



HELSINKI COMMISSION HEARING

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SECURITY AND COOPERATION IN EUROPE

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Thank you, Chairman Hastings and Members of the Commission, for organizing today's hearing. I am honored to be with you today. We respect and appreciate the Commission's sustained commitment to human rights and democracy across Europe, and are grateful to you, Mr. Chairman, for your leadership and collaboration in support of democracy in Georgia. We welcome this opportunity to discuss with you the recent elections in Georgia and their ramifications for Georgia, U.S.-Georgian relations, and prospects for Georgia joining NATO.

I sit before you today with friends on either side, Ambassador Sikharulidze and former Foreign Minister and opposition leader Salome Zourabichvili. We have known one another for many years, and I have great respect for the public service of the other two distinguished witnesses appearing today.

The U.S. – Georgian partnership is firmly rooted in our common strategic interests and shared values. Following Georgia's independence in 1991, the United States and Georgia forged a partnership rooted in our realpolitik interests in energy (as we worked together with Azerbaijan and Turkey to develop a network of oil and gas pipelines linking the Caspian Sea with European markets), and security (with expanded counterterrorism cooperation after September 11 and sustained U.S support for peaceful settlement of Georgia's separatist conflicts in Abkhazia and South Ossetia within a unified Georgia). The Rose Revolution of November 2003 cleared the way to expand our cooperation into the realm of our shared values of political and economic freedom.

The Georgian Government's pursuit of groundbreaking political and economic reforms following the Rose Revolution has elevated Georgia's strategic importance. Georgia has now transformed itself from a failing state in economic collapse to an emerging democracy with a market economy, advancing political and economic freedom at the strategic nexus of NATO, Russia, Iran, and Central Asia, and in the borderlands of the broader Middle East. Our shared values of democracy, justice, and human rights in Georgia are thus also a strategic interest of the United States. Today, the United States is working with Georgia to help it firmly establish democratic institutions and provide prosperity and peace to its people. We believe these goals will draw nearer as Georgia moves ever closer to NATO membership. We strongly support Georgia's independence, sovereignty, and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders.

U.S.-Georgia cooperation has achieved important advances in our common interests and

shared values, especially since the 2003 Rose Revolution.

- On energy, the Baku-Supsa and Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipelines are now operating across Georgia, providing oil producers in the Caspian Basin direct access to global markets for the first time, free from geographic chokepoints and monopoly pressures. The South Caucasus gas pipeline can now deliver natural gas from Azerbaijan to Greece and the EU-15, helping Georgia and the rest of Europe diversify sources of natural gas supply even as Gazprom attempts to bolster its monopoly leverage. Four years ago, Georgia suffered power blackouts throughout winter and was unable to pay for the natural gas it purchased from Russia. Today, Georgia enjoys power 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, with consumers purchasing their energy supplies on the basis of free market business transactions.
- On security, Georgia restored authority and stability to the Pankisi Gorge in 2003, eliminating a possible haven for terrorists who threatened regional stability (including in Russia's North Caucasus). Today, Georgia is the third largest troop contributor in Iraq, with over 2,000 soldiers on the ground in Baghdad and Wasit Province. We also deeply appreciate Georgia's peacekeeping contributions in Kosovo and its preparation to contribute to Operation Active Endeavor in Afghanistan.
- On internal reform, Georgia has emerged from the darkness of a failing state with a stolen election in November 2003 to the "world's leading economic reformer" for 2007, according to the World Bank. Georgia is now rated by the World Bank as the 18th easiest country in which to do business, placing it ahead of many EU member states. The Georgian Government has initiated judicial reform, established fair standards of entrance into universities while devolving administrative authority to local school districts, and taken serious steps to combat trafficking in persons (resulting in Georgia's elevation from Tier 2 to Tier 1 according to the U.S. Government's ranking system).

The United States has played an important role in encouraging and supporting these successes through our assistance to the government and people of Georgia in democratic institution-building, economic development, health, and education. We welcome the achievements outlined above. But, we also recognize the serious need for accelerated progress, as expressed by protestors, opposition politicians, and more recently, President Saakashvili.

The events of this past fall marked a setback for democratic momentum in Georgia. Large segments of the Georgian public expressed serious dissatisfaction during the large protest rallies in September, October, and November. This dissatisfaction stemmed from a combination of continuing poverty and unemployment, a sense the Georgian Government had grown disconnected from certain segments of civil society, and anger over a political system that seemed to be structured to limit space for a vibrant opposition to flourish.

On November 2, Georgia's opposition leaders held a peaceful protest to demand several electoral reforms. The core demand was to hold parliamentary elections as originally planned in spring, rather than concurrently with presidential elections in November as had been decided by a constitutional referendum many opposition leaders opposed. The State Department recognized this demonstration as an example of the exercise of democracy through

the right of peaceful and lawful protest. On November 3, protestors escalated beyond their reasonable demands of the previous day to a call for the overthrow of Georgia's democratically elected president, who was dubbed a "terrorist" and a "criminal." In this emotionally charged atmosphere, protestors blocked Tbilisi's main thoroughfare, Rustaveli Avenue, and occupied the plaza in front of Georgia's Parliament for several days.

