

On Shores of Lake Geneva: Integrity or Partnership with Aggression?

David J. Smith*

Russian occupation forces withdrew from parts of Georgia last week in partial fulfillment of their obligations under the ceasefire agreements of August 12 and September 8. In violation, the Russian army remains in Akhagori, Perevi and Upper Abkhazia. Europe offered mixed reactions. Washington mumbled that it will make an assessment this week. Now the question is whether the west will make constructive use of an international conference set to begin in Geneva this week or allow that meeting to become a diplomatic broom with which to sweep Russian aggression against Georgia under the carpet.

The agreements negotiated by French President Nicolas Sarkozy required Russian forces to withdraw by October 10 from areas adjacent to the disputed Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to the lines they held before the August 7 invasion.

On October 8, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev told a conference in Evian, France, “that by midnight today the evacuation of Russian troops will be complete.”

On October 10, Javier Solana, European Union High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy, hastened “to announce that the EU Monitoring Mission patrols have confirmed that the Russian armed forces have completed their planned withdrawal.”

On the ground in Georgia, however, French Foreign Minister Bernard Kouchner said, “Not everything has been achieved. The Russians have left most of the territory, but they remain in Akhagori and Perevi.”

Kouchner did not mention Upper Abkhazia, perhaps signaling willingness to accept that, though Russian forces did not occupy this area before August 7, because it is in Abkhazia, it is a legitimate subject for the talks envisaged in the agreements.

Akhagori, the French foreign policy chief indicated, is quite another matter.

In response to Kouchner, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said, “Akhagori is within South Ossetia’s borders so the [ceasefire] plan does not cover it.”

Actually, Akhagori is in the Georgian Region of Mtskheta-Mtianeti. To believe otherwise, one must resurrect old Soviet maps—which, of course, is precisely what Moscow wants to do.

Akhagori is inaccessible from South Ossetia. To reach it, one must drive south, out of South Ossetia, then east on the Georgian-controlled East-West highway, then north. To eliminate this telltale inconvenience, Russian soldiers are now building an East-West road across rugged mountains to provide a makeshift link between South Ossetia and Akhagori.

What to do?

Though Kouchner had the integrity to speak frankly about the Russian forces that remain in Georgia, his diplomatic solution is feeble. “That is why we will continue talks in Geneva,” he said.

Do not expect much there other than Russian rhetoric—the Geneva conference will be a bust because that is what Moscow wants.

The conference is co-sponsored by the United Nations, the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe and the EU. Russian manipulation hobbles the first two; the third is divided over pursuit of a prospective partnership agreement with Russia.

EU members like Sweden, Poland and the three Baltic countries warn against premature return to business as usual.

Other EU members, such as Germany, Italy and Spain, crave the benefits of turning a blind eye toward Russian aggression. For them, a solution is to sweep the matter under the carpet of a technocratic conference.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and OSCE Chairman in Office and Finnish Foreign Minister Alexander Stubb will join Solana and Kouchner to inaugurate the Geneva talks. Then, one EU official close to the conference arrangements said at a Brussels press conference, the conference will “start by being very practical and bottom-up...to allow us to find the solutions to concrete problems” such as refugees.

The conference concept is wrong. The matter is not to provide shelter, food and blankets to the people chased from their homes by Russian-backed ethnic bullies. The Georgian Government, the UN and a panoply of well-experienced private organizations are already doing that.

The matter to discuss in Geneva is how the refugees became refugees and how they can go home to their regions of Georgia in security and dignity. It is not a bottom-up technocratic discussion; it should be a top-down political discussion.

Meanwhile, the Russian delegation will divert attention by quibbling over the conference mandate. They will hold hostage any possible substantive progress to seek some international acknowledgement that the Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia are the equals of sovereign countries.

The real work of the conference will be carried out in the press gallery.

With America lost at sea, only sustained high-level EU political participation can turn the Geneva conference toward success.

After launching the Geneva talks, Solana and Kouchner will skip to Brussels for the EU Summit which must decide whether to insist upon a meaningful conference and upon the integrity of agreements or to look away and pursue a partnership with aggression.

*David J. Smith is Director, Georgian Security Analysis Center, Tbilisi, and Senior Fellow, Potomac Institute for Policy Studies, Washington.