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## Russia's Escalation of the Conflicts in Georgia: A Brief Chronology of Recent Actions

Moscow's attempt at de facto annexation through military & legal means violates Georgia's sovereignty, prompting international condemnation

### I. INTRODUCTION

Russia is implementing an increasingly dangerous policy of open annexation and military aggression on sovereign Georgian soil in the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Rather than provide security on the ground, as per its United Nations mandate, Russia has become a party to the conflict.

Since spring, Moscow has illegally introduced offensive troops and heavy weaponry into the Abkhazia region; shot down a Georgian aircraft over Georgian airspace, an act of aggression verified by the United Nations and the OSCE; introduced "railroad troops" into the region that aim to prepare the territory's infrastructure for full-scale military operations; and issued a presidential decree that aims to legally incorporate the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into Russia.

The United Nations, the European Union, NATO, the European Parliament, the OSCE, and others have condemned these moves. All have called for Russia to reverse them.

### II. A CHRONOLOGY OF RUSSIAN AGGRESSION

The key actions that comprise Russia's apparent policy of de facto annexation include the following:

#### **March 6, 2006: Russia Withdraws Unilaterally from CIS Sanctions**

On March 6, 2008, Russia makes a unilateral decision to walk out of 1996 CIS sanctions banning the delivery of weapons and military aid to separatist rebels in the Abkhazia region, marking an alarming first step in Russia's policy of open annexation.

The sanctions had been created based upon a common understanding that ethnic cleansing had taken place in the region, and that the separatist regime responsible for these gross violations of human rights had to be sent a clear and unequivocal message.

Walking out of the sanctions implies that Russia views ethnic cleansing, violent separatism, and the transportation/shipment of weapons as acceptable behavior.

#### **March 21, 2008: Duma Calls on Kremlin to Recognize Abkhazia & South Ossetia**

The Russian Parliament adopts a resolution urging the Russian government to consider "the expediency of recognizing the independence" of Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions. The resolution also called on the Kremlin to intensify efforts aimed at protecting its newly minted citizens in the territories. (Russia has been illegally distributing its passports to residents in the separatist regions since 2001.)

#### **April 3, 2008: President Putin Vows De Facto Recognition**

In a letter to the separatist rebel leaders in the Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions, Russia's then-President Vladimir Putin vows to continue his country's de facto recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia through means that are "not declarative, but practical"—such as by lifting sanctions and establishing legal links.

***April 16, 2006: Presidential Decree Established Direct Legal Ties To Separatists***

On April 16, 2008, Russia further escalates its policy of open annexation by establishing direct diplomatic and legal ties with separatist rebels in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as President Putin signs a decree to this effect.

The decree recognizes the legality of separatist institutions and their documents, therefore offering juridical recognition in direct contravention of Georgia's internationally recognized sovereignty and territorial integrity.

The decree is condemned by a wide array of international institutions and states including the European Union, the OSCE, NATO, the US Department of State and, for the first time, four out of five (UK, France, Germany, USA) of the Group of Friends of the UN Secretary General, charged with finding a peaceful solution to the conflict. Collectively, these actors call upon the Russian Federation to repeal the April 16 decree.

To date, Russia has categorically rejected these calls.

***April 20, 2008: Russian Jet Fighter Shoots Down Georgian Aircraft***

In an act of aggression later confirmed by UNOMIG, a Russian fighter aircraft—either a MiG-29 or an Su-27—shoots down and destroys a Georgian unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) in Georgian airspace.

The unarmed UAV of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia was conducting routine surveillance above the conflict zone. A UN mission on the ground (UNOMIG) analyzed radar tracking data and video transmitted from the UAV in the moments before its destruction; the UN observers deemed the data to be authentic and impossible to simulate.

UNOMIG added that the data correlated with eyewitness reports from civilians and Russian peacekeepers that the mission interviewed. It said that the Russian interception mission was probably controlled by an operator using a separatist radar located at the Sukhumi airport.

Furthermore, the Russian fighter was found by UNOMIG to have fired a heat-seeking missile at the UAV, "very close to, or even inside, an international airway at a time where civilian aircraft were flying."

***April 25, 2008: Use of "Military Means" Threatened by Russian Envoy***

The Russian Foreign Ministry's special envoy for relations with CIS countries, Valery Kenyakin, declares that "Russia will have to react through military means" in case Georgia's central government uses force to reestablish control over its separatist territories.

***April 28, 2008: Russia Announces Illegal, Unilateral Decision to Increase Troops***

On April 28, 2008, Russia announces its unilateral intention to increase its troop presence in the Abkhazia region. The decision is illegal as there is no pre-notification or pre-agreement on the deployment. The decision therefore constitutes an act of open military aggression, designed to change the on-ground balance of forces.

***May 8, 2008: Warning of Further Troop Increase***

The Russian Defense Ministry warns it might send even more forces into the Abkhazia region, in addition to the heavy artillery, armored vehicles, anti-aircraft systems, and over 400 paratroopers with 30 BMD-2 airborne vehicles it had recently deployed.

***May 9, 2008: Russian Ambassador Claims War Will Result From Withdrawal***

The Russian ambassador to Georgia, Vyacheslav Kovalenko, claims that withdrawal of Russian peacekeeping forces from the Abkhazia region "will result in war".

**May 31, 2008: The Tipping Point—"Railroad Troops" Arrive in Abkhazia**

The Russian Defense Ministry announces it has sent approximately 400 of its own forces into the Abkhazia region—without consulting Georgia, and against Georgia's wishes—to "rehabilitate the region's railway and road infrastructure". The move eliminates any doubt that Russia is following through on a well-planned scheme leading to the full annexation of the Georgian region of Abkhazia.

With respect to the so-called "railway forces," several aspects of their deployment are worth noting:

- The introduction of these 400 forces into Abkhazia marks the first time that Russia has overtly overstepped its CIS mandate. Instead, in justifying the entry of these troops, Russia invoked former President Vladimir Putin's April 16 decree integrating Abkhazia into Russia's legal space.
- The April 16 decree is now being implemented militarily. This operation is managed by the Russian Ministry of Defense and consists of armed troops. Its goal is to prepare the region's railways for the transport of military equipment and to extend that network to the central government controlled Kodori gorge in Upper Abkhazia. This is a clear, imminent, and unacceptable military threat to Georgia.
- The operation was implemented against the backdrop of the nearly universal condemnation of Russia's previous provocations by the international community; a broad international endorsement of the comprehensive peace plan developed by Georgia; and the developing prospect of a constructive dialogue leading to positive changes in the peace process.

Finally, it was implemented after the assumption of the Russian Presidency by Dmitry Medvedev, implying that the new President intends to pursue the destabilizing policies of his predecessor.

**July 1, 2008: Russia Launches Maritime Traffic with Separatist Region**

Russia launched a 250-passanger boat cruise from its port of Sochi to the resort town of Gagra in the Abkhazia region on July 1, in another illegal move, as no pre-notification or pre-agreement with the central government of Georgia took place.