MEDIATION FOR PEACE

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Russia to hold Syria ‘congress’ in Sochi despite Syrian opposition’s concerns

By Georgi Gotev

The seventh round of Syria talks in Astana ended on Tuesday (31 October) with an agreement between the three “guarantor states” (Russia, Iran and Turkey) for a “congress of national dialogue” to be held in Sochi, despite reservations from the Syrian opposition. EURACTIV reports from Astana.

The Kazakh government is offering Astana as a neutral venue and “a natural home” for peace negotiations on Syria. The Astana talks are no substitute for the Geneva peace talks but seek to supplement them by making progress mainly on humanitarian issues.

EU is not represented at the Astana talks. Around the table are the three guarantors of a nationwide Syrian ceasefire regime, the Syrian government, the Syrian opposition represented by a dozen of opposition groups, plus the observers, namely the UN, the USA and Jordan.

Turkey backs the opposition while Russia and Iran support Bashar al-Assad’s regime.

Iran’s delegation was led by Deputy Foreign Minister Hossein Jaberi Ansari, Russia’s by the country’s Special Envoy for Syria Alexander Lavrentiev, and Turkey by Deputy Foreign Minister Sedat Onal.

The Syrian Ambassador to the UN, Bashar Jaafari, represents the Syrian government while the chief of General Staff of the so-called Syrian Free Army is heading a delegation of the armed opposition, including groups such as Ahrar al-Sham, Jaish al-Islam, the Sultan Murad Brigade, the Al-Sham

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army and the Central Division.

The US was represented by Acting Assistant Secretary of State David Satterfield. UN’s special envoy for the Syria crisis Staffan de Mistura did not come this time and the UN was represented by Milos Strugar.

At a previous Astana meeting on 4 May, the guarantor countries had agreed to establish “de-escalation zones” in Syria. The zones would cover the city of Idlib and certain parts of Latakia, Homs, Aleppo and Hama as well as Damascus, Eastern Ghouta, Daraa and Quneitra. The fourth one in the Idlib province was agreed at the sixth meeting in September.

The main issues of the seventh round were humanitarian access, demining, exchange of prisoners and the dead and search for the missing persons.

But diplomats told EURACTIV that the main prize for the Russians was to obtain a “congress of the Syrian people” to be held under their auspices. Reportedly, Moscow’s initial idea was to hold the congress in their military base of Hmeimine, but it eventually agreed to host it in the Black Sea resort city of Sochi.

Russia’s Lavrentiev was quoted as saying that his country may host talks between Syrian groups next month, with the goal of working on a new constitution for the war-battered country.

A two-page Joint Statement by the guarantor countries says the Russian proposal to hold the congress would be discussed with the UN-led Geneva process, without further details. The statement also emphasises the need for the conflicting parties to release detainees, hand over dead bodies and help identify the missing persons.

It also “underlines the necessity” to increase humanitarian aid to Syria, and “to provide rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian access to all those in need”.

In successive press conferences, the Syrian government expressed support, while the armed Syrian opposition criticised the agreement.

Bashar Jaafari took a strong aim at Turkey, saying that its troops and tanks had entered the Syrian territory with the help of Al-Nusra, internationally acknowledged as a terrorist organisation. He called this action “an act of aggression”. He later said that the military presence of America was “also an aggression”.

Asked about the proposed congress of the national dialogue, Jaffari said the government in Syria was open to any possibilities for dialogue and that the initiative was timely.

The leader of the opposition delegation, Colonel Fateh Hassoun, slammed the push for a congress in Sochi, arguing that such initiatives were in fact a substitute for UN-led Geneva peace talks.

ORDINARY PEOPLE PUT HOPES IN EU

Syrian businessmen staying in the same hotel said they didn’t expect anything from talks that include the participation of Assad’s regime. Asked what be the right way to achieve peace, one of the businessmen said there was a need for the big powers to take serious action on the ground.

