

## **EMBASSY OF GEORGIA**

**For:  
US SENATE  
COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS**

**“RUSSIA AND EUROPE” - hearing before the Department of State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs Appropriations Subcommittee**

**March 7, 2017**

### **Russia’s meddling in Georgia – a brief history**

Georgia was under Russian colonial occupation between 1801 and 1991, with prior independent statehood of more than 3,000 years. For a brief period between 1918 and 1921 Georgia reclaimed independence, only to face massive Soviet invasion and another 70 years of occupation.

In 1991, as the Soviet Union collapsed, Georgia regained its independence and began a state-building process. Georgia’s stated aspirations to European and Euro-Atlantic integration and its commitment to democratic progress and economic growth have since then provided a counterpoint to the new-imperialist intentions of the Russian Federation to keep Georgia and other former-Soviet states under its direct political influence and domination.

US support has been critical to Georgia’s ability to continue on its path toward progress, despite regional challenges. In return, Georgia has been America's closest ally in a tough neighborhood. For a small nation, we make an outsized contribution to international security efforts with an allocation of more than 2% of our GDP to defense spending. We are also a committed partner in the fight against terrorism. We remain the largest per capita contributor to NATO’s Resolute Support mission in Afghanistan with 870 Georgian servicemen. Georgian soldiers stand shoulder-to-shoulder with the US and allies in the most dangerous parts of the world, 32 Georgian soldiers lost their lives in the fight against terrorism.

The US-Georgia alliance remains vital in the face of ongoing Russian provocations, which have been going on for decades. The first demonstration of Russia’s imperialist intensions – in what it likes to refer to as its “near abroad” – came shortly after Georgia’s independence, when Russia sponsored separatist movements in Georgia in the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia in 1991 and the Abkhazia region in 1992. Situations in both regions escalated to armed hostilities, where Russian-backed separatist forces and so called ‘Russian mercenaries’ defeated the newly-formed weak and fragmented Georgian military forces, resulting in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of ethnic Georgians from those regions.

Throughout the 1992-1993 conflict, the ethnic Georgian population was subject to atrocities including acts of murder, torture, rape and pillage. The UN Secretary-General-mandated fact-finding mission, which visited Abkhazia, Georgia in 1993, described various episodes of the

conflict where such acts occurred on a large scale.<sup>1</sup> To escape the atrocities, the entire ethnic Georgian population of approximately 260,000 was forced to flee from the Abkhazia region by 1994.<sup>2</sup> However, an estimated 35,000 Georgians remained in the region.

The population that remained in the Abkhazia region soon was subject to forced passportization. As described by the EU-mandated Independent International Fact-Finding Mission on the Conflict in Georgia, “after the ethnic cleansing of Georgians in these two regions in early 1990s, *en masse* distribution of Russian passports to the remaining civilian population represented a deliberate and well-constructed policy aimed at establishing a pretext of the military intervention of the Russian Federation on the territory of Georgia [in August 2008]”.<sup>3</sup>

### **Russia-Georgia War in August 2008 and security situation on the ground after 8 years**

The Russian military aggression and invasion of Georgia in August 2008 brought a new wave of massive ethnic cleansing of the Georgian population from the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. The widespread violence against Georgian civilians included acts of killing, torture, rape, looting and burning of people’s houses.<sup>4</sup> All Georgian villages in the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, Georgia with a total ethnic Georgian population of approximately 35,000 were burned down and destroyed in order to preclude any return of the expelled population.

August 12, 2008 Ceasefire Agreement between the Russian Federation and Georgia calls for the withdrawal of Russian troops to the places held prior to the outbreak of hostilities. However, Russia continues to occupy both Georgian regions through the presence of approximately 10,000 Russian military and security personnel and the so-called FSB border guards. The Russian occupation forces have no legal mandate and are in stark violation of international law. There is neither host country consent from Georgia to have Russian troops on Georgian soil, nor any agreement that would permit Russian military presence. Moreover, the Russian state has direct control over both regions given that top decision-makers in both the Tskhinvali and Abkhazia regions are Russian citizens.

