

Lavrov, EU leaders focus on bilateral ties



Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, left, shares a word with Swedish counterpart Carl Bildt during a press conference at the EU Council building in Brussels, Monday Oct. 19, 2009.

(AP Photo/Virginia Mayo)

BRUSSELS (AP) — Talks between the European Union and Russia are on track to conclude a new partnership and cooperation agreement to replace the one that expired last year, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Monday.

After meeting with EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana and Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt — whose country currently holds the EU's rotating presidency — Lavrov said efforts to reach a new "strategic partnership" deal with the EU were going well.

Lavrov said he and the EU officials had agreed to press negotiators "to seek compromises and solutions that would be based on a balance of interests."

He said other issues discussed were Russia's proposal for a binding trans-Atlantic security treaty.

The talks in Brussels also focused on the upcoming EU-Russia summit, which will take place next month in Stockholm, an EU spokeswoman said. Leaders of the two sides hold formal meetings twice a year, alternately in Russia and in the EU.

The upcoming summit is expected to focus on securing Russian energy supplies

for Europe.

Russia and the EU are linked closely

by commerce, although Europe has grown wary of relying on Russian energy sup-

plies after Moscow in January halted natural gas shipments through Ukraine over a dispute over payments with the government in Kiev. The two-week cutoff which left millions of Europeans without gas in the dead of winter.

Lavrov offered no direct guarantee against an interruption in gas supplies to Europe this winter, blaming Ukraine for the cutoff in January and suggesting it is largely up to the EU to ensure uninterrupted supplies by helping Ukraine.

"We consider it more important that the European Union engage in guaranteeing the continuity of supplies," he said. "I am counting on the fact that we all learn the lessons from the hardships caused last year."

Greece, Cyprus say want to see Turkey in EU

NICOSIA (Reuters) — Greece and Cyprus said on Monday they supported Turkey's bid to become a full member of the European Union and needed its help to end the island's decades-old division.

The division of Cyprus has defied mediation for decades, remaining a key obstacle to Turkey joining the EU and a source of tension with Greece, its neighbor and partner in NATO.

"This is an issue which we can either solve and therefore (will) unite us, or keep us divided," newly elected Greek Prime Minister George Papandreou told journalists in Nicosia, Cyprus's ethnically split capital.

An architect of closer ties with Ankara, Papandreou said Turkey had every right to be a member of the European Union, but needed to meet entry requirements.

Turkey has had a large military presence in northern Cyprus since 1974, when it invaded the north in response to a brief Greek-inspired coup. The island is now in the EU represented by Greek Cypriots, but EU membership



Greece's Prime Minister George Papandreou (L) and Cyprus' President Demetris Christofias hold a news conference in Nicosia October 19, 2009.

(Reuters/Andreas Manolios)

is suspended in the north, a breakaway Turkish Cypriot state recognized only by Ankara.

Turkey has been urged to open its ports to Cyprus, which it does not recognize, and help resolve the division of the island.

"Turkey has obligations it must comply with or it will not be able to continue on its accession course without obstruction," said Cypriot President Demetris Christofias.

Turkey began EU entry talks in December 2005 but their pace has been slowed by delays in Turkish reforms and by the Cyprus issue.

"I'll always be sincere about the problems which separate us and those we need to solve. Among those the biggest one is the continued occupation of Cyprus," Papandreou said.

Cyprus's Greek and Turkish communities launched peace talks in September 2008. They are trying to unite the island under a federal umbrella and any agreement will be put to a referendum.

Kosovo, Macedonia agree full diplomatic ties

SKOPJE (AFP) — Kosovo and Macedonia have agreed to establish full diplomatic ties after resolving a long-running border dispute, the Macedonian government said on Sunday.

The agreement was signed by the Macedonian foreign minister in Skopje on Saturday evening and by his Kosovan counterpart in Pristina a few hours later.

Macedonian Foreign Minister Antonio Miloski said the two countries hoped for "stronger ties, based on common respect for national sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity."

The announcement comes after the two governments ratified a deal over a border dispute.

Media reports in Macedonia said Skopje and Pristina disagreed over the border demarcation that runs close to the Macedonian villages of Debalde and Tanusevci.

The border between the two former Yugoslav territories was agreed upon in 2001 between Belgrade and Skopje when Kosovo was still part of Serbia.

Kosovo's Prime Minister Hashim Thaci also said this new deal would make it easier for Kosovans who own land in Macedonian territory to cross the border.

Macedonia recognized Kosovo's independence in October 2008, six months after ethnic Albanian authorities there declared it had split from Serbia.

It has so far been recognized by 62 countries, including the United States and most of the European Union countries.



Macedonian Foreign Minister Antonio Miloski, pictured in March 2009.

(AFP/File)

But Macedonia refused to establish full diplomatic relations with Kosovo until the border dispute was resolved.