“Today Syria is for us occupied by more than one power. Today we are sitting here in a five-star hotel, but children are dying five kilometres from Damascus because of hunger. What are these talks doing about them? Nothing. This has been going on for six years, chemical weapons, all kinds of terrible deaths. What are they waiting for? “

Asked what he meant by “the big powers”, he said that Russia was a country occupying Syria, and his country was actually under two powers: Russia and Iran. As for the US, he said that since the days of Obama, this country would take no action.

Asked about the EU, he said that the bloc could indeed play a critical role “if they wanted”. He said the Syrian people could no longer accept Russians, Americans and even some of the Arab nations but the EU would be “someone who can be trusted”.

“Syrians could not tolerate foreign presence on the ground as part of a deal, but some sort of EU presence would be accepted”, he said, declining to give his name.
Kazakhstan is ready to continue its role as a facilitator of international dialogue and mediation, Yerzhan Ashikbayev, Kazakhstan’s deputy foreign minister, said as he briefed reporters in Astana on Tuesday (31 October) and answered many questions about the ongoing Syria talks, North Korea and eastern Ukraine.

“We really believe in the power of dialogue,” the diplomat said, recalling that his landlocked country with such powerful neighbours as Russia and China was deeply committed to this form of foreign policy.

“If countries, if conflicting parties feel better here, in the windy climate of Astana, they are welcome to come […]. If Kazakhstan can be of any practical assistance to achieving this noble goal, we are ready,” Ashikbayev said.

As Ashikbayev met with journalists in the country’s foreign ministry, a nearby hotel in Astana hosted the seventh round of talks in the so-called “Astana process”, which supplements the Syria talks in Geneva with a more focused humanitarian dimension.

The talks have in the past few months focused on establishing “de-escalation zones” in Syria. The meeting was organised by the so-called “guarantors”: Russia and Iran, who support Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s regime, and Turkey, which backs the opposition. The present talks are aimed at finalising a plan for four de-escalation zones across eight of Syria’s 14 provinces.

EURACTIV.com will report separately from the Syria talks in Astana.

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Astana after a press conference expected later on Tuesday.

Asked about the Syria talks, Ashikbayev said his country had no particular economic interest in that region and had accepted the mediation for humanitarian reasons.

“Our principal position when we accepted this proposal from the guarantor states was to ease the suffering of civilians on the ground, and so far the Astana process has been successful in easing this suffering. We reiterated from the very beginning that the Astana platform is a supplement to the Geneva peace talks.

“We really are concerned about the security situation. We are ready to continue our efforts along those lines,” he said.

Asked by a journalist who voiced the frustrations of the Syrian opposition, Ashikbayev recalled the saying that “bad peace is better than any conflict”.

“What the Astana process did achieve is de-escalation zones, alleviating the suffering of thousands and thousands of civilians, paving the way for humanitarian access, and gradually moving the country to a peaceful settlement, preparing the ground for future discussions at the Geneva platform.”

He added that with 25 opposition groups present at the talks “you cannot expect everyone to be happy”.

“If you compare the situation in Syria a year ago and now, if you compare the media reports, a year ago we were talking about barbaric killings, about destroying cultural heritage sites, now the media talks about how to better access civilians with humanitarian aid,” Ashikbayev said.

He also mentioned the Kurdish issue and many other dividing lines, adding: “But the situation on the ground drastically changed. The humanitarian situation has improved. This is a major outcome.”

**NUCLEAR TALKS**

The diplomat was assailed with questions about whether his country was prepared to mediate also in the North Korea nuclear programme and perhaps host nuclear material from that country as part of a deal.

Kazakhstan inaugurated a Low Enriched Uranium Bank on 29 August, backed by the IAEA. Although diplomats avoid commenting about its possible purpose, the idea for such a facility was born during the crisis with the Iranian nuclear programme.

Ashikbayev said the real question should be whether the international community was ready for such talks, adding that as far as Kazakhstan was concerned, it would be “theoretically” ready to provide a platform for negotiations.