On November 7, Georgia's Ministry of Internal Affairs dispersed the protestors from Rustaveli Avenue and Parliament. Later in the day, as emotions continued to escalate, police clashed with protestors in a different section of Tbilisi. The U.S. Government condemned what appeared to be the use of excessive force by the Georgian Government against the protestors. We also decried the imposition of a state of emergency and closure of the independent Imedi television station, leading to suspension of all news broadcasts except those of the Georgian Public Broadcasting station.

I traveled to Tbilisi the following week to deliver a clear message on behalf of Secretary of State Rice: namely, that to restore Georgia's democratic reputation and international support for Georgia's NATO aspirations, it was essential for the Georgian Government to lift the state of emergency, restore all TV broadcasts, and engage in good-faith negotiations with the opposition on electoral reform. I met with a wide range of leaders of Georgia's government, opposition, and civil society, as well as Imedi TV's management and journalists. Working closely with Ambassador Tefft and EU Special Representative Peter Semneby, we negotiated a way to get Imedi TV back on the air by establishing a media freedom ombudsman to pronounce on – but not censor – any Georgian TV broadcast that might violate professional or ethical standards of journalism. We were pleased to see the state of emergency lifted, and the launch of serious negotiations between the Georgian Government and opposition. We commend the efforts of Parliamentary Speaker and (during December and January) Acting President Nino Burjanadze in leading a constructive dialogue between the government and opposition, which led to the establishment of an inter-agency task force on free and fair elections. The government listened to the opposition and accepted most of its recommendations, including allowing voters to decide via plebiscite on the timing of parliamentary elections, and releasing from prison Irakli Batiashvili (whom some opposition leaders considered a political prisoner). Still, the use of force by Georgian law-enforcement personnel against protestors crossed a painful threshold in the history of an independent Georgia.

In the midst of this turmoil, President Saakashvili tried to defuse tension by taking an unusual democratic step: he called for a snap presidential election on January 5 that would shorten his term by a year. The January 5 election helped get Georgia's democratic transition back on track, though much work remains to be done to improve Georgia's election procedures. In the immediate aftermath of the January 5 vote, the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) determined the election was in essence consistent with most OSCE and Council of Europe commitments and standards for democratic elections, although it also noted significant challenges that urgently still need to be addressed. In subsequent days, opposition politicians and other private Georgian citizens raised a series of complaints about potentially serious election irregularities to Georgia's Central Election Commission. Many of these complaints

appear to have failed to receive a proper hearing. The U.S. Government spent a week of careful investigation before making an official pronouncement on the outcome of the elections, even after Georgia's Central Election Commission certified as official the result that President Saakashvili was reelected with approximately 53 percent of the vote, just three percent over the threshold required to obviate a second round.

Georgian leaders and citizens will long argue over whether irregularities skewed the outcome of the January 5 election. Our assessment, after careful consideration by our Embassy, was that there were not enough disputed votes to have changed the official outcome and therefore Mikheil Saakashvili had been legitimately re-elected as President of Georgia, but that election irregularities must be remedied prior to this spring's parliamentary elections if Georgia is to restore the faith of its voters and the international community that it has regained momentum on democratic reform.

Georgian politics have now entered a new and exciting period. President Saakashvili's narrow margin of victory over the 50 percent threshold sets an important precedent for the region, according to which a president does not need to win by an enormous margin to enjoy legitimacy. Meanwhile, having won 47 percent of the vote in the presidential election, Georgia's political opposition stands a chance to win a significant number of seats in this May's parliamentary elections. A parliament that reflects the contemporary sentiment of Georgia's voters will strengthen that institution as a cornerstone of Georgian democracy. We therefore look forward to the vigorous participation of Georgia's opposition leaders in the upcoming elections. And, we call on the Georgian Government to redress the irregularities of the presidential election and ensure the parliamentary election campaign meets international democratic standards. While the presidential election was in many ways a referendum on the leadership of President Saakashvili, the parliamentary election will be an opportunity for leaders across Georgia's political spectrum to define their country's political future.

We sense new momentum in Georgia. The coming months will be turbulent, and there may be further political demonstrations, but the Georgian Government seems to recognize the need for significant change. We already have seen changes in key leadership roles in the new government, including incorporation of civil society leaders into important positions. President Saakashvili's inauguration address offered an eloquent vision of a new direction in Georgian politics. A central theme of his address was reconciliation. President Saakashvili pledged that his government would reconnect with all of segments of Georgia's population. He called for tolerance and reconciliation between the government and the opposition, and among all ethnic groups. President Saakashvili also emphasized his desire for improved relations between Georgia and Russia. The second theme of President Saakashvili's speech was the need to bring the benefits of economic reform and growth to all the people of Georgia, especially those in rural areas. He announced a series of 50-day plans to achieve these economic goals in response to the clear calls from many Georgian voters for a more equitable share of Georgia's economic growth.