In addition to the personnel presence, Russia has illegally built and fortified military infrastructure in the occupied regions. In August 2010, the military base located in the Abkhazia region was fortified with the S-300 type surface-to-air (anti-aircraft) missile system. In December 2010, Russia installed a multiple-launch rocket system artillery battalion (so-called “Smerch” units) at the Tskhinvali base. In January 2011, this base was further reinforced with the tactical-operational missile launch system “Scarab B,” also known as “Tochka U,” with an operational range of 120 km, and capability of being equipped with conventional and nuclear warheads.

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<sup>1</sup> U.N. Sec. Council, Report of the Secretary-General’s Fact-Finding Mission to Investigate Human Rights Violations in Abkhazia, Republic of Georgia, ¶ 17, U.N. Doc. S/26795, (Nov. 17, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> See UNHCR data at: <http://www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/page?page=49e48d2e6>.

<sup>3</sup> IFFMCG Report, Volume II, at 187.

<sup>4</sup> See for example HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH, UP IN FLAMES: HUMANITARIAN LAW VIOLATIONS AND CIVILIAN VICTIMS IN THE CONFLICT OVER SOUTH OSSETIA (Human Rights Watch 2009), at 127-194; AMNESTY INTERNATIONAL, CIVILIANS IN THE LINE OF FIRE: THE GEORGIA-RUSSIA CONFLICT (Amnesty International Publications, 2008), at 34-45.

Despite the explicit calls of the international community to end the occupation and withdraw its military forces<sup>5</sup> as called for by the EU-mediated Ceasefire Agreement signed after the August 2008 war, Russia has intensified both military build-up and grave human rights violations in the occupied regions. For instance, in 2015, the illegal military base in the Tskhinvali region was further fortified with modernized missile systems, such as the ballistic missile system “Iskander,” multiple BM-21“Grad” rocket launchers, and the surface-to-air missile system “Strela 10,” as well as tanks and UAVs.<sup>6</sup>

### **Creeping Annexation and efforts of GoG**

First in summer 2009 and then in April/May 2011, the Russian occupation forces started the installation of razor wire fences and other artificial obstacles along the occupation line in the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions; the process has further expanded since January 2013 and continues today. The total length of the trenches across the Abkhazia region’s occupation line is around 48 km. The total length of artificial barriers along the occupation line in the Tskhinvali region is around 52 km, affecting around 200 local families, by leaving their houses behind the new barriers. Some of them were compelled to flee their places of residence, thus creating a further wave of IDPs.

In parallel, Russian occupation forces are installing so-called “border” sign posts along the occupation line in the Tskhinvali region. As a result of the so-called “borderization” process, local families have found themselves cut off from agricultural lands, potable and irrigation water systems, religious sites and cemeteries; they are deprived of their fundamental rights, including the rights to free movement, education, and social and health services. This situation creates an imminent threat of further waves of displacement. The arrest of Georgian citizens for so-called “illegal border crossing,” kidnappings for ransom, robberies, partial murders, attacks on civilians, discrimination against ethnic Georgians and violations of the Georgian central government-controlled air space by Russian helicopters and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) continue to pose challenges for the State Security Service of Georgia (SSSG). Since 2010, 915 civilians have been detained for so called “illegal border crossing.”

In a further grave violation of the August 2008 Ceasefire Agreement, Moscow signed the so-called “treaty on alliance and strategic partnership” with the Sokhumi occupation regime on 24 November 2014 and the so-called “treaty on alliance and integration” with the Tskhinvali occupation regime on 18 March 2015. Although similar Russian-led initiatives have been undertaken in the past, these documents represent a factual annexation of Georgia’s occupied regions, as they provide for full integration into the social, economic, administrative and - importantly - military and security institutions of the Russian Federation. Among others, the documents envisage the de-facto abolishment of the segment of the Georgia-Russia border in the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions, whereas the occupation line with the rest of Georgia will be further fortified. The documents also envisage: (1) the creation of “common security and defense space;” (2) the establishment of a Joint Coordinating Centre for law enforcement agencies, imposing the FSB system on both the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions; (3) the

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<sup>5</sup> These include: NATO, EU, Council of Europe, Resolutions of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly, U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, Lithuanian Seimas, Czech Senate, Romanian Senate, etc.