Miloski said that in the document Pristina had recognized the constitutional name of the Republic of Macedonia, which is disputed by Greece.

Athens has blocked global recognition of Macedonia under this name since 1991, arguing the name refers exclusively to a part of its own territory.

Macedonia was admitted to the United Nations in 1993, two years after independence, under the provisional name "The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia".

Serbian Foreign Minister Vuk Jeremic condemned the agreement as "deplorable" and warned the two countries' of unspecified consequences.

Countries bordering Serbia can only discuss border issues with the government in Belgrade, he said.

But in Washington a statement issued by State Department spokesman Ian C. Kelly said the United States "warmly welcomes the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Republic of Kosovo and the Republic of Macedonia, as well as the successful completion of the demarcation of their shared border."

"We commend the leadership of both countries for their resolve in taking a significant step toward Euro-Atlantic integration by establishing good neighborly relations and enhancing regional stability."

Spain says Cuba's Castro committed to reform

HAVANA (Reuters) — Spain's foreign minister met with Cuban President Raul Castro on Monday and said the communist leader affirmed his commitment to economic reform and expressed his desire to continue improving relations with the United States.

Castro also promised to pay about \$450 million in back payments to Spanish companies doing business on the cash-strapped Caribbean island, said Foreign Minister Miguel Angel Moratinos.

Moratinos said Castro told him during a 2007 visit of his plans to reform

Cuba's state-dominated economy and repeated his commitment to change on Monday.

"I have found in President Castro a commitment to reform, to advance the process of reform in the whole country, to improve the economic situation of Cuba," he said. "Today he reiterated his will to continue the process."

Since replacing his ailing older brother Fidel Castro as president last year, Raul Castro has initiated a handful of reforms aimed at making Cuba's economy more productive but has been criticized for moving too

slowly.

Moratinos said Castro had good words about U.S. President Barack Obama and was pleased at recent Obama-initiated talks on migration issues and the possible resumption of direct U.S.-Cuba mail service broken off since 1963.

"They hope to be able to improve ... relations with the United States," Moratinos said of the Cubans.

He said Castro "had personally committed and given instructions" that Spanish companies awaiting payments for about \$450 million in goods and services would be paid.



Honduras crisis talks stall again

The latest talks on the political crisis in Honduras have stalled with both sides at odds over the fate of ousted President Manuel Zelaya.

A spokesman for Zelaya, who was exiled in June, said the interim government's proposals were insulting.

Interim leader Roberto Micheletti accused Zelaya's side of promoting "an agenda of insurrection".

The stumbling block is whether Zelaya can return to the presidency ahead of November's elections.

Zelaya, who slipped back into Honduras in September, is insisting he be allowed to serve out his remaining weeks in office before the presidential election on 29 November.

The interim government has proposed that the country's Supreme Court and Congress should submit official proposals to the negotiating commission on Zelaya's possible reinstatement.

The Supreme Court was the body that ordered Zelaya to be removed from office in June, arguing that he had violated the constitution. Congress overwhelmingly backed this.

Negotiator Victor Meza, speaking for Zelaya, said the interim government was obstructing progress.

"We're not going to meet again until we have a constructive and serious proposal (from Micheletti)," Meza said.

Talks, while not broken off, were stalled, he said.

"Unfortunately, in recent days, ex-President Zelaya and his followers have promoted an agenda of insurrection in the country," a statement from the interim authorities said.

A pro-Zelaya television channel and radio station, which had their offices closed and equipment confiscated, went back on air on Monday after the measures were officially rescinded.

Zelaya was sent into exile on 28 June after trying to hold a vote on whether a constituent assembly should be set up to look at rewriting the constitution.

The vote was deemed in violation of the constitution by the Supreme Court.

Zelaya's opponents accused him of trying to lift the current ban on presidential re-election to remain in office - a charge he has repeatedly denied.

(Source: BBC)

Nicaraguan high court allows Ortega reelection bid

MANAGUA (AFP) — The constitutional panel of Nicaragua's Supreme Court struck down a constitutional ban on President Daniel Ortega seeking reelection to a second consecutive term.

"The Constitutional Branch deems unenforceable" a constitutional provision disallowing reelection to a second consecutive term by the president and vice president, justice Francisco Rosales said on announcing the ruling.

Ortega in July said he would be seeking a referendum to change the constitution to allow him to seek reelection in 2011.

Nicaragua's constitution, amended since 1995, allows only one presidential term at a time and a maximum of two non-consecutive terms.

The constitutional panel's ruling needs to be ratified by a majority of the 16 Supreme Court justices before it can be enforced, Rosales said.

Six supporters of Ortega on the constitutional panel voted to strike down the election provision after the president appealed the measure to the Supreme Court on Thursday.