EU Scores Victory in Georgia Prisoner Release

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ZUGDIDI, Georgia — The European Union secured the release of a Georgian army veteran from jail in the Russian-backed rebel Abkhazia region in a rare gesture of goodwill between foes.

EU diplomats escorted Malkhaz Kordzaia over the Inguri River dividing government-controlled Georgia from the breakaway Black Sea territory, after 20 months in jail and more than a year of quiet lobbying by Brussels for his release.

Kordzaia had been convicted on weapons charges, but Abkhaz authorities linked him to the downing of a Mi-8 helicopter carrying Abkhaz civilians during the region's 1992-93 war to split from Georgia. The son of a mixed Georgian-Abkhaz marriage, he was never charged over the helicopter attack.

EU diplomats hailed Thursday's release as a confidence-building step after the 2008 Georgia-Russia war shattered what few ties remained between Georgia and Abkhazia, a lush strip of coastline once a playground of Soviet elite and Georgian vacationers.

EU South Caucasus envoy Peter Semneby, who took part in the handover, said the EU was still working on another release. A third prisoner they had hoped to free died last December.

"Any step of this kind is an important one in creating an atmosphere of confidence and showing the will of the parties to address difficult issues," Semneby said.

A Georgian assault on the country's other rebel region, South Ossetia, in August 2008 triggered a devastating Russian counterstrike that drove Georgian forces from their last footholds in both South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

The brief war followed years of baiting and rising tensions after the 2003 Rose Revolution brought President Mikheil Saakashvili to power. He set Georgian sights on NATO membership, to the ire of Moscow.

A UN monitoring mission withdrew from Abkhazia after the war in a dispute over sovereignty, after the Kremlin recognized the sub–tropical region and South Ossetia as independent states.