<sup>6</sup> Available at: [http://dyn.function.mil.ru/news\\_page/world.htm?objInBlock=25&blk=10323761](http://dyn.function.mil.ru/news_page/world.htm?objInBlock=25&blk=10323761)

simplification of procedures necessary for obtaining Russian citizenship; (4) the equalling of pensions and salaries to the equivalent level of allowances for residents of the Russian Federation's Southern District. The document signed with the Tskhinvali region contains certain differences, which speak of full de facto annexation of the region into the Russian Federation. The title – “alliance and integration” – points to the genuine intention and ultimate goal of the document. The occupation regime in the Tskhinvali region confirms this by making explicit the necessity of becoming a federal subject of Russia. The so-called “President” Leonid Tibilov recently announced a decision to initiate a referendum on the integration of South Ossetia into the Russian Federation.<sup>7</sup> Follow-up field “agreements,” which have been already signed or are in the pipeline, will factually turn Georgia's regions into federal parts of Russia.

It is worth mentioning that, in November 2011, then President of Russia Dmitry Medvedev made a statement that Russia's military aggression against Georgia was intended to counter Georgia's NATO ambitions and thus Georgia's sovereign choice to integrate into the Euro-Atlantic community.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, on August 8, 2012, on the fourth anniversary of the Russia-Georgia War, the President of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin confessed that since 2006, Russia had developed a plan to invade Georgia. He also revealed that Moscow had been training militias of the Tskhinvali regime to directly participate in the military operations.<sup>9</sup>

The policy of creeping annexation exercised by Russia against Georgia, coupled with the alarming developments in the region, demonstrate that Russia does not accept the sovereign choice of independent states and is attempting to restore zones of influence in the region.

While advancing its Euro-Atlantic integration, Georgia remains firmly committed to the peaceful resolution of the conflict and the de-escalation of tensions with Russia based on respect for Georgia's territorial integrity. Georgia has taken concrete steps in this direction. In November 2010, Georgia undertook a non-use of force pledge against the Russian Federation, which was further reiterated by the Parliament of Georgia in March 2013. While the international community lauded Georgia's pledge on the non-use of force, Russia explicitly refuses to reciprocate it. In November 2011, Georgia agreed on Russia's accession to World Trade Organizations, thus completely removing the barriers for Russia's membership in the WTO. In February 2012, the Government of Georgia unilaterally abolished the visa regime for Russian citizens. In November 2012, the Prime Minister of Georgia appointed a Special Representative for Relations with the Russian Federation and launched a direct channel with Moscow, thus once again reaffirming the political will to mend economic, cultural and humanitarian ties with Russia. In the meantime, the Geneva International Discussions, co-chaired by the UN, EU and the OSCE, remain the only format for discussing outstanding political and humanitarian issues with the Russian Federation. In February 2014, the Georgian national team participated in the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi, while the Government of Georgia expressed readiness to cooperate with relevant Russian structures on security-related issues.

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<sup>7</sup> Available at: <http://cominf.org/node/1166506480>

<sup>8</sup> Statement of D. Medvedev is available at: <http://www.rg.ru/2011/11/21/prezident-site.html>

<sup>9</sup> Statement of the President of the Russian Federation is available at: <http://www.kremlin.ru/transcripts/16180#sel=30:1,32:21>

The above constructive initiatives have been met with further provocations, the installation of artificial barriers on the territory of Georgia, and steps towards the annexation of the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions. Despite Georgia's tireless efforts at constructive engagement, Russia continues to obstruct agreement on establishing an international security presence in the occupied regions, and for the safe and dignified return of IDPs and refugees.

