

U.S. Helsinki Commission Hearing: “On Violations of the OSCE Principles and Commitments by the Russian Federation, and Severe Human Rights Situation in the Illegally Occupied Regions of Georgia – Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia”

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Introduction

Chairman Wicker, Co-Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Cardin, Ranking Member Hastings, and distinguished Commissioners, thank you for the opportunity to testify at this hearing.

Today we are speaking about violations of the OSCE principles and commitments by the Russian Federation in the illegally occupied regions of Georgia.

And I feel that this is a quite appropriate topic of discussion not only because ten years have passed since the Russia-Georgia war, when the Russian Federation invaded my country and occupied two Georgian regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, but also because Russia continues its aggressive policy aimed at redrawing the borders and retaining the so-called zones of influence.

As Chairman Wicker has very rightly pointed out, this undermines the security and peace in Europe and creates a very dangerous environment that if not appropriately countered may lead to developments in the region that will be hard to reverse.

In my remarks today I will brief you about the situation in the Georgian regions illegally occupied by the Russian Federation. I would also like to draw your attention to the humanitarian, social, and other costs that Russian occupation has imposed on people residing in the occupied and adjacent areas. And I will conclude my remarks highlighting the U.S. role in reinforcing Georgia’s efforts for preserving sovereignty and territorial integrity, as well as successful reconciliation and confidence-building.

Main Points

It should be mentioned from the outset that since 2008 the Russian Federation is in breach of full spectrum of principles of the Helsinki Final Act of the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe, such as:

- sovereignty and territorial integrity; inviolability of frontiers;
- refraining from the threat or use of force;
- refraining from making each other's territory the object of military occupation;
- refraining from any demand for, or act of, seizure and usurpation of territory of another State;
- the human rights and fundamental freedoms, and etc.

Russia’s Illegal Military Presence

Through these ten years, the Russian Federation has intensified its illegal steps towards factual annexation of Georgian regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia. Moscow has further

continued the implementation of so-called “integration treaties”, absorbing Georgia’s occupied regions into Russia’s military, political, economic and social systems.

In gross violations of all the international obligations, the Russian Federation reinforces its illegal military presence in the occupied regions of Georgia having illegally stationed fully operational military bases [with up to 10,000 militaries and 3,000 FSB personnel and sophisticated offensive weaponry], constantly conducting military drills [as part of the exercises of its Southern Military District] and violating Georgian airspace with its UAVs and military helicopters.

At the same time, Russian Federation intensifies the installation of barbed wire fences and other kinds of artificial barriers along the occupation line. The total length of the barriers has reached 49 km along the occupation line in Abkhazia region and 52 km along the occupation line in Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia.

Against this background, the EU Monitoring Mission deployed in Georgia on the basis of the Ceasefire Agreement is not allowed by the Russian Federation to enter the occupied Regions to fully implement its mandate throughout the whole territory of Georgia.

Human Rights Violations

The Human Rights situation remains alarming, with fundamental rights of the local population infringed on a daily basis. Against the backdrop of intensified ethnic discrimination, restrictions on free movement, illegal detentions and kidnappings, deprivation of property rights, prohibition of education in native language and other ethnically based violations, the local population is deprived of minimal safeguards for their lives. This is particularly alarming given that international human rights mechanisms are not allowed to these regions of Georgia. As a result of several waves of ethnic cleansing since close to half a million people have been expelled from their homes to become IDPs and refugees. And they are deprived of their right to return to their homes in safety and dignity. Worth to note that since the August 2008 war 53 Georgian villages and 35.000 houses have been burned and ruined.

Murder of ethnic Georgians by the representatives of the occupation regimes has become a dangerous trend. We all remember the killings of David Basharuli, Giga Otkhзорia and Archil Tatumashvili. In all these cases, despite cooperation by the government of Georgia in the relevant formats, the questions still remain unanswered and the perpetrators unpunished. This makes crystal clear that the Russian occupation regimes in Sokhumi and Tskhinvali not only strengthen the sense of impunity, but also further encourage ethnically targeted violence and crime against the Georgian population.

In that regard on the basis of the Resolution of the Parliament of Georgia the “Otkhзорia-Tatumashvili List” was adopted that includes the persons accused and convicted of gross human rights violations in the occupied regions. Georgian Government seeks from its partners the imposition of sanctions on persons included in the List. To be very clear, the aim of this List is to end impunity and prevent further aggravation of the human rights situation in Georgia’s occupied territories that represent “black holes,” an inaccessible place for international human rights watchdogs and humanitarian organizations.

