
NATO CHIEF ON PARTNERSHIP WITH SERBIA; ITS TIES WITH RUSSIA

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Stoltenberg told Serbian journalists on Wednesday that it was "up to Serbia to decide" and that NATO "respects its neutrality."

"It is important that each country chooses its own way, we respect when countries want to become members, but also your decision not to be a part of the alliance, because you are a sovereign state," Stoltenberg said.

According to him, NATO appreciates its partnership with Serbia, while he personally is looking forward to continuing cooperation also with incoming Prime Minister Anne Brnabic.

Speaking about Serbia's decision to conduct joint military exercises with Russia, Stoltenberg said that the organization he heads "respects the decisions that Serbia makes."

"When I was prime minister of Norway, we had ties with Russia, although we had been a NATO member since 1949, we held exercises. I do not think that Russia should be isolated," said Stoltenberg.

In the conversation with Serbian reporters today, the Russian-Serbian Humanitarian Center (RSHC) in Serbia's southern town of Nis featured as one of the topics. Asked whether the granting of diplomatic status to Russian humanitarian workers there was "a red line," he replied:

"Again, Serbia decides on whom it will give this status. What's important to me is that I am looking forward to Serbia hosting a civil emergency situations exercise with NATO next year. That's something we often organize with partner countries."

Stoltenberg also spoke about NATO's 1999 bombing of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (Serbia and Montenegro).

He said that he was "not in NATO at that time" and therefore "cannot talk about depleted uranium and ammunitions used" - but said that NATO was "now in Kosovo to help stabilize and avoid violence."

Stoltenberg also said that NATO is "aware of tensions in the Balkans, and that violence and war could occur there."

"This must be prevented in the future, and therefore we welcome partnership with your country, while membership of surrounding countries is important to us in order to avoid unpleasant situations from the past," Stoltenberg said.

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