“But a lot of conditions should be met before we can even think of having those talks. There are so many parties involved, and it’s first and foremost up to them, to neighbouring states, to those parties concerned, if they think that uranium placed in Kazakhstan is suitable, comfortable for such a dialogue, I think my government would be positive,” he said.

EURACTIV asked about Kazakhstan’s position on the Iran nuclear deal, which is now challenged by US President Donald Trump. The diplomat took the opportunity to recall his country’s past mediation efforts in the case of the Iranian nuclear programme crisis.

“Kazakhstan invested a lot in the normalisation of the situation with Iran,” he said. After a crisis in the talks, Kazakhstan hosted two rounds of talks in 2013.

“Kazakhstan was also contributing at the very latest stage, by supplying 60 tonnes of natural uranium to Iran, in the very last days before the agreement was implemented,” he said, adding that his country believed in the “great benefits” of the deal. With regard to the US, he only stated that “each country has its own views”.

“Iran is our partner, Iran is our neighbour across the Caspian Sea, any instability across our border could affect us,” he said.

Iran is not a direct neighbour but Ashikbayev jokingly said his country used the old Soviet terminology of “near neighbourhood”. However, he warned against stereotypes which suggest that Astana’s foreign policy is doing Moscow’s bidding.

Asked by EURACTIV about Kazakhstan’s mediation in the case of eastern Ukraine, Ashikbayev explained that this case was sentimentally different, as it was a “family affair” that was of major concern for his countrymen.

“Our mediation capacity is growing. You asked about Ukraine: it’s not only a conflict in proximity to our borders but it’s also a conflict that has some domestic repercussions for Kazakhstan because our country is home to some four million ethnic Russians and 300,000 ethnic Ukrainians. And of course, the deterioration of relations between these two brotherly nations is not a desirable scenario for Kazakhstan,” he said.
A flurry of diplomatic activity continued in Astana on Wednesday (1 November), marked by the visit of the King of Jordan, Abdullah II, who was awarded a prize for fighting against nuclear proliferation.

President Nursultan Nazarbaev, who had been this vast land's ruler even before Kazakhstan emerged from the Soviet Union as an independent state, received the King of Jordan with full honours, including a presidential guard of some 100 elite soldiers who sang the national anthem.

As Nazarbayev and Abdullah II went into a meeting room for their talks, the press watched and listened to the protocol statements via a video channel. Nazarbayev praised his guest for having continued the role of his late father, King Hussein (deceased in 1999), with whom Nazarbayev had held friendly relations.

“You continued the role of your father as an ambassador of peace to the world. Kazakhstan tries to play the same role”, Nazarbayev said. He reminded that Kazakhstan was “one of the leaders of the anti-nuclear movement”, and that he himself closed the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site as the country gave up nuclear weapons inherited from the Soviet period.

Indeed, on 29 August 1991, Kazakhstan closed the Semipalatinsk site as the country banned nuclear weapons on its territory (the Soviet weapons positioned there could have made it the world's fourth largest nuclear power, after Russia, the US and France).

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The nuclear tests in Semipalatinsk caused a huge environmental disaster. After its closure, other nations also stopped nuclear tests.

Kazakhstan holds an annual anti-nuclear conference and Nazarbayev said he had established a prize to be awarded to those leaders who distinguished themselves in the fight against nuclear proliferation.

“You are the first to receive this prize. We hope you will continue to play an important peacekeeping role in the region”, Nazabayev told King Abdullah, reminding that Jordan plays an important part in the Astana Process, the Syria peace talks taking place in the capital of Kazakhstan.

“The fact that your country hosted a million of Syrian refugees and your government spends so much money for that must be appreciated by the entire world”, he added.

The King of Jordan repeatedly called Nazarbayev “my dear brother” and paid tribute to the family friendship. The international community appreciates the role Kazakhstan plays in international affairs, he said, adding: “If it wasn’t for your leadership, I think the world would have been a much more difficult place”.

King Abdullah received the inaugural Nazarbayev Prize for a Nuclear-Weapons-Free World and Global Security. The Jordanian monarch was decorated for his input into “regional stability, global security and steadfast stance against war and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction”.

