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Russia and Georgia Resume Direct Dialogue With Official Meeting in Minsk, Moscow Says

By Reuters

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A Russian deputy foreign minister and a Georgian special representative for relations with Moscow met in Minsk on Thursday, marking the resumption of direct dialogue between the two countries, the Russian Foreign Ministry said.

The neighbors have had no diplomatic relations since fighting a brief war in 2008. Tbilisi rejects Moscow's recognition of the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, which Georgia considers parts of its territory.

Mikhail Galuzin, a Russian deputy foreign minister, met on Thursday in the Belarusian capital Minsk with George Zurabashvili, Georgia's first deputy foreign minister, who was appointed the prime minister's special envoy for relations with Moscow last month.

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"A thorough exchange of views took place on current issues of bilateral cooperation, with an emphasis on trade, economic, cultural and humanitarian cooperation," the Russian Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

The two officials discussed regional security, the statement said, adding that "a number of practical agreements were reached."

Once the former Soviet Union's most democratic and pro-Western successor state, Georgia has drawn closer to Russia under the ruling Georgian Dream party, government critics say.

With a population of some 3.7 million, Georgia is officially an EU candidate country, but Brussels says it has backslid so far on democratic reforms that its candidacy exists "in name only."

Authorities have cracked down on opposition politicians and former members of the ruling elites alike, jailing several key figures. The country's Constitutional Court is currently hearing a lawsuit filed by the government seeking to ban the main opposition parties outright.

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