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FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION, AT THE
2021 ANNUAL SECURITY REVIEW CONFERENCE**

31 August 2021

**Working session I: Conflicts and crises in the OSCE area – building security
and confidence**

Madam Chairperson,
Esteemed colleagues,
Ladies and gentlemen,

As part of the discussion of various aspects of crisis management during today's dedicated session of the Annual Security Review Conference (ASRC), we feel it would be appropriate to consider, *inter alia*, issues related to the Geneva International Discussions on Security and Stability in the Trans-Caucasus, including the development of relations within the "triangle" comprising Abkhazia, Georgia and South Ossetia, and also issues pertaining to the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict.

It is worth recalling that the current realities in the Trans-Caucasus did not arise in a vacuum but are, rather, the completely logical outcome of a whole chain of events, which at times were highly dramatic. The root cause of the fundamental transformation of the foreign policy landscape in the region is the military aggression undertaken in August 2008 by the President of Georgia at the time, which was accompanied by a treacherous attack on Russian peacekeepers from the Joint Peacekeeping Forces in the zone of what was then the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict. Russia was left with no choice but to intervene in the resulting emergency: at first it conducted an operation aimed at compelling the aggressor to sue for peace – that is, Russia essentially saved the South Ossetians from extermination – and later on it safeguarded the security of the people of South Ossetia, and likewise that of the people of Abkhazia (the same fate had been awaiting them), by recognizing both republics as sovereign and independent States on 26 August 2008.

Subsequently, at the request and with the consent of the authorities in Sukhum and Tskhinval, Russia took charge of their security by concluding relevant treaties and agreements on, among other things, the deployment of a military base in each republic and the defence of their State borders.

Organically complementing the efforts undertaken by Russia at the bilateral level, the Geneva International Discussions on Security and Stability in the Trans-Caucasus were launched in October 2008: a multilateral negotiation format that was also a consequence of Mikheil Saakashvili's failed military adventure. The new dialogue platform was created pursuant to the well-known arrangements agreed on by

Presidents Medvedev and Sarkozy with the clearly formulated task of (I quote) “safeguarding the lasting security of Abkhazia and South Ossetia”. The uniqueness of the Geneva Discussions lies in the fact that they provide an opportunity for constant direct dialogue between Georgia on the one hand, and Abkhazia and South Ossetia on the other, whose official representatives take part in the format on an equal footing.

Russia considers the Geneva Discussions to be a much-needed negotiation format and, what is more, one to which there is no alternative. The absence of breakthrough agreements cannot be attributed to some kind of weakness or deficiency of the format. We did not and do not entertain any illusions as to the possibility of swiftly resolving the existing contentious issues. The approaches of the individual players are too different, the lack of trust between them due to deep-rooted divergences is too great. Clearing the “obstructions” so as to bring their positions closer requires patience and takes time. The Russian side is conscious of that and therefore seeks to continue the painstaking work on the negotiation front – something which it urges the other participants in the Geneva Discussions to do as well.

As before, a number of well-known destructive factors are preventing headway from being made in strengthening the negotiation process and imparting a steady momentum to it. Surely you will agree that it is difficult to achieve progress when one participant in the Geneva Discussions, namely Georgia, is openly pursuing a policy – both in Geneva and at other international platforms, including the OSCE – aimed at discrediting another participant in the negotiations, Russia, while at the same time isolating two further participants, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, by mounting anti-Russian propaganda campaigns, and also anti-Abkhazian and anti-South Ossetian ones, on various pretexts.

A manifestation of this so unconstructive approach is the way in which the following have all become routine features of the communication process in Geneva: a disrespectful tone, confrontational rhetoric, ignoring the legitimate concerns of regional neighbours, a striving to play to the gallery and the desire to advance one’s own positions to the detriment of the other parties’ interests.

There are other irritants, too, that hinder regular work in the Geneva format. Among these one must, above all, single out the resolution on internally displaced persons and refugees that Georgia introduces at the United Nations General Assembly every year. Through its actions in New York, the Georgian side is itself blocking the discussion of these issues in Geneva. It is necessary once and for all to understand and accept the logic of the authorities in Sukhum and Tskhinval: given that their representatives are denied access to the United Nations platform in New York and are consequently unable to expound their counterarguments there, they see no point in talking about these matters during the Geneva Discussions. Nothing comes up for substantive discussion in Geneva, since everything has already been “decided” in New York without the Abkhazians and the South Ossetians. The Abkhazian and South Ossetian delegations in Switzerland are essentially being asked to just agree with the “verdict” that was pronounced over there, while the role of the other delegations is to reconfirm the main provisions of a politicized and one-sided resolution of the United Nations General Assembly.

