

**EUROPEAN UNION****OSCE Permanent Council No 1117
Vienna, 3 November 2016**

**EU Statement in reply to the Co-Chairmen of the Geneva
International Discussions**

The European Union warmly welcomes the Co-Chairmen of the Geneva International Discussions, Ambassadors Günther Bächler, Antti Turunen and Herbert Salber, and thanks them for their presentations. The EU reiterates its strong support for conflict resolution in Georgia, including through our co-chairmanship of the Geneva International Discussions, and the EU Monitoring Mission in Georgia.

We would like to use the opportunity to thank also the Head of Mission of the EUMM, Ambassador Kęstutis Jankauskas, who is present with us today, for the EUMM's continuous contribution to the de-escalation of the security situation and confidence building on the ground.

We welcome the efforts of the co-chairs throughout the year to consolidate the Geneva International Discussions and its Incident Prevention and Response mechanisms (IPRMs), which could be considered as the main achievement to date of the Geneva discussions and continue to be essential for confidence, predictability and transparency. We are pleased that the 37th round of the Geneva International Discussions allowed for active exchanges on substantive issues of concern including the security and humanitarian situation on the ground.

We welcome the resumption of the Gali IPRM and a better use of the hotline mechanisms. Several potentially serious security incidents had occurred recently, but they have been managed in a satisfactory way by the mechanisms provided through the Geneva International Discussions, including the two IPRMs. As regards the fatal shooting incident in Khurcha on 19 May 2016, we call for a swift and unconditional prosecution of the perpetrator. We encourage participants to use the Gali IPRM for exchanging information on the investigation, including evidence.

The European Union is encouraged that the debates on a possible joint statement on non-use of force have been continued. This is essential for achieving progress on international security arrangements in the region. In this regard, and with the view of the continuing Russian military and security related presence and infrastructure reinforcements in the Georgian breakaway regions, in violation of Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity and OSCE commitments, we continue to believe that a clear non-use of force commitment by Russia is essential.

We reiterate our view that the continued building by the Russian Federation of so-called border signs, fences and other obstacles at different locations along and beyond the Administrative Boundary Lines, divides communities and negatively affects the local population. Such provocative steps are unacceptable and we renew our call on the Russian Federation to reverse these moves. We express our concern about the closure of two crossing points between the breakaway region of Abkhazia and the rest of Georgia earlier this year and reiterate that possible further closures of remaining crossing points would very negatively affect the freedom of movement for the conflict affected population.

The European Union reiterates its concerns about the persistent uncertainty regarding the status and associated rights of the ethnic Georgian population residing in the Gali district of the breakaway region of Abkhazia. We encourage the participants of the Geneva International Discussions to continue to work towards increased transparency and objective information on the developments in this regard. Improving the human rights situation and addressing concerns in full respect of international law and OSCE commitments is important to improve the conditions of the conflict affected population.

In the humanitarian area, we welcome constructive discussions on cultural heritage, co-operation over archive issues and common environmental threats. We therefore regret that participants from the breakaway regions of Georgia and from the Russian Federation refused to engage in the substantive discussions on returns of refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs). We recall that addressing refugees and IDPs, including their safe, dignified and voluntary return, is a core task of the Geneva International Discussions. We call upon all participants to engage on all issues under the agenda, regardless of the views expressed in other international fora, and to

refrain from walk outs which lead to a premature end of the discussions and contradict the commitments to the Geneva International Discussions made by the participants concerned.

We welcome the positive steps undertaken throughout the year in the humanitarian issues, in particular the release of detainees from Tbilisi, Tskhinvali and Sukhumi in March, the repeated deployment of an OSCE-commissioned expert tasked to assist in addressing the fate of missing persons and the fact finding visit to breakaway region of South Ossetia by the UNHCR in August.

We remain convinced, that there is an urgent need for a meaningful cross-dimensional OSCE presence throughout Georgia, in particular for the benefit of the civilian population, including a robust monitoring capacity able to operate unhindered across the Administrative Boundary Lines. A meaningful OSCE presence to Georgia would considerably strengthen the OSCE's engagement in the Geneva International Discussions and IPRMs, as well as in the implementation of confidence building measures.

The European Union reiterates its firm support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognized borders. The European Union calls on Russia to fulfil its obligations under the ceasefire agreement of 12 August 2008 and its subsequent implementing measures of 8 September 2008, and to provide EUMM access to the breakaway regions.

The EU thanks the Co-Chairmen of the Geneva International Discussions for their comprehensive address and looks forward to the next round of the Geneva International Discussions scheduled for 13-14 December 2016.

The Candidate Countries the FORMER YUGOSLAV REPUBLIC OF MACEDONIA*, MONTENEGRO* and ALBANIA*, the Country of the Stabilisation and Association Process and Potential Candidate BOSNIA and HERZEGOVINA, and the EFTA countries ICELAND, LIECHTENSTEIN and NORWAY, members of the European Economic Area, as well as UKRAINE and the REPUBLIC OF MOLDOVA align themselves with this statement.

* The Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Montenegro and Albania continue to be part of the Stabilisation and Association Process.