Russia's efforts to legitimize its occupation of territories of a sovereign state include the illegal "recognition" of the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali as independent states, and furthermore, the coercion of other nations, including through political and financial pressure, to do the same. After failing to achieve progress in this regard at the political level<sup>10</sup>, the Russian Federation has been resorting to other instruments in order to legitimize the so-called "independence" and thus its illegal actions on the ground.

The Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions remain inaccessible for the international community. The EU Monitoring Mission, which is an extremely important instrument to ensure security and stability on the ground, is still prevented from fully implementing its mandate by not being allowed to access the occupied regions. Notwithstanding, the EUMM is the only international mechanism capable of monitoring the situation in close proximity to the occupied regions. The latest report by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs on the Human Rights Situation in the Occupied Regions of Georgia is attached (<http://mfa.gov.ge/getattachment/fe17def2-cd11-48b6-b9ad-d0535e49e6fa/MFA-4-report-2016-fin.docx.aspx>)

In a recent development: Russian occupation regime in Tskhinvali scheduled a referendum on 9 April on changing the name of one of the oldest Georgian regions into the one similar to the federal subject of the Russian Federation. This referendum is a step intended to lay a ground for illegal annexation of the occupied region.

The international society should urge the Russian Federation to respect sovereignty and territorial integrity of its neighbors and comply with its international obligations. The firm stance and consolidated efforts of international society is crucial to prevent another act of annexation in Europe. We appreciate a firm stance of the US State Department on this issues as expressed in the Statement of the Embassy of USA in Georgia. Meanwhile, we remain open for constructive negotiations in the format of Geneva International Discussions. Last year was marked by the restoration of the Gali Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism.

As concerns the relations with our compatriots living in the occupied territories, the ethnic Abkhaz and Ossetians, are an integral part of our common history and future, despite the current artificial barriers. There is no alternative to the return of the IPDs and refugees to their homes and to the full re-integration of all ethnicities into a vibrant society where human rights and individual freedoms as well as cultural and linguistic diversity of different communities are the Georgian State's top priorities.

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<sup>10</sup> Despite Russia's illegal policy, only three states have recognized the so called "independence" of Georgia's occupied regions – Venezuela, Nicaragua and Nauru. Tuvalu and Vanuatu have withdrawn the recognition and established diplomatic relations with Georgia based on the principle of the latter's sovereignty and territorial integrity within the internationally recognized borders.

We firmly pursue the engagement, confidence building and reconciliation process with the people living in the occupied territories. We are offering all benefits which are open to Georgian citizens. We stand ready to offer all the progress we will be having on our development path. The Universal free healthcare, free education, benefits of Georgia's European integration path - Visa liberalization, educational, cultural, scientific programs are available for our citizens residing on the other side of the occupation line. (Main directions of the reconciliation and engagement policy of the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality is attached)

### **Hybrid warfare**

It is worth noting not only the persistence of Russia's efforts to undermine Georgian sovereignty and territorial integrity, but also the nature of those efforts. Since regaining its independence, Georgia has been subject to different forms of unconventional, hybrid warfare. The blackmailing and intimidation has been in the Russia's toolkit. The economic embargo of 2006, energy cuts, cyber-attacks in 2008 and after were parts of Russia's policy to attain its desired political results, to derail Georgia from its sovereign choice of European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

For the last several years, Russian propaganda has become visible and stronger not only in Georgia, but in the wider region. The approach differs not only from country to country, but from region to region, serving the goal it wants to achieve in each location. In Georgia's case Russia is defying and confronting Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic path. It builds on fears and challenges that exist in different societies, creating myths and communicating through different forms of social media, using newly established NGO's or media organizations, like radio "Sputnik", Internet trolls etc.

The Georgian Government has been successful in its strategic communications, through a coordinated approach that dismantles myths. The policy is not fighting propaganda with propaganda, but with truthful information and the policies, that deliver. Last four years have been successful for Georgia's European integration, bringing tangible results for its population, through European instruments, like Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement, the Association Agreement and Visa Liberalization, that will be available for the citizens of Georgia by the end of this month. These deliverables are important to counter Russian propaganda that aims to showing futility of the reforms approximating with European legislation.