Later on Wednesday, the two leaders made statements to the press but did not take any questions. Nazarbayev said that the issue of Qatar had been discussed as well.

Saudi Arabia led a six-nation effort to cut ties with Qatar on 5 June. The nations in question – Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Egypt, Yemen and the Maldives – also banned all travel to and from Qatar and, with the exception of Egypt, ordered their citizens living in the country to leave.

Speculation is rife as to whether Kazakhstan, a Muslim nation, would be willing to mediate in the Qatar dossier.

In the corridors of the Presidential palace, journalists spoke to Kazakhstan’s Foreign Minister Kairat Abdrakhmanov, who had announced the results of the Astana talks the night before. Kazakhstan only provides the framework for the talks, without being one of the official stakeholders (the Astana talks are centred around the “guarantor states” – Russia, Iran and Turkey).

**UNIVERSAL MEDIATOR?**

Asked if Kazakhstan was becoming a universal mediator for different hotbeds of tension, Abdrakhmanov said:

“We are. We mediate in any of the post-Soviet [frozen conflicts]: Karabakh, Transnistria, Georgia. In any of them, we play some role. Sometimes we are approached.”

EURACTIV asked if the Ukraine peacemaking effort needed some fresh initiatives. The process has stalled despite the Minsk I and II agreements signed in September 2014 and February 2015 in the capital of Belarus. In his answer, the Kazakh diplomat emphasised that these agreements have no alternative.

“It depends on all the countries engaged in the implementation of Minsk. Minsk is a priority. The implementation of the Minsk agreements is the minimum of what we should do”, he said.

A couple of hours later, journalists met with the Chairman of the Senate of the parliament in Kazakhstan Kassym Jomart Tokayev.

Asked about Ukraine, Tokayev, who previously served as director general of the United Nations Office in Geneva from March 2011 to October 2013, said:

“Ukraine is difficult. I’m personally not optimistic about the possibility of solving this issue very soon”, the politician said.

“I think we need additional efforts. First of all, we need to make the Normandy format more active. We also need to use other channels of negotiations and to bring together the conflicting sides, the conflicting views, the conflicting parties, because what is happening inside Ukraine, as well as outside Ukraine, is abnormal”.

He added that parliamentary diplomacy was playing an increasingly important role. “We will be assisting to make this whole situation healthier and safer”, he said.

Kazakhstan, home to 4.5 million ethnic Russians and about 300,000 Ukrainians, was shocked by the Ukraine crisis. Nazarbayev was keen to mediate and helped arrange the first meeting in Minsk in August 2014, and then “Minsk II” in February 2015.

EURACTIV asked Tokayev about his country’s relations with the EU. But he stressed that Kazakhstan’s assessment of the EU was “quite positive”. Asked what he thought about the many problems the EU is facing, he briefly replied: “We don’t think the EU will collapse”.

EURACTIV also asked Tokayev about Kazakhstan’s ideas for reforming the UN and in particular the Security Council (UNSC), where the USA, Russia, China, France and the UK have a permanent seat. He said his country supported the idea of reform by introducing a rotation in the UNSC, so that Kazakhstan can also sit at the table. “But we acknowledge this is a very difficult matter”, he added.
The ruling elite in Astana acknowledges that continuous efforts are needed to tackle corruption – recognised as “systemic” – and bolster press freedom in Kazakhstan. “But it’s a very subtle balance between democracy and stability”, local politicians argue.

This “subtle balance” between democracy and stability has turned Kazakhstan into an increasingly sought-after mediator in conflict resolution. “Our external successes are largely based on our internal stability,” said Zurema Shaukenova, the director of KAZISS, a think tank, who met with a group of international journalists on Thursday (2 November).

The country’s decision to close down the Semipalatinsk nuclear test site and abandon its Soviet-time nuclear arsenal have greatly contributed to enhancing the country’s international image, added Sanat Kushkumbayev, deputy director of KAZISS.

Other reasons for the rising trust in Kazakhstan are its predictable foreign policy, the good relations it has with its neighbours and lack of hidden agenda, he said.

The country’s political stability in an uncertain environment was brought up also the day before when journalists met Chairman of the Senate of the Kazakh parliament Kassym Jomart Tokayev.

Asked about concerns regarding the country's fledgling democracy, human rights, press freedom and corruption, Tokayev appeared

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surprisingly straightforward.

Tokayev, a veteran diplomat, said more than 10,000 civil servants have been tried for corruption over the last 15 years, making the fight against corruption a top priority for the country.

"Corruption exists in all countries of the world, at different levels, and it also exists in Kazakhstan, we are not denying it. We are taking the matter very seriously and this is why the fight against corruption is part of the institutional reform in our country," Tokayev said.

Compared to "other countries" which he didn't name, he said the fight against corruption in Kazakhstan was making quick progress. "This is not a temporary campaign, this is a systemic issue and an integral part of the modernisation of our country," he said.

He added that President Nursultan Nazarbayev, who is also the founder of post-Soviet Kazakhstan as a sovereign nation, was deeply committed to institutional reform, starting with judiciary reform and granting judges more freedom and autonomy.

A draft law in this regard, authored by the president himself, will soon be presented to the Senate, Tokayev said.

Countries of the former Soviet Union and its satellite states have inherited an authoritarian judiciary system in which judges have little independence. The reforms have been slow and painful across this geopolitical space.

In Kazakhstan, national wealth has been better preserved than in most other ex-Soviet states and the living standards have steadily increased, which is confirmed by everyday Kazakhs, who often say their lives have never been better. Most of the people EURACTIV spoke to weren’t interested in politics and generally trusted their country’s leadership.

‘VERY SUBTLE BALANCE’

"Kazakhstan has done a lot, we have political parties. Yes, we have the ruling party which dominates the parliament but the Senate is non-partisan. We have no parties here in the Senate, all of them are represented in the lower chamber, the Madjlis, over there, we have three political parties, they freely compete for elections of parliament," the Senate chairman said.

He added there are more than 4,000 NGOs active in Kazakhstan and there is freedom of the press.

"At the same time, we need to think about stability, but not at the price of curbing or undermining democratic values," Tokayev said and added:

"But it’s a very subtle balance between democracy and stability. This kind of balance has been sustained here in Kazakhstan quite successfully and this policy will of course have a follow-up."

"I don’t think Kazakhstan should be regarded as a non-democratic country. Kazakhstan should be regarded first of all as a young democracy, which wants to follow this mainstream, and which gained a lot of achievements in its democratic development. Democracy is a process, it’s not an ultimate goal, it’s a very hard process of self-development in which Kazakhstan has done a lot," he concluded.

Journalists insisted on the media freedom issue, highlighting the fact that Kazakhstan ranks low in various press freedom indexes.

"While being abroad I read newspapers, in Eastern Europe as well as in other states. I wouldn’t say we are somehow less in terms of freedom of the press," said Tokayev. He added he was aware of the “prejudice” about a lack of press freedom in his country but hoped the prejudice would fade away when more foreigners come to visit Kazakhstan.
Kazakhstan is searching for a post-Soviet identity somewhere between its traditional Kazakh and Turkish cultures, Europe and multiculturalism, diplomats have told EURACTIV. But Europe has been slow to forge closer ties with the young country, despite its strategic location and potential.

Why is Azerbaijan considered European and Kazakhstan not? Where are the real boundaries of Europe? Is Kazakhstan within its borders? These are some of the questions foreign diplomats in Astana ask themselves.

The famous phrase “Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok” was not coined by Vladimir Putin, who used the expression several times, but Charles de Gaulle, the founder of the Fifth Republic in France. Mikhail Gorbachev also made frequent references to it. But not everyone understood the concept – at least not in the same way.

Imperial Russia, followed by the Soviet Union, have “Europeanised” to a great extent the huge territories stretching from the Urals to the Kamchatka peninsula, facing Canada. In that sense, “Europe” is a cultural feature that extends beyond geography.

