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## **Consultations Set to Begin to Replace Russian Peacekeepers in Abkhazia, as Part of Peace Plan that Includes Free Economic Zone**

**Germany, France, Britain, UK rebuke Russia, demand reversal of its decisions that breach Georgia's sovereignty**

President Mikheil Saakashvili is urging the United Nations, EU and the international community to review the role of Russian peacekeepers in Abkhazia, arguing that they have compromised their neutrality and become a part of the conflict in the territory. He said Georgia aims to replace the peacekeepers with an international civilian police force. The call comes after a series of unilateral Russian actions in Abkhazia that threaten Georgia's sovereignty and that have drawn sharp rebukes from across the international community.

"Russia's military presence in the conflict zone [of Abkhazia] is becoming a risk factor," President Saakashvili told a meeting with foreign ambassadors in Tbilisi. "We plan to start intensive negotiations with friends and partners about the expediency of the Russian peacekeeping contingent's presence in the conflict zone."

President Saakashvili said the aim of the consultations would be to increase the role of the international community in peacefully resolving the conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

This latest move came as a part of a sweeping new peace proposal for Abkhazia and South Ossetia which includes unprecedented autonomy for the territories. Georgia is preparing plans to create a Free Economic Zone (FEZ) in the Gali and Oчамchire districts of Abkhazia.

President Saakashvili said such a zone should be policed by an international civilian force. He added that Georgia will reveal details of the plans for the FEZ later this week.

Meanwhile, the international community continued its outcry against a series of illegal unilateral Russian actions in Abkhazia, including an April 16 instruction by Russian President Putin that establishes legal ties with the separatist regime—effectively making Russia the first foreign country to recognize the illegal government in Abkhazia.

NATO, EU, France, Germany, Britain, and the US, among many other organizations and nations, have demanded that Russia revoke or not implement the order. Also this month, a Russian MIG-29 fighter jet shot down an unmanned Georgian reconnaissance aircraft over Georgian territory. On Friday, a Russian Foreign Ministry official, Valery Kenyaikin, escalated tensions further by warning that Russia would use "military methods" in Abkhazia.

In Berlin, German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier said that Georgia will become a NATO member and criticized Moscow. "Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty is beyond all question," he added.