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NATO Backs Georgia in Dispute with Russia, Seeks Reversal of Recent Moves by Russia in Abkhazia

“When do we draw a line?” Asks Georgian Special Envoy Bakradze in High-Level Meeting with NATO

NATO leaders met on April 28 with Georgian Special Envoy Davit Bakradze to discuss a series of increasingly dangerous Russian provocations against Georgia. In a statement following the meeting, the NATO allies “reaffirmed their strong support to Georgian sovereignty and territorial integrity” and note that in “their view, the Russian Federation should reverse the recent steps which undermine that sovereignty”.

The meeting, held in Brussels under the North Atlantic Council (NAC) 26+1 format, followed global condemnation of Russian President Vladimir Putin’s move on April 16 to establish legal ties between Russia and the separatist territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia. The decree was issued just a day after Russia voted in the UN Security Council to extend the mandate of UNOMIG, the UN body monitoring the ceasefire in Abkhazia.

In their statement, NATO allies also “described statements by Russian officials and political figures considering a possible use of force by Russia in Georgian territory as unhelpful”.

Russia will meet with the NAC on April 30 to discuss the current situation. The NAC will ask Russia to reverse the presidential decree that aims to establish official legal and economic ties with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

President Putin’s decree of 16 April represents the first time that a foreign state has formally acknowledged the legal authority of the separatist regimes in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali. As Bakradze pointed out, “Russia thus justifies the ethnic cleansing of hundreds of thousands of peaceful citizens, since the de facto authorities whose documents the Russian Federation is planning to recognize were created through this very cleansing.”

The Russian moves come despite ground-breaking peace proposals made by the Government, which aim to guarantee maximum autonomy to Abkhazia within a unified Georgia by granting the region sweeping powers, including that of vetoing legislation and constitutional changes that go against its interests and the reservation of the second-highest position of State, the Vice-Presidency, for an Abkhaz.

Bakradze explained that the April 16 decree was part of a systematic escalation of Russian pressure prompted by Georgia’s decision to seek a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) at the Alliance’s Bucharest Summit earlier this month. Georgia’s bid for a MAP was delayed by several NATO member states, who argued that yielding to Russia on this issue would lessen tensions across the region; this has not proved to be the case.

Instead, Russia has pursued an ever-more aggressive strategy. On April 20, a Russian MIG 29 fighter jet—operating illegally from Abkhazia—shot and destroyed a Georgian unmanned aerial vehicle over Georgian airspace. And today, April 19, Russia announced the deployment of additional troops in Abkhazia, supposedly as a reaction against “Georgian troop deployments” in the Kodori Gorge region of Abkhazia, Georgia. However, the United Nations Observer Mission in Georgia has confirmed that there have not been any unusual Georgian troop deployments near the conflict zones.

Georgian sovereignty is under serious threat, underscored Bakradze in his session with NATO foreign ministers. “When do we draw a line? Who will work with us in defending sovereignty? How do we create the conditions that will allow for the peaceful resolution of our territorial issues?” he said. Bakradze served as Georgia’s Foreign Minister until April 23, when he stepped down to run for Parliament of Georgia (elections will be held on May 21).

II. FULL TEXT OF SPEECH TO NATO BY SPECIAL EVOY DAVID BAKRADZE

Remarks of Georgia

North Atlantic Council Meeting

April 28, 2008

Secretary General, esteemed ambassadors,

Georgia has requested this meeting on the basis of our agreements with NATO that allow for consultations at the highest levels.

We had hoped such consultations would focus on our continuing integration into the Alliance and our progress towards a Membership Action Plan.

Following the assurances we received in Bucharest that Georgia will become a NATO member, our Government is redoubling its efforts to restore peace throughout our territory and to continue to advance democratic reforms.

Allow me to present our Government's view of how we see the period of active engagement with the Alliance at the high political level from now until December.

We understand the difficult negotiations that took place among the Allies on Georgia's MAP application at the Bucharest Summit.