We have managed, despite increased propaganda and an open media environment, through effective strategic communications and coordinated information campaigns, to maintain high support for Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic aspirations. According to the recent polls, the Georgian population expressed 73-78% support for Georgia's membership in the EU and NATO.

We have strengthened traditionally emotional support for European integration with knowledge-based support, something that cannot be easily challenged through propaganda efforts. An informed society cannot be easily influenced by misinformation. Coordination of

the Government's activities with civil society (23 NGOs) efforts not only in the capital Tbilisi, but in the most exposed regions as well, is implemented by communication with the most vulnerable parts of society, through information providers, like regional media, municipality workers, teachers, clergy.

We highly appreciate good cooperation with NATO's Center of Excellence on Strategic Communication since the day of its establishment in Riga, as well as with the EU EastStratComm unit in Brussels. We look forward to more initiatives from the US congress.

### **Stronger United States for Stronger Georgia**

To summarize, despite the Russia's vicious efforts, Georgia has persisted on its path toward democratic progress and economic growth. We have made great progress in building strong and effective state institutions, ensuring: a free civil society; free media; free markets; social cohesion; and the rule of law. This past fall, we held free and fair parliamentary elections, cementing our democratic progress. Meanwhile, the 2017 Index of Economic Freedom named Georgia the 13<sup>th</sup> freest economy in the world, ensuring openness and integration into the global market and equal opportunities for all people interested in doing business in Georgia.

We are confident that our political and economic progress will ultimately serve as potent antidotes to Russia's expansionist designs. Moreover, Russia's aggression and occupation of Georgian territories, its attempts to derail us from our pro-western path, made Georgia even more determined to resist Russian domination and pursue further integration with EU and NATO.

Our viability, persistent and resilience could not be achieved without the United States continued and vital support for the last 25 years. This coming April we will be celebrating 25 years of establishing diplomatic relations. During these years the US has been one of the most important economic and security partners of Georgia. The US is the largest bilateral donor, having provided several billion dollars since 1991. This support has always enjoyed bipartisan backing. Since 2009, we have institutionalized our relations and friendship through a Strategic Partnership charter, pledging to further Georgia's democratization, economic development, sovereignty, and territorial integrity.

For the last decade Georgia has become the best example of the American Taxpayers money wisely spent, being the most reliable, consistent, credible democratic ally for the US in a tough neighborhood. We have shown valor and commitment to our American partner during its most difficult times. We have always supported the U.S. in the fight against terrorism contributing to the US and NATO led missions like an ally.

Last year we have signed with US memorandum on the deepening security and defense partnership, committing "to strengthen the self-defense capabilities of Georgia's Armed Forces... improving readiness and supporting a resilient force that is capable of providing its own defense and contributing to that of others", we have successfully launched Georgia Defense Readiness Program. Sustainability and further improvement of these programs and elevation of our security partnership to the new level is of vital importance, as we believe Georgia remains an essential piece of the Euro-Atlantic security architecture, as NATO is seeking to protect its allies from Russia's expansion.

When the cold war ended, and the Soviet empire dissolved, the United States and its allies sought to build Europe whole, free, and at peace. Nowadays, when the empire strikes back and one of the basic foundations of security and peace - respect for national borders - is violated, new transatlantic leadership is needed to fortify and enlarge the alliance. We believe the new administration shall soon develop a comprehensive long-term engagement strategy for the region and Georgia, which will include the strengthening of Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty, improving bilateral trade and investment relationship and supporting the democratic choice of the Georgian people to integrate further with Euro-Atlantic institutions, including NATO. All these measures will make Georgia more resilient and stronger and, we believe that **stronger Georgia is in the United States' interest as much as stronger United States is in Georgia's interest.**

Attachments:

- Quarterly Report of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia on the Human Rights Situation in the Occupied Regions of Georgia;
- Main directions of the reconciliation and engagement policy of the Office of the State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality.