

Initiatives of March 2008¹

On the March 28, 2008 proposals made by President Saakashvili regarding the resolution of the conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia²

During a conference held by the Georgian Foundation for Strategic and International Studies on 28 March 2008, the President of Georgia, *Mikheil Saakashvili* aired a set of new proposals regarding the resolution of the conflict in Abkhazia, Georgia.

“There are no issues that we and the Abkhazians cannot solve through negotiations,” he declared.

“Unlimited autonomy, wide federalism, and very serious representation in the central governmental bodies of Georgia – all will be guaranteed, with the support of international guarantors.” The only issue not on the table, the President emphasized, was the *“disintegration of Georgia.”*

The new initiative builds on Georgia’s 2006 peace proposal to the separatist authorities in Sokhumi.

Among the highlights of the plan announced are:

- **Broad political representation for the Abkhaz, including the new post of Vice President of Georgia to be occupied by an Abkhazian.**
- **The right to veto legislation related to the constitutional status of Abkhazia, and to issues related to Abkhaz culture, language, and ethnicity.**
- **The establishment of a joint Free Economic Zone in the Gali region, including the sea port of Ochamchire.**
- **International guarantees of Abkhaz autonomy and an offer to Russia to help mediate a peaceful resolution of the conflict.**

The Georgian Government also has asked UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon to undertake a thorough review of the current peace process, with an eye to its radical reform.

Specific proposals of the President of Georgia include the following:

1. Broad political representation at the highest levels of the Georgian government

The President offered the Abkhaz a series of political rights, including:

- The right to occupy the post of Vice President of Georgia, which will be created specifically for the Abkhaz;

¹ http://www.parliament.ge/index.php?lang_id=ENG&sec_id=1315&info_id=22617

² <http://www.president.gov.ge/?l=E&m=0&sm=1&id=2569>

- Guaranteed representation in all main Georgian government bodies, including Parliament and all ministries, as well as in local government.

2. Veto rights on all major legislation related to Abkhazia

Abkhazian representatives will retain the right to veto all decisions related to Abkhazia's constitutional status, and to the preservation and further development of Abkhazian culture, language, and ethnicity.

3. The establishment of a jointly controlled free economic zone

The free economic zone is to be in the region of Gali and would include areas that have been depopulated due to the conflict, as well as the seaport of Ochamchire, which will be jointly controlled by Abkhazian and Georgian authorities.

4. Law enforcement

The gradual merger of Abkhazian and Georgian law enforcement agencies and customs services.

5. International guarantees to ensure wide federalism, unlimited autonomy, and security

The President offered absolute security guarantees to the Abkhaz authorities, and called for the international community to play a fundamental role in ensuring these guarantees. The Russian Federation is invited *“to move from being a party in the conflict towards becoming a mediator in the conflict, together with other members of the international community.”*

Press Conference by Georgia in United Nations.³

[...] Mr. Alasania said that the text (SC resolution on UNOMIG mandate) had failed to reflect some new developments, particularly the Georgian President's peace initiative of 28 March. The proposal to the Abkhaz side envisaged the setting up of a joint free economic zone in the Gali and Ochamchire districts, guaranteed Abkhaz representation in central executive and legislative bodies, and the establishment of a constitutionally guaranteed position of Vice-President of Georgia for the ethnically Abkhaz representative, who would be delegated a right of veto for all decisions concerning Abkhazia status and rights.

It had been underlined repeatedly that the Georgian authorities would offer Abkhazia "wide federalism", as well as the necessary preconditions for developing their culture, language and national identity, he said. Abkhazia would enjoy unlimited autonomy within Georgia's internationally recognized borders. The President's initiative also called on the international community, including the Russian Federation, to play a fundamental role in ensuring those guarantees. Respective ministries had been instructed to inform the Abkhaz side about the new initiative and facilitate intensification of direct links between the two sides.

He added that success of the peace initiative depended on the international community's more active involvement, including that of the Russian Federation, in the ongoing United Nations-led comprehensive assessment of the peace process.

The State Minister for Reintegration of Georgia had been entrusted with the task of elaborating a special programme to ensure reintegration of former combatants, their retraining and employment. Also by the President's instruction, inter-governmental working groups on legal, economic and political issues had been set up. Their aim was to thoroughly process the new peace initiative, develop a plan for its implementation, enter into a direct dialogue with the de facto authorities and involve the international community in the process.

He said that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Georgia maintained that the new peace proposals opened up completely new perspectives for peaceful conflict resolution, created a unique mechanism for the protection of rights of national minorities in Georgia and provided additional opportunities for the engagement of the international community in the conflict resolution process. Indeed, the Georgian authorities' new peace initiative provided the only reasonable and peaceful alternative to the "dangerous and provocative steps recently masterminded by the external forces in the conflict zones".

Expressing gratitude to the majority of Security Council members who had welcomed the President's comprehensive peace initiative, he reiterated his country's wish *to see the Russian Federation as a partner in peacemaking. Unquestionably, that was in both countries' mutual interest, and he appealed to the Russian Federation to support Georgia's new peace initiative, in order to build a solid foundation for peace and stability in the greater Caucasus region.*

Responding to correspondents' questions, he said that unlimited autonomy for the people of Abkhazia meant the Abkhaz people would have their say in all subjects of concern to their autonomous status within a unified Georgian State. It meant that they would have foreign trade rights, self-government, legislative and executive organs, and be represented at the federal or central government agencies. The vice-presidential post meant they would have a say in foreign and other matters to be decided by Georgia. The proposal effectively gave them "unlimited autonomy within the internationally recognized borders of Georgia".

³ http://www.un.org/News/briefings/docs/2008/080415_Georgia.doc.htm

Georgia was open to negotiating with the Abkhaz side; it was not taking any unilateral steps, he added.

Asked to comment on reports that the leader of the Abkhaz de facto entity had already rejected the proposal, he said he thought the main target of the initiative was not only the de facto leader, but the Abkhaz ethnic group. The proposal aimed to show that Georgia was not a threat to them and that it was really willing to take into account their security and other legitimate concerns, which would later be enshrined in constitutional changes.

He added that he would have anticipated that reaction initially. What counted was how to deal in direct talks with the Abkhaz side and how to explain to them what the offer would do for the Abkhaz nation. Such a direct dialogue would be planned soon.