It would be best if we engaged in close consultations on Georgia's MAP application and approach the December Ministerial with a clear idea of where we stand.

We see this process as an intensification of our interactions within already existing formats of cooperation, within the process of Intensified Dialogue on Membership issues.

We hope that through intensive engagement the MAP readiness assessment will duly reflect Georgia's progress. This will create solid ground for making a positive decision on Georgia's MAP at the December Meeting.

Granting MAP to Georgia at December Ministerial—assuming we have met NATO's performance criteria, which we believe we have—would demonstrate that Georgia's Euro-Atlantic choice is irreversible and is not hostage to a third country's destructive actions.

However, Georgia now faces a direct threat to its sovereignty and territorial integrity. I am here to explain my government's view of how best to address this threat and to seek your support for our efforts to find a peaceful solution to this challenge.

I am **not** here to import a territorial problem into NATO.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am well aware of the responsibilities my country has towards this Alliance.

But, I am here to alert you to a creeping threat to peace and to consult with you as to how such a threat can be averted. I am here to ask you that if a line is not drawn now, when will it be drawn? Where and when will the next challenge occur?

A line must be drawn to protect the territorial integrity of all sovereign nations, not just of Georgia. But such line also serves to defend the values shared by Georgia and the Alliance—because it is our faithful adherence to these values that can best preserve the peace and prevent war.

Georgia also must make decisions.

When do **we** draw a line? Who will work with us in defending sovereignty? How do we create the conditions that will allow for the peaceful resolution of our territorial issues?

We have tabled very generous proposals in this regard that can eliminate the constant threat to stability. How do we balance our very material commitment to the Alliance with the need to deploy assets to protect our territory and deter further encroachment on our sovereignty?

Allow me, as I begin, to outline the peace proposals made by the President of Georgia:

- The introduction of the new position of Vice-President of Georgia, which will be constitutionally reserved for an Abkhaz representative, with the right to veto all decisions related to the constitutional status of Abkhazia;
- Guaranteed representation in all bodies of the Georgian central authorities;
- International guarantees for Abkhazia to ensure wide federalism and unlimited autonomy;
- Measures to ensure the preservation and further development of Abkhazian culture, language, and ethnic identity;
- Establishment of a joint free economic zone in Gali and Ochamchire, with development of the seaport of Ochamchire;
- Security guarantees;
- The gradual merger of law enforcement agencies and customs services;
- An offer to the Russian Federation, along with the international community, to act as a mediator in this process;

At the President's behest, inter-governmental working groups on legal, economic, and political issues will expand on these new peace initiatives, develop a plan for their implementation, and seek to enter into a direct dialogue with the de facto authorities—with the involvement of the international community in this process.

These proposals have already been transmitted to the Abkhaz side through UNOMIG. The State Minister for Reintegration stands ready to travel to Sukhumi and start direct detailed talks on these proposals.

Unfortunately, in the light of Georgia's efforts at peaceful resolution of conflict, the Russian Federation keeps undermining the situation.

Allow me to briefly review Russia's most recent acts of aggression that have infringed on our sovereignty.

These actions, which began before the Bucharest Summit, have dramatically escalated in the weeks since then. Clearly, Russia has interpreted the outcome at Bucharest as a cue to accelerate its creeping annexation of Georgia's territory.

On 6 March 2008, Russia announced its withdrawal from a 1996 CIS agreement prohibiting any kind of military cooperation, assistance, weapons, and manpower transfers to the separatists in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Russia claimed "humanitarian" motives, saying the ban prevented the implementation of socio-economic programs. This is erroneous and misleading. Numerous UN agreements specifically exempt humanitarian assistance from the list of prohibited actions. Russia's claim is not only false but a cynical attempt to use the honorable tradition of humanitarianism as a camouflage to consolidate the illegal political grip of a tiny minority of the original population of Abkhazia.

Russia also justified its move by citing alleged progress in the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to the Abkhazia region. However, no such "progress" has occurred in reality.

As a result of the ethnic cleansing that occurred in the 1990s, compounded by the counter-productive stance of the separatists, Abkhazia's population today stands at about 70,000—a small fraction of its pre-conflict number. Over 400,000 residents of Abkhazia were forcibly expelled and remain refugees or IDPs.

The claim of the Russian Federation is—and I regret to use this term—a lie. In fact, this new policy is an attempt to prevent the return of those IDPs and refugees to their homes. The Russian Federation is legalizing ethnic cleansing.

Next, within hours of issuing the Bucharest Summit communiqué, the Russian President wrote a letter to the separatist leaders in Abkhazia and in South Ossetia, addressing them as “presidents” and promising firm Russian support that—he wrote—would be “not declarative, but practical”—citing Russia's withdrawal from the aforementioned CIS agreement as one such practical step.

Then, on 16 April came an unprecedented instruction from President Putin to the Government of the Russian Federation ordering it to establish direct legal, trade, economic, social, scientific, technical, educational and cultural ties with the separatist regimes.

I draw your attention to the fact that this decision was announced one day after the Russian Federation voted at the UN Security Council *in favor of* continuing the UNOMIG peacekeeping mission. This timing was by design and makes a mockery of the United Nations. We are grateful for the prompt reaction of those countries that responded with firm conviction to Russia.

The 16 April decree overtly violates the sovereignty and legitimate authority of the Government of Georgia. It authorizes Russian state agencies to enter into direct cooperation with representatives of the *de facto* authorities of Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia.

More specifically, the decree lists the legal documents issued to individuals by the Abkhaz and South Ossetian separatist authorities that will be recognized by Russian state agencies; other legal entities registered by the separatist regimes also will be recognized by Russia.

Meanwhile, the Russian Foreign Ministry's local representations in Krasnodar district and in the Republic of North-Ossetia-Alania are tasked with performing consular functions. Under the decree, separatist-issued “passports” and other legal acts will be “recognized by counterpart state agencies of the Russian Federation.”

Put simply, President Putin's decree of 16 April represents the first time that a foreign state has formally acknowledged the legal authority of the regimes in Sukhumi and Tskhinvali, by recognizing the validity of legal acts and documents issued by the separatist entities.

Russia thus justifies the ethnic cleansing of hundreds of thousands of peaceful citizens, since the *de facto* authorities whose documents the Russian Federation is planning to recognize were created through this very cleansing.

The 16 April instruction also represents the fulfillment of a systematic strategy by the Kremlin to assert indirect sovereignty over Abkhazia through its “passportization” policy.

The latest move was also justified on humanitarian grounds. Russia seeks to justify its actions by citing “the need to take care of the interests of population in the conflict regions, including Russian citizens living there.”

However, these supposed Russian citizens are a manufactured and artificial “diaspora.” Imagine the turmoil that would occur if countries were to illegally grant passports to residents of neighboring countries so that they could then invoke their responsibility to protect—this is precisely what Russia has done.

Russia's use of the humanitarian argument, I must warn you, is an attempt to legitimize armed intervention.

Here, I want to re-affirm that Georgia has never prohibited or halted humanitarian assistance from anybody to the Abkhaz side. However, we all understand that any economic activity in the conflict regions not focused on reuniting separated communities are in vain, and do not serve purpose of settlement. This is only a false pretext.

Then, on 20 April a Russian MIG-29 shot down a Georgian Unmanned Air Surveillance Vehicle in Georgian airspace. This reconnaissance drone was the property of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia.

According to simultaneous NATO-standard radar data released by the Georgian Ministry of Defense, the Russian aircraft took off presumably from Russian military base in Gudauta, Georgia. After the attack, fighter jet proceeded northward, entering Russian airspace.

This constitutes a threat to the territorial integrity of our State and is defined as «act of aggression» by the UN's fundamental documents.