The time has come to abandon the confrontational polemics that have hitherto prevailed at the Geneva Discussions in favour of a more pragmatic approach by concentrating efforts on the search for a unifying agenda. In practical terms, we believe it is imperative to focus attention on the two most important priorities of the Geneva Discussions as we see them, the implementation of which can make a real contribution to strengthening stability and security throughout the South Caucasus. I am referring firstly to the conclusion of a legally binding agreement between Georgia on the one hand, and Abkhazia and South Ossetia on the other, and secondly to initiating the process of delimiting the Georgian-Abkhazian and Georgian-South Ossetian borders. Achieving progress in both these areas would pave the way for establishing the necessary conditions for the gradual settlement of relations in the

“Tbilisi-Sukhum-Tskhinval triangle” and open up the prospect of developing good-neighbourly ties between these Transcaucasian republics at both the bilateral and the regional level.

The relevance of guarantees for the non-use of force being given by Georgia is growing markedly in view of the continued attempts to integrate it further into NATO. At the summit of the North Atlantic Alliance in Brussels on 14 June this year, the commitment to accepting that Transcaucasian country as a NATO member was again reiterated and plans were also announced for conducting the next NATO-Georgia military exercise in 2022. Another NATO exercise, “Agile Spirit 2021”, has just wrapped up on Georgian territory.

The build-up of United States and NATO military capability near the borders of Russia and its allies, together with one of the region’s States being drawn into NATO, is undermining stability and security in the South Caucasus and making the likelihood of constructive co-operation being established within the framework of the Geneva Discussions even more remote.

We are convinced that the potential of the Geneva format has not been fully unlocked. This format has sufficient “reserves” when it comes to creating favourable conditions for the settlement of Georgia’s relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia as a prerequisite of peace and prosperity throughout the Trans-Caucasus. Achieving that strategic goal would make a real contribution to safeguarding regional stability and security. Russia very much intends to actively work towards that.

In this regard, we feel it would be helpful to hear the opinion of the Abkhazian and South Ossetian sides. The ASRC’s blended format makes it possible to find out first-hand, as it were, what is the position of all the interested parties, including Abkhazia and South Ossetia. To that end, it is not strictly necessary to invite their representatives to Vienna. They can be given the floor remotely – via videoconference, as in the case of experts from the capitals who present their countries’ views on issues that are being discussed.

We should also like to note that the open letter addressed by the opposition party Alliance of Patriots of Georgia to the President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, calling for the normalization of relations between the Russian and Georgian Governments has not gone unnoticed in Russia. This appeal serves as clear proof of the fact that, all the exertions by Russophobes and radicals notwithstanding, there continue to be forces of common sense within Georgia advocating the restoration of good-neighbourly ties between our States. We for our part are always open to that happening.

Madam Chairperson,

When speaking about Russia’s efforts to maintain peace in the South Caucasus, it is impossible to ignore the situation regarding the settlement of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. The Russian Government played a key role in stopping the bloodshed that took place in Nagorno-Karabakh between September and November 2020. Relevant agreed arrangements were set forth in the statement of 9 November 2020 issued by the leaders of Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia. Pursuant to these arrangements, a Russian peacekeeping contingent was deployed along the line of contact: it enjoys the trust of both sides by virtue of being a driver of peace and stability.

Efforts are currently under way to unblock transport links and economic ties in the region. This work is being conducted by a trilateral working group jointly chaired by the Deputy Prime Ministers of Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia that was set up following the Moscow summit of 11 January 2021. Seven meetings in this format have already taken place. In particular, an expert analysis has been concluded on the measures required to restore communications, which would make it possible to proceed in the near future with the gradual implementation of joint infrastructure projects.

As an ally of Armenia and a strategic partner of Azerbaijan, Russia is doing everything possible to de-escalate tensions along the Azerbaijani-Armenian border beyond Nagorno-Karabakh. We are exhorting the sides to settle border disputes by political and diplomatic means, and are actively assisting with the launch of the process for the delimitation and subsequent demarcation of the border between Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Russia continues to take the position that there is a need for further work by the OSCE Minsk Group on the Nagorno-Karabakh settlement process on the basis of the existing mandate and duly taking account of the new realities in the region, including the implementation of the agreed arrangements contained in the statements of 9 November 2020 and 11 January 2021 by the leaders of Russia, Azerbaijan and Armenia. We believe that the potential of this unique mechanism, which enjoys broad international support, is far from exhausted.

We support the intention of the three Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group to conduct meetings with the Ministers for Foreign Affairs of Azerbaijan and Armenia soon, and to resume their visits to the region, including Nagorno-Karabakh. The new Russian Co-Chair in the OSCE Minsk Group, Igor Khovaev, is in Baku at present, where he is holding a number of meetings with the Azerbaijani leadership. He is scheduled to visit Yerevan as well. The main objective of these contacts is to intensify the efforts by the Co-Chairs of the OSCE Minsk Group.

In our view, the three Co-Chair countries could focus on implementing measures aimed at building trust between the conflict parties and on tackling pressing socio-economic and humanitarian problems. This would set the stage favourably for gradually moving on to a comprehensive discussion of the issues related to a political settlement.

Russia intends to continue facilitating in every possible way the achievement of a comprehensive and sustainable political and diplomatic settlement, both as part of the OSCE Minsk Group Co-Chair countries and in its national capacity, drawing on its traditionally close relations with Azerbaijan and Armenia.

Thank you for your attention.