For our part, the United States will continue our diplomatic and technical assistance to the Georgian people and their government to help them reap the benefits of our shared values of democracy and human rights, which form the foundation for our partnership. We have

reviewed the recommendations of the OSCE and Council of Europe on the January 5 presidential elections, and are working to target our assistance to address the areas of concern these organizations have highlighted.

Restoring democratic momentum through free and fair parliamentary elections will be crucial to Georgia's ability to fulfill its NATO aspirations. We welcome Georgia's continuing success on defense reform in the context of its Individual Partner Action Plan as well as Georgia's active Intensified Dialogue program with NATO. We continue to support a NATO Membership Action Plan (MAP) for Georgia. We believe NATO should keep open its doors for Georgia's future membership in the Alliance at a pace determined by how quickly Georgia meets the standards of membership. This assessment will be made independent of any non-NATO country's objections. Georgia's progress on security and democratic reform should determine how quickly Georgia advances toward NATO membership. Whether Georgia achieves MAP by the April NATO Summit in Bucharest will be determined by NATO's current members. It is important to remember that a NATO offer of MAP can take place at any time that the Allies achieve consensus.

We remain active in helping Georgia forge peaceful settlements of conflicts in its separatist regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The situations in both separatist regions are now relatively calm after a period of tension throughout much of 2007. The mysterious March 11 artillery and airborne rocket attack on Georgian Government facilities in the Upper Kodori Valley of Georgia's region of Abkhazia, August 6 missile attack near the village of Tsitelubani near South Ossetia, September 20 deadly clash between Abkhaz and Georgian forces at Bokhundjara in Abkhazia, and the October 30 altercation between Russian peacekeepers and Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs troops at Ganmukhuri just beyond Abkhazia all contributed to heightened tensions in both conflict areas.

Negotiations between Tbilisi and Sukhumi remain stalled. During a December 12 meeting in Oslo, the Friends of the Secretary General on Georgia – the United States, France, Germany, the UK, and Russia – agreed a comprehensive assessment of the UN-led peace process was necessary to take stock of the situation in Abkhazia and develop new strategies for jump-starting the peace process. Most members of the Group of Friends agreed the bottom-up approach focusing on incremental confidence building measures alone was not working, and that discussions of a political settlement and return to Abkhazia of internally displaced persons (IDP's) and refugees needed to be addressed in parallel with grassroots initiatives. The Friends agreed that the UN should continue to focus on strengthening the cease-fire regime, reinvigorating the process of IDP returns, implementing confidence building measures, promoting economic rehabilitation, and ending the isolation of the Abkhaz population.

In South Ossetia, a meeting of the Joint Control Commission was held on October 23-24 after a year-long hiatus, but did not produce agreement on joint actions to resolve the conflict. The OSCE's ability to monitor reports of heavy weapons movement into South Ossetia from Russia and to increase military transparency throughout the separatist region remains severely restricted due to political constraints placed on the mission. Russia vetoed the extension of the Border Monitoring Operation in 2004; Russia has also refused to grant OSCE monitors access to the Roki tunnel into South Ossetia on the Georgian-Russian border, and at a crucial road

juncture near the South Ossetian village of Didi Gupta, through which we believe South Ossetian troops and military equipment circumvent OSCE monitors. The OSCE mission has expressed its serious concerns about the presence of heavy military equipment, as well as the continuing influx of armed personnel and ammunition into the region, and has requested additional monitoring officers to help expand its observation capacity.

Kosovo casts an ominous shadow over Abkhazia and South Ossetia. President Putin and other senior Russian officials have intimated Russia might recognize the independence of Abkhazia in the wake of Kosovo's independence. We have pointed out to Russia that this linkage is artificial and masks the serious differences between Kosovo and Georgia. Kosovo's history of UN administration and NATO protection, the status process envisioned by UNSCR 1244, and the commitments of the Kosovar authorities to guaranteeing minority rights as well as the safe return of IDPs and refugees create a different situation from that in Georgia's separatist regions. Moreover, we believe Russia recognizes the serious and negative impact recognition of Abkhazia's independence could have on stability throughout Russia's own North Caucasus region.

On the positive side, Russian-Georgian relations have recently shown tentative signs of improvement, including Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov's attendance at President Saakashvili's inauguration. We hope this portends concrete steps to normalize relations between Moscow and Tbilisi, including Russia's lifting of all economic embargoes against Georgia. President Saakashvili extended a hand to Russia in his inaugural address on January 20 and pledged to work together "in a spirit of mutual respect, camaraderie, and shared gains." We hope Russia will take him up on this offer and end the remaining economic and transportation sanctions it imposed against Georgia in the fall of 2006.

Georgia should continue to avoid overreacting to any provocative rhetoric, and should pursue exclusively peaceful and diplomatic means of resolving the separatist conflicts, as indeed it has for some time now. Russia should recognize that a stable, democratic, and prosperous Georgia is surely a better neighbor than the alternative. These are messages that we will continue to reinforce in our discussions with both countries.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman and Members of the Commission. I am happy to answer any questions.