Russia's actions have been condemned by many states and international organizations. We are heartened by the fact that NATO was among the very first to condemn Russia's moves and to require explanation along with immediate reversal of the actions. We are extremely grateful for the forthcoming and straightforward language in the statement made by the NATO Secretary General.

To verify the authenticity of the video footage as well as the radar data from the 20 April incident, we have invited international experts.

What are the implications of these latest developments?

They undermine the internationally recognized inviolability of Georgia's territories. They blatantly violate international law.

Georgia is being pushed to the edge of a precipice. Without credible and concerted reaction, we are confronted by the prospect of a situation similar to that in northern Cyprus or analogous to what occurred in the Taiwan.

Russia's end goal now appears to be to force Georgia into armed conflict. It would thus strip it of the opportunity to earn NATO membership, while finally annexing Georgia's territories.

We believe that there is hope for a solution. But immediate action is required soon.

The Government of Georgia and the President have placed ideas on the table that should form the basis for a negotiation that would give the inhabitants of Abkhazia full rights to their identity and full representation within our democratic system.

These are proposals. They are made in good faith.

Now we need a process.

I appeal to the Alliance to contribute to this process.

It is not enough to ask parties to be restrained. While we talk, the realities on the ground are changing. The decisions of the Russian Federation effectively create the legal pretext for a radical alteration of the balance on the ground.

The acts I detailed earlier clearly attest to the fact that the Russian Federation has lost any legal, political, and moral right so be a main facilitator in conflict resolution.

This is why we have been forced to ask the UN Security Council to reassess the Russian Federation's status as conflict facilitator and member of the Group of Friends of Georgia.

We have also called on the international community to facilitate the change of negotiating and peacekeeping formats.

NATO-Russia Council is one of the forums through which a matter of such magnitude for Euro-Atlantic security must be discussed.

We ask the Alliance to request Russia through NRC to:

- Revoke the 16 April decree;
- Ensure the documentary (legal) transfer of all facilities of the Gudauta military base to Georgia and allow on-site inspection of the Base;
- In the light of withdrawal from the 1996 CIS decision, to take up the responsibility not to provide any kind of military assistance to the Abkhaz side through another appropriate international frameworks of the OSCE and UN.

It should be noted that the airspace over the uncontrolled territory of Abkhazia is used for international air traffic, so the shutting down the UAV by the Russian MIG was an act of aggression not only against Georgia, but also against those people who traveled along this route by that time.

Despite the denial from the Russian side of this act of aggression, we are sure that international experts group will confirm the accuracy of the facts we displayed before you.

On the other hand, there would not be need to summon the international experts if Georgia already was a part of the NATO Air Situation Data Exchange program. We do hope that this latest aggression conducted in the Georgian air-space clearly demonstrates the urgent necessity to complete all the remaining technical work for connecting Georgia to ASDE.

The time has come for all of us to put this choice to the Russian Federation in a frank and firm manner.

Ambassadors, Secretary General,

The latest moves against Georgia's sovereignty are designed specifically to tarnish our democratic achievements. We are being provoked to swerve from our chosen democratic and Euro-Atlantic path. But we will not concede.

We are facing a direct threat against the values we cherish: freedom, democracy and peace.

In the coming days and weeks, as we address the rising security challenges, we will "refuse to move even a single inch away from our core values," as our President has stressed.

To ensure that the process is inclusive, the President of Georgia has pledged to engage in constant consultations with opposition parties on matters of security so that their insight and advice is fully shared.

Our upcoming parliamentary election will take place as scheduled on May 21. We will put our democratic values on display once again by ensuring the conduct of free and fair elections. We will also press ahead with the economic and social improvements we have been steadily pursuing.

As we have before, we ask for your assistance in completing Georgia's struggle to establish democracy and freedom. Our partnership with NATO has already been an inspiration in this process of democratic transformation, and our belief is that the Alliance will ensure that the achievements of the past years are not squandered.

Thank you for your attention.