

REMARKS

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OSCE Permanent Council
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- Mr. Chairman, Distinguished Ambassadors, Ladies and Gentlemen.
- It is my pleasure to once again have the opportunity to address you today, and to share my thoughts on how we can continue to move forward with the pursuit of peace in Georgia.
- Much has happened since my last visit to Vienna some seven months ago.
- The pursuit of peace is a difficult endeavor – requiring patience, discipline, cooperation – and most of all trust.
- All of us in this room wish we were further down that road – and my presence here today is meant to add new energy and new commitment to our common objective.
- I would like to begin my remarks this afternoon by expressing my sincere gratitude to the Belgian Federal Government – for the leadership their Chairman in Office has exhibited, and for the tremendous energy they have contributed.
- My government and the people of Georgia appreciate your efforts – and I wish to acknowledge that today.
- Looking to the future – we are clearly operating in a more complex environment – and I daresay, a more tense one.
- I would like to address and discuss these tensions with you – and reflect on what I think our next steps should be.
- For I firmly believe that when things get difficult – we must work even harder. When obstacles appear – we must be more creative. And when problems exist – we must speak frankly and honestly.
- This is the essence of building trust – and it is the key to achieving lasting peace.
- With this in mind, let me turn your attention to the issue that has received a great deal of attention around the world during the past month – and this is the rather visible downturn in relations between my country and the Russian Federation.

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- I do not believe I need to go through a lengthy recital of the unilateral and punitive – I would even say disproportionate steps - that Russia has taken against Georgia in the last month.
- In the first place – we all know the details.
- But moreover, to do so would miss the much larger trend in Russian policy towards Georgia for the past year.
- The latest round is simply more visible, and more dramatic, due to its unprecedented scale and breadth.
- The simple truth is these latest moves are part of a larger strategy to put pressure on many neighbors in our region, including most notably Moldova and Ukraine – whose products and market access have also been systematically limited.
- Today however, I am here to tell you that the path of democratic reform that we have chosen is irreversible.
- Irreversible because it was made by the people of Georgia – and it is my solemn responsibility to continue down that path – for the good of my country and our region.
- Speaking in my official capacity – I can tell you that this latest blockade has created real difficulties for Georgia.
- It has caused us to lose up to 1.5% of our GDP and fully 17% of our export markets.
- It has disrupted a number of our domestic industries and caused financial losses.
- And it has forced us to look for new markets and new suppliers, cutting historic ties across the board.
- I can think of few countries that in the face of such unrelenting pressure would be able to weather this storm.
- Despite the difficulties, despite the damage it has done to countless Georgian families – we are persevering – and indeed we are thriving.
- No one would like to learn how to swim by being dropped in the middle of sea – but that is where we have found ourselves. And we have taught ourselves how to swim.
- This year, despite these onerous measures, Georgia will grow by double digits.
- Despite the disruptions – we will keep inflation in the single digits.

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- And our energy sector, infrastructure projects, and education plans will not be derailed or disrupted.
- I believe the single most important factor that is allowing us to thrive given these conditions is our uncompromising commitment to reform.
- If three years ago pundits referred to Georgia as a failed state – today the World Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, International Finance Corporation, and many others site us as their model.
- If Georgia was once one of the hardest places to do business, today we are a leader in routing out the institutional sources of corruption.
- That is why foreign direct investment is higher than ever – and continuing to grow with vigor and pace, despite the negative propaganda.
- If anyone thought Georgia would crumble as a result of these sanctions – they were mistaken.
- What is clear is that we will endure – we will survive – and together, we will prosper.
- Stepping for just a moment outside my everyday role as Georgia's Prime Minister – I must however share with you my profound concern – indeed my alarm, at the current Russian State policy directed against Georgians living in Russia.
- I can think of few other instances in recent history when an entire class of people – many of whom are longtime citizens of the Russian Federation - were targeted, harassed and persecuted simply because they have the wrong last name.
- I can only express my deep sympathy for those individuals who have been victimized over the last month.
- I am thinking here of Mr. Giorgi Gvichiani – a six time world arm wrestling champion who was brutally murdered in Moscow a few weeks ago.
- Of Tengiz Togonidze who died while being forcibly deported back to Georgia because the authorities refused to give him his asthma medication.
- Of Giorgi Tskipurishvili, a nine year old boy who was separated from his family, and sent back to Georgia alone and terrified.
- And of the more than 1,000 Georgians deported or forced to flee in the last month alone.

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- These are real people – the targets of widespread xenophobia – whose only crime was being Georgian.
- Indeed, I myself spent six years studying in Moscow – a fact that I am proud of.
- However, when I think that now, I could not walk the streets of that city without fear – that I could not study there without the threat of being pulled out of my classroom – and that I could be forcibly deported under deplorable conditions no matter my legal status, it gives me pause and makes me understand that something is terribly wrong.
- Georgia after all is a freedom loving state – composed of individuals who share a set of beliefs commonly identified as European values.
- Here I mean freedom of expression, freedom of worship, freedom of the press, and freedom to go about one’s business unhindered by the peculiarities of ethnic origin.
- Unfortunately, what is happening today demonstrates that these values are not in practice in contemporary Russia.
- Moreover, they are under threat.
- And I believe your reactions – indeed your solidarity and clear response – proves that all of us are at risk – when policies like these persist.
- Let me take this opportunity to express my deep gratitude to the European Union for their statement last week in Luxembourg - and the European Parliament – which just yesterday adopted a landmark resolution concerning these events and the recent escalation in tension.
- It is statements like these, that not only show European solidarity – but also European values in practice - that give me hope that tomorrow, others may not face the same treatment.
- Returning to the main topic of our discussion, I would like to express my agreement with Russian President Vladimir Putin, who recently declared that the only problem between Georgia and Russia is the unresolved conflicts.
- These conflicts are the problem – and in fact they are the major source of tensions in our bilateral relations.
- Where I differ however is in recent characterizations of that problem.
- Specifically, few statements could be more misleading, and more directly incorrect, than the repeated assertion that Georgia is actively preparing to solve these conflicts using force.

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- Nothing could be farther from the truth – we know it and the Russian leadership knows it.
- Because when conflict erupts, there are no winners – and war is never a solution.
- Let me state here once again for the record – as I and President Saakashvili have done on many occasions.
- The Georgian Government – and the Georgian people – have no intention to use force, to spark violence, to conduct provocations – or to do anything that would cause harm to our citizens in order to solve these conflicts.
- No matter where they reside, or what their ethnic heritage is.
- Too much blood has already been shed – too many homes have already been destroyed, and too many lives have already been shattered.
- Here let me pause for just a moment to take stock of history and current events.
- In 1993, ethnic cleansing was committed in Abkhazia – and more than 500,000 people were forced to flee, including more than 280,000 ethnic Georgians.
- Today the population of this area is less than one-fifth its pre-war size – and those who were born and raised there are still not able to return.
- Let us not lose sight of this tragic episode in our recent history, nor of the hopes, dreams and rights of those who have suffered.
- For those brave few who do venture back to the Gali district of Abkhazia, there's an existence characterized by fear and regular abuse of basic human rights.
- I mention these facts because they only provide greater impetus for our collective efforts.
- Together we must work harder to right the wrongs of the past – and to find a peaceful solution that will ensure prosperity and justice for all.
- This is why our position on peace is so firm. And why peaceful resolution is the only option.
- Yet despite our undisputed position, high level authorities in the Russian government continue with their portrayals of Georgia as an aggressive State, ready to unleash violence.

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- One cannot help but ask why Russia is painting Georgia and my government in such stark colors.
- What is their motive?
- What are they trying to achieve by labeling us as an aggressor when our acts, policies and positions speak otherwise?
- Two days ago, three GRAD rockets were fired into the Kodori Gorge by Abkhaz forces who were conducting so-called training maneuvers.
- Thankfully no one was hurt, including our Minister of Interior who was in the village subject to the shelling on a routine inspection of Interior troops.
- We have condemned this provocation – but given the context of Russia’s latest statements – it is of grave concern.
- This is a question we must all consider – as we dedicate ourselves even more diligently to the pursuit of peace.
- Some say that politics is filled with cynicism. I tend to see the opposite, that politics is the practical implementation of hope based on the common aspirations of our people.
- Today, we hope that Russia is not saying one thing – and doing another.
- Warning of war, while actively creating pre-conditions for it.
- Nothing could do more damage to my country, to our people, and to our region, if we allow that to happen.
- We must not stand idle while these constant and destabilizing threats continue.
- Rather, we must respond with a unified voice – and remind our friends of the dangers created by saber rattling and false accusations of war.
- And that is why, once again, I wish to reiterate my willingness and that of my government, to engage in a direct dialogue with members of the Russian government as soon as possible.
- How then do we bring new momentum to our efforts at building peace?
- How do we silence the voices of war and return the voices of reason?
- Quite simply, I think the answer is staring us in the face.

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- It is the very peace plan that this institution universally endorsed almost one year ago in Ljubljana.
- Only now we must implement its provisions and steps.
- For too long we have crossed our fingers and optimistically hoped that the instruments of war, now so pervasive in South Ossetia, would simply disappear.
- Every member of this chamber knows perfectly well that in order for demilitarization to take place, Russia must take back their weapons – from where they came.
- Let us shed our illusions that somehow, the de-facto authorities in South Ossetia will comply with these demands.
- On the contrary, it is their active intention not only to hold onto them – but to acquire even more weapons – as recent OSCE reports show.
- These weapons – which are more visible and widespread than ever – will only leave South Ossetia when Russia decides to take them out.
- And today, I would like to ask Russia to do just that.
- When Russia acts in a concrete, and verifiable manner to demilitarize South Ossetia – we will all say that they are promoting peace.
- When Russia stops the illegal flow of narcotics, counterfeit money, and other forms of contraband – we will all say that they are working to normalize the situation.
- When criminals are arrested and taken to justice, instead of harbored and welcomed, we will all say that Russia is playing a constructive role.
- The people of South Ossetia deserve to live without a climate of fear.
- By implementing what we have committed ourselves to – the OSCE approved peace plan - we can achieve this objective.
- And here I would like to extend my support to the very constructive ideas put forward recently by members of this organization to expand the mandate of the OSCE in South Ossetia.
- Only by strengthening our commitment will we increase the momentum for peace.
- An expanded mandate that increases the number of OSCE monitors, to include the entire Tskhinvali/South Ossetia region is the right step at the right time.

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- Likewise, to reduce tension and counter the growing threats, it is high time that we establish a joint Georgian-Russian-OSCE permanent monitoring presence at the Roki Tunnel.
- It is both ironic and irresponsible that this international border crossing is the only open link today between Russia and Georgia – and it is one without regulation, without rules, without verification, and without inspection.
- Indeed, it is a veritable invitation to those who seek to further destabilize, militarize and benefit from the evils of lawlessness and crime.
- The proposals put forward by the OSCE are concrete– and they are one’s that my government endorses – and that we hope to see implemented as soon as possible.
- Despite the very real obstacles I have just mentioned, I would like to once again welcome the efforts of the OSCE to begin a program of rehabilitation in South Ossetia.
- We are thankful for the generosity that is making these projects a reality.
- And we are pleased that our contribution, already programmed into the 2007 State budget, will make a difference.
- But rehabilitation alone is not enough – we must also build jobs – and create a stable future for the citizens of South Ossetia.
- And here too – we must do more.
- We must increase the scope and scale of confidence building measures between both sides.
- And we must increase the frequency of direct, bilateral contacts.
- Georgia supports the activation of mechanisms that create strong channels for bilateral dialogue – some of which already exist – and some of which we must create from scratch.
- Today, I have the special privilege to announce, on behalf of President Saakashvili, his readiness to meet directly with the de-facto leader of South Ossetia, Mr. Eduard Kokoity in the town of Bakuriani.
- Bakuriani is home to thousands of Ossetians who for centuries have lived in peace and harmony with their neighbors outside the Tskhinvali/South Ossetia district – despite the recent conflict.

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- This step, indeed this new initiative, is intended to create dialogue, build trust, and create a powerful signal that there is no alternative to peace.
- Consistent with this open posture, we support efforts to make the negotiation process more meaningful.
- And we endorse all plans to introduce neutral forces into the region, capable of bringing lasting law and order through police training, and robust exchange of peoples and experiences.
- Changes that would establish meaningful and lasting security guarantees for all.
- We are also encouraged by the very inclusive manner in which our law on restitution has been created.
- Working together with the UNHCR, the OSCE, the Venice Commission, local NGO's and other partners, we have now crafted a model law that includes critical input and feedback from those most affected.
- I believe a specific meeting on the practical implementation of this law, held under the auspices of the OSCE is a logical next step.
- Looked at individually, these may be small steps, but taken together they help fill the void – and rebuild trust.
- In this spirit, I would like to ask the OSCE to convene a special conference on overall implementation of the peace plan – ideally before the next Ministerial – so that together we can bring greater focus, and more concentrated effort towards implementation.
- I believe this step could mark a turning point in our shared efforts – and that this organization is ready and able to take this important step.
- For let us not forget what is at stake – and we are trying to achieve.
- We are trying to put an end to a cycle of violence – more than a decade of separation – and more than a generation of isolation.
- Georgia is ready to move forward with all these measures – in order to create a constructive atmosphere where discussions on the final status of South Ossetia can be more easily addressed.
- While it bears no repeating that we are prepared to offer the citizens of South Ossetia the widest form of autonomy possible.

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- Broader and more comprehensive than anything enjoyed by this region during the Soviet era – or more than anything enjoyed by those living in North Ossetia today.
- It is worth repeating that conflict, violence, war and bloodshed must be avoided.
- That stagnation, alienation, deterioration and fear must not be allowed to continue.
- It is my sincere hope that my remarks today will become a springboard for action.
- And provide a new path forward towards lasting peace.
- For those who are insistent on spreading false rumors and repeating dangerous and incendiary claims.
- Let these remarks – and our collective actions prove them wrong.
- And let our voices unite against hatred and provocation – against division and deceit - so that once and for all – all citizens of Georgia can live in a country that is whole, peaceful and free.