Georgia’s Peaceful Conflict Resolution Policy

With these provocative steps the Russian federation tries to make the international community cope with its version of “new realities” and undermine the efforts of Georgia and its international partners for peaceful conflict resolution.

Nevertheless, throughout these ten years since the 2008 Russia-Georgia war and occupation by the Russian Federation of two Georgian regions, the Government of Georgia has been pursuing peaceful conflict resolution policy unwaveringly:

- We remain in full compliance with the EU mediated 12 August 2008 Ceasefire Agreement;
- We have reconfirmed our adherence to the non-use of force principle at various levels numerously and have implemented this commitment, still awaiting for the reciprocity from the Russian Federation;
- We pursue the policy of dialogue with the Russian Federation aimed at de-escalation of tensions;
- We remain committed to result-oriented engagement in the Geneva International Discussions and do our utmost to solve security and humanitarian problems of conflict-affected population;
- Reconciliation and engagement policy remains our priority and we have even reinvigorated our efforts by presenting new opportunities through the new peace initiative “A Step to a Better Future”. These proposals are aimed at improving the humanitarian, social, and economic conditions of conflict-affected population, and fostering people-to-people contacts and confidence building between the communities divided by war and occupation lines.

At the same time let me underline here that international support is decisive in order to succeed in the peaceful conflict resolution process. We need to be determined and consistent to effectively cope with the destructive policy of the Russian Federation. In this respect we believe that the further work needs to be done in the following directions:

- We need to reinvigorate our efforts both within the GID in order to reach progress on the core items like non-use of force commitment and implementation of this principle, the establishment of international security arrangements on the ground, and the return of IDPs and refugees, and outside this format as well.
- Implementation of the Ceasefire agreement by the Russian Federation, including withdrawal of its forces to the pre-war positions and creation of the international security mechanisms on the ground is essential to ensure lasting peace and security, as well as reconciliation of divided societies. Elaboration of concrete implementing steps would help advance this process.
- We need to urge the Russian Federation as a power exercising effective control in the occupied regions to cease the human rights violations, ensure the implementation of the right of the IDPs and refugees to return to their homes in safety and dignity and allow international human rights monitors to address and prevent further alarming developments in the occupied regions.
- In that regard I should also underline that imposing sanctions on the individuals included in the “Otkhozoria-Tatunashvili List” by the international society would be an important step preventing the grave human rights violations in the occupied territories where the Government of Georgia is deprived of the possibility to exercise its legitimate jurisdiction.
- We need to further intensify our efforts in order to ensure the unimpeded access of the EU Monitoring Mission as well as international human rights monitors and humanitarian organizations to the occupied regions of Georgia.

The U.S. Role and Conclusion

While talking on the peaceful conflict resolution in Georgia, I should emphasize that the United States has a particular role in this process as a strategic partner to Georgia and a participant of the Geneva International Discussions. We greatly value the U.S.-Georgia strategic partnership and the contribution of the U.S. peace and stability in Georgia. The impact of the U.S. assistance is significant on the ground.

On a political level, U.S. support has been extremely important in reinforcing Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. The voice of the U.S. Congress has been always vocal on these very important to Georgia matters and we have been truly enjoying a very strong bipartisan support for years.

In June, bipartisan Georgia Support Act was introduced in the U.S. Congress by Co-Chairmen of the Georgia Caucus, U.S. Congressmen Ted Poe (R-TX) and Gerald Connolly (D-VA). We also greatly appreciate the recent bipartisan resolution authored by Senators Perdue, Isakson, and Cardin marking the 100th anniversary of the First Democratic Republic of Georgia.

It is the time that this political support is further reinvigorated in the concrete work and practical steps in order to ensure the implementation of Ceasefire Agreement and comprehensive peaceful settlement in my country, which is a role model for the South Caucasus and a wider region. We believe through consistence and hard work we can lay the ground for lasting peace and security in Georgia. In that regard, I would like to emphasize the necessity of the peaceful conflict resolution to be placed high in the international as well as in the US dialogue with Russia. Strong leadership of the United States is essential to reach progress in the resolution of the Russia-Georgia conflict.

We deem it crucial that the United States together with the international society does not keep a blind eye on Russia's aggressive actions with regards to the occupied territory of Georgia and severe security and humanitarian situation on the ground that this policy entails. Firm stance of the international society, and particularly the US, is decisive to send a clear message to Russia that this policy directed against sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia is not acceptable.

Let me once again thank the Commission for holding this hearing.

I will stop here and will gladly take questions afterward.