgia on Friday while Russian general Valery Yevnevich - who has "peacekeeping" troops in the zone - has warned his soldiers will fire back if attacked.

Armenia and Azerbaijan are monitoring the situation, with Baku giving full support to Tbilisi's "anti-terrorist operations" on its own "sovereign territory." The EU has not so far officially reacted to the Kodori operation - which left one woman dead - but Brussels is "concerned" about potentially worsening instability in its Black Sea neighbourhood.