Take Kazakhstan in Central Asia. Diplomats nowadays say that the former capital Alma Ata, 200km west of the Chinese border, offers a striking example of what it means to be part of “Europe from Lisbon to Vladivostok”.

“Alma Ata is strikingly European, and the contrast is even bigger at the border with China,” said one European diplomat in Astana, who spoke to EURACTIV on condition of anonymity.

Europe has been extremely inconsistent in defining the principles behind its own borders. For example, the island of Cyprus is part of the continental shelf of Asia. That is why in the United Nations, Cyprus is part of the Asian group. But Turkey is

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considered European, although only 10% of its territory is on the European continent.

Undoubtedly, more than 10% of the territory of Kazakhstan could be considered European. Strangely, Kazakhstan is not a member of the Council of Europe although it fulfills the two criteria of this European organisation – being “wholly or partly located in Europe” and being a country “whose culture is closely linked with the European culture”.

This geographical misunderstanding was at the foundation of an EU plan to forge closer relations with its eastern neighbourhood, called the Eastern Partnership. When the initiative was launched in 2009, Europeans decided that a number of countries would qualify because of their geography – Belarus, Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia, Armenia and Azerbaijan.

But, for different reasons, three of these countries lost interest in the Eastern Partnership, and one of them – Ukraine – subsequently lost part of its territory because Russia saw the plan as hostile.

Today, diplomats argue there was little ground to substantiate that Azerbaijan would qualify better than Kazakhstan for a special relationship with Europe. Moreover, Astana was able to conclude a unique “Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement” two years ago and has basically proved that it is possible to develop good relations both with the EU and Russia.

The question “is Kazakhstan a European state?” was recently raised by the publication of a programme by the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute & Silk Road Studies, authored by Svante E. Cornell and Johan Engvall.

Cornell is a familiar face in Brussels where he has participated in public events organised by the European Policy Centre (EPC), a think tank.

In a 70-page paper, the authors take the view that when the EU was defining its neighbourhood policy, Kazakhstan’s centralised government structure and top-down approach to reforms limited its European ambitions.

But they argue that those times are now gone and that from 2015 onward Kazakhstan embarked on a modernisation program focused on the transparency and efficiency of government.

It is not only geography that makes Kazakhstan a European state, argue Cornell and Engvall. They point out that Kazakhstan does not view itself as an area distinct from Europe and Asia, but as embodying the meeting space between the two continents, drawing on both.

“A closer look at Kazakhstan’s development since independence highlights the important European aspects of its statehood. Kazakhstan is a secular state with a civic conception of the nation based on an inclusive, citizenship-based understanding of membership in the national community. That in itself makes it highly compatible with European norms and principles,” the two authors write.

Peter Burian, EU Special Representative for Central Asia, was quoted by The Astana Times on 30 October saying that the Union welcomes the new atmosphere in Central Asia as conducive to regional cooperation.

Indeed, following the death of Uzbekistan’s leader Islam Karimov in 2016, his successor Shavkat Mirziyoyev is pursuing a less autocratic path, seeking to reform and liberalise the country. Difficult regional relations are improving as a result.

“Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan managed to increase bilateral trade by almost 30% within a couple of months. We welcome these developments and we know how important regional and neighbourly cooperation are for stability,” the EU representative said.

He added that he saw good prospects for a strong relationship.

“I’m pleased that we have created a very solid foundation based on common interest and shared values. I hope this foundation is further strengthened. I see the potential of the region in its strategic location being a link between Europe and Asia. I see already a growing potential for Kazakh investors to be active in the European market. Kazakhstan is moving very comprehensively in all key areas of the reform process, provided all these reforms are fully implemented,” Burian said.

He made it clear that this time, the EU was careful not to antagonise Russia.

“The EU doesn’t have to have and doesn’t want to have any exclusive kind of space, but rather share the cooperation with others, avoiding geopolitical games in the region. And I hope that the regional and interregional cooperation helps the region assume the rightful position it deserves,” Burian concluded.