

Delegation of the Russian Federation

**STATEMENT BY MR. ALEXANDER LUKASHEVICH,
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION,
AT THE 1141st MEETING OF THE
OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

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**On the latest round of the Geneva International Discussions on
Security and Stability in the Trans-Caucasus**

Mr. Chairperson,

In turn, we should like to share our thoughts on the results of the latest meeting held in Geneva on 28 and 29 March within the framework of the international discussions on the Trans-Caucasus. This is to date the only format for direct dialogue between the official representatives of the Republic of Abkhazia and the Republic of South Ossetia and their neighbours in Georgia.

In deliberately creating a confrontational environment for the negotiations, the Georgian Government clearly hoped to justify in this way its own unwillingness to engage in constructive dialogue in Geneva. A whole series of propagandistic steps were taken on the eve of the negotiations. On 24 March, the Georgian Government effectively forced the member countries of the United Nations Human Rights Council to vote on its draft resolution “Cooperation with Georgia”, which has nothing to do with genuine concern for human rights. Back to back with the Geneva talks, an extremely politicized thematic discussion was organized in the UN Security Council. The “pilgrimage” of foreign visitors to the Georgian-South Ossetian border and the harsh statements by Georgian officials and politicians criticizing Russia’s co-operation with the young republics have continued. Some acts of this sweeping political spectacle have also been played out in this room with the participation of many OSCE participating States. In short, everything was done to create an absolutely intolerable atmosphere at the Geneva meeting and prevent any advances being made in the discussions.

Against this background, the confrontationally charged state of the Georgian representatives at the Geneva talks also came as no surprise. The delegations of the Republic of Abkhazia, the Russian Federation and the Republic of South Ossetia did not yield to such an irresponsible and provocative policy at odds with the spirit and objectives of the Geneva format.

Unfortunately, it once again proved impossible to adopt a statement by the participants in the Geneva International Discussions on the non-use of force. Not for the first time did Georgia prove unwilling to make quite flexible compromises on the text of the statement proposed by the Russian delegation. Nevertheless, there are some positive developments. We thank the Co-Chairs for their efforts to bring the positions of the participants in the negotiations closer together. We trust that work on a joint draft will continue, and it will prove possible to reach an agreement in June.

A review of the situation in the region confirmed that despite the Georgian Government's attempts to dramatize the state of affairs on the country's borders with Abkhazia and South Ossetia the situation there remains stable and under control. The decision by the Government of the Republic of Abkhazia to reduce the number of crossing points at the Enguri River has not made it any more difficult to cross the border. According to statistics, 390,000 people have crossed the Georgian-Abkhazian border since the previous round of the Geneva International Discussions. Following the closure of two checkpoints, the flow of people crossing at the main Enguri checkpoint increased by 38 per cent compared to the same period last year. The number of people being detained for crossing the State border illegally has decreased somewhat. In most cases, the offending persons are released after paying a fine or are politely sent back. We are of the opinion that the Abkhazian delegation provided detailed explanations in Geneva regarding the steps taken by the authorities in Sukhum to improve the border crossing mechanism and develop the transport infrastructure in the Gal district. We hope that there will be no further need to return to this matter.

The situation on Georgia's border with South Ossetia is also stable. Over 50,000 people have crossed the border since the last Geneva meeting. Since 1 January 2017, the South Ossetian authorities have simplified the border regime considerably for the local population – special permits have been abolished and an internal passport is sufficient for crossing the border. A possible increase in the number of people crossing the border illegally during the spring sowing work in the border regions remains a problem. We believe that the demarcation of at least those border segments that run through farmland would help to solve this problem. Georgia ought to give real consideration to the relevant proposal by the South Ossetian Government.

Contacts via the hotlines play a positive role in eliminating problems as they arise at the border, while more serious incidents are discussed within the framework of the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms (IPRMs) in Gal and Ergneti. We hope that their work will continue according to plan and in a depoliticized manner. We note the timely preparation at the request of the South Ossetian Government of a report on missing persons.

The Russian, Abkhazian and South Ossetian delegations again pointed to the destabilizing role of the continuing military “development” of the South Caucasus and the Black Sea by NATO, which Georgia is also eager to join. We cannot take protests and accusations against Russia seriously in the light of the Georgian Government's intensified co-operation with NATO and its individual members to improve the offensive military capabilities of the Georgian armed forces.

In view of Georgia's continuing policy of politicizing humanitarian affairs in all international forums, the representatives of the Republic of South Ossetia and the Republic of Abkhazia refused to discuss these matters in Geneva. We regard such a decision as justified. It is difficult to expect an enthusiastic discussion when the Georgian Government continues

its practice of mud-slinging at international forums at which neither the Abkhazian nor the South Ossetian authorities are represented. It is not surprising that under these circumstances co-operation in other neutral areas is also in the doldrums – education, health care, environmental problems and the preservation of cultural heritage. There is a real risk that what has been achieved in Geneva over a period of many years will be undone. The local population ultimately suffers as a result of this policy by the Georgian Government and the Western countries supporting it.

It is gratifying that even under these circumstances work continues in a number of areas. For example, the participants in the 39th round of the Geneva International Discussions reaffirmed the importance of further co-operation at the expert level to prevent environmental damage to the Black Sea coast. They discussed the proposal by Abkhazia to establish a co-ordinating council on environmental issues.

All in all, we believe that it is time for the Georgian Government to make a choice between substantive dialogue with Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Geneva or continuing attacks on these States in international forums, including the UN and the OSCE. To do this in parallel is counter-productive and pointless. There needs to be talk about peaceful coexistence in the region in the light of the geopolitical realities of the present-day Trans-Caucasus. For our part, we should like to reaffirm our willingness to facilitate a calm and productive discussion on current regional problems.

Thank you for your attention.