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European Monitors Must Head into Abkhazia, South Ossetia

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Is deployment of the European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) in Georgia the beginning of the end or the end of the beginning of Russia's occupation? All we can say with confidence today is that the arrival of the EUMM animates two vital steps. First, it enables the return home of at least some people displaced by Russia's August attack on Georgia. Second, it sets the stage for Russia to fulfill its unequivocal obligation to withdraw its forces to their prewar positions. Beyond this, the road is fraught with mudslides, sinkholes and—western diplomats beware—no doubt a few landmines.

Last Wednesday, the EUMM began operations with a staff of over 250, including 200 monitors with police and military police credentials. German diplomat Hansjorg Haber heads the Mission. Haber has conflict management experience in Lebanon and many of his staff members gained experience in tough spots like the Balkans; a few have even served before in Georgia.

The EUMM will mount patrols from field offices in Tbilisi, Gori, Poti and Zugdidi. On their first day, the unarmed EU Monitors mounted 14 patrols. They are here to monitor implementation of the EU-brokered agreements of August 12 and September 8, and to enhance stability and confidence on the ground.

On the human level, visible European presence in the so-called security zones, which the Russians established on Georgian land adjacent to the Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, will encourage people to return to what little is left of their homes.

"If the Europeans and the Georgian Police are in place," Giuli Kasradze of Ergneti told *The Guardian's* Luke Harding, "we will go back."

Harding writes that residents of the Russian-held territory just south of South Ossetia say, "The militias burned down houses belonging to ethnic Georgians, kidnapped civilians and stole cattle."

"The Russians are not doing anything to stop this," said Givi Goligashvili near the village of Garejvari.

There are only 200 European monitors, but they will bring more peace than the Russian army has afforded in the areas it controls. The EU patrols are prerequisite to reintroduction of the Georgian police and implementation of Georgian Government rehabilitation plans.

Moreover, if the EUMM ever gets into Abkhazia and South Ossetia, just a handful of monitors would deliver greater security than the so-called Russian peacekeeping forces have afforded in years.

Considering whether the EUMM will gain access to Abkhazia and South Ossetia brings us straight to the strategic level.

Make no mistake—under the August 12 and September 8 agreements, Russia agreed to withdraw its forces to pre-August 7 lines by October 10. That means that all but the peacekeepers who were in those territories before the war must leave. Furthermore, says the EU mission statement, "the EUMM

shall provide civilian monitoring of parties' actions, including full compliance with the Six-point Agreement and subsequent implementing measures throughout Georgia.” Except for Russia and Nicaragua, everyone understands that “throughout Georgia” includes Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Nonetheless, Haber told *Reuters* on October 1, “We do not expect to be allowed to go there soon.” Indeed, Moscow has deftly shifted focus away from Abkhazia and South Ossetia and toward discussion of whether it will even withdraw from the so-called security zones by October 10.

On the eve of EUMM deployment, Russian peacekeeping force spokesman Vitaly Manushko said that the Europeans could patrol only “up to the southern border of the security zone.” However, the next day, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev said, “We will do everything on time.”

On the ground, EUMM monitors passed into the so-called security zones after brief conversations at Russian checkpoints. Haber told *Reuters* that the Russians committed to remove the checkpoints, “but we do not have the timeline yet.”

It will not be easy. The Russians will push and shove—diplomatically and on the ground in Georgia—to cast their withdrawal from the so-called security zones into doubt.

They will use Friday’s car bomb blast in the South Ossetian administrative capital of Tskhinvali to heighten the doubt.

The potential trap for the EU is to fall into anxiety and negotiation over the so-called security zones. Then—whether on October 10 or later—when the Russians withdraw from the so-called security zones, the West sighs in relief and forgets about Russian occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, which is the real issue.

If that happens, Moscow can sweep all matters to do with the two Georgian territories it occupies into the ill-starred Geneva talks set to begin on October 15.

To avoid that fate, EUMM must find the stamina and courage to seek access to Abkhazia and South Ossetia—repeatedly and visibly—in accordance with its mandate. With that, its service in Georgia will mark the beginning of the end of Russian occupation.

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