

State Secretary and Deputy Foreign Minister Grigory Karasin's interview with TASS News Agency

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Question: Mr Karasin, earlier you had a meeting in Prague with the Georgian Prime Minister's special representative for relations with Russia, Zurab Abashidze. How did the meeting go? What issues were raised at the meeting?

Grigory Karasin: The meeting was constructive and open. We discussed practical issues and some political aspects of our relations. As is known, problems of fundamental nature between Russia and Georgia still remain. These problems are fairly complicated, and are primarily connected with Abkhazia and South Ossetia. However, they were not the subject of our discussions in Prague. Those problems are dealt with at the Geneva discussions on the South Caucasus. The next meeting in that format is due in late March, and this is where we will discuss all that in detail.

Mr Abashidze and I summed up the major results of 2017, and agreed that they look rather impressive. Thus, mutual trade grew by 34 per cent. Russia has become Georgia's second largest trade partner: we buy two-thirds of Georgia's wines and sell them in the Russian market.

There are also very good results in the area of transport. Work is currently underway to expand the Verkhny Lars border checkpoint. I think it will considerably simplify the procedure itself and, crucially, it will increase the number of vehicles passing through the checkpoint. Air transport also posted some positive changes.

One of the results of 2017 became a significant increase in the number of Russian nationals visiting Georgia as tourists reaching about 1.4 million people.

Question: Was the implementation of the 2011 Russian-Georgian Agreement on customs administration and trade monitoring discussed at the meeting? Apparently, there is a misunderstanding between the parties on this issue.

Grigory Karasin: There was a heated discussion on the implementation of the customs agreement. Indeed, it follows from a number of public statements made by the Georgian and Russian sides that they interpret the content and the wording of the document differently. Therefore, today we had to review the text of the document and agree on the fact that whatever interpretations might be, the main thing is to start properly fulfilling all the clauses of the document.

As for Russia, we are completing our procedures and will make a report to the Government, which will be followed by signing a respective contract with SGS, the Swiss company that will ensure the monitoring of cargo within the framework of the document's implementation.

Question: Did the talks cover the issue of the agreement between the Russian Federation and South Ossetia on incorporating some South Ossetian military units into the Russian Army, the agreement that was approved the other day by the Federation Council? Tbilisi earlier voiced concerns over the agreement.

Grigory Karasin: We spoke briefly about that agreement at the initiative of the Georgian side. I am confident that there is no urgency about it since the agreement was signed in pursuance of the broad treaty between Russia and South Ossetia. It is aimed exclusively at enhancing the defence capabilities of the young republic and presents no threat to anybody. We will continue this work, especially in view of NATO's increased activities in Georgia.

Question: And for the record, regarding NATO – what does Moscow think of the close cooperation between Tbilisi and the North Atlantic alliance? Do you think Georgia can join NATO in the near future?

Grigory Karasin: We see the United States and NATO stepping up their activities in Georgia. I will not give the numbers but weapons supplies have noticeably increased. We see the transformation of Vaziani into a modern training centre for Georgia's regular army. It is a cause for concern for us and our neighbours in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Regarding the possibility of Georgia joining the alliance, let us not run ahead of time, let us remain optimistic. Russia, for its part, will continue work to ensure that out-of-region military and political blocs do not approach our borders and aggravate problems which already exist with our neighbours.

Russia and Georgia should develop bilateral relations with a positive agenda in mind.

Question: You said earlier that as soon as Tbilisi is ready to restore diplomatic relations in the light of new realities, Moscow will immediately react positively to this. Are there any positive signals from the Georgian side today?

Grigory Karasin: We are not inclined to simplify the situation. We still do not have diplomatic relations. And judging by unfolding events, it is hard to believe that these diplomatic relations, severed by Georgia in 2008, will be restored soon. Nevertheless, we continue dialogue and we are ready to give open and objective assessments of the situation in the region, including through the lens of our bilateral relations.

Question: If you will allow me, a few questions about Ukraine. Kurt Volker, the U.S. *Special Representative* for Ukraine, called earlier for a prompt return of Russia to the Joint Centre for Control and Coordination (JCCC) of Ceasefire in Donbass. When might Russian officers resume activities at the JCCC and what does the date depend on?

Grigory Karasin: We are in favour of ensuring normal guaranteed conditions for our military's work and stay at the JCCC. Such conditions were not provided despite Russia sending four notes via diplomatic channels. Apart from that, the Joint Centre must have a mandate, that is, a prescribed and approved procedure for execution of documents and arranging their effects; in a word, a document that would determine and guarantee the presence of the Russian military at the centre.

So far, we haven't had any response from Kiev. I think we are entitled to demand that normal civilised conditions be provided for our representatives. We also think it necessary for Lugansk and Donetsk to be represented there. This is an important condition.

Question: How would you comment on Kurt Volker's statement that Russia has done "absolutely nothing" for the settlement in Donbass?

Grigory Karasin: In this case, we are talking about a serious domestic Ukraine conflict, and it would be very unfair to accuse us of doing nothing to settle it. We were, in fact, the initiators of the Minsk agreements. Our President Vladimir Putin spent 17 hours discussing the document back then. We are also actively engaged in the Contact Group and the Normandy format. But everything will ultimately depend on Kiev's ability and readiness to build bridges with Donetsk and Lugansk, to start dialogue with them, and the key thing – to fulfill the obligations contained in the Minsk agreements. I think Kiev will be unable to hide behind new schemes and formats. There is an awareness in the world that Kiev is actively avoiding volitional positive solutions.

Question: Is it possible to hold a meeting of the Normandy format nations' foreign ministers on the sidelines of the Munich Security Conference on February 16?

Grigory Karasin: Yes, work is underway on holding such a meeting but it is too early to confirm it.