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European Parliament Calls for Replacement of Russian Troops in Georgia; EU-US Summit Calls on Russia to Respect Georgia's Borders

“Russian troops have lost their role of neutral and impartial peacekeepers,” Parliament declares; Ferrero-Waldner applauds Georgian peace initiative for Abkhazia

Russia's recent actions in Georgia's regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia have violated Georgia's territorial integrity and undermined regional stability, the European Parliament has declared. Meanwhile, at an EU-US Summit on June 10, leaders urged Russia to respect Georgia's borders. "We reiterate our commitment to the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognized borders," they said.

The EU's External Affairs Commissioner, Benita Ferrero-Waldner, also added her voice to the growing international chorus of criticism, saying that Russia's militarization of Abkhazia and other moves "undermine efforts to find a peaceful solution."

"The European Parliament expresses its deep disapproval at Russia's announcement that it would establish official ties with institutions within the separatist authorities of South Ossetia and Abkhazia," the Parliament said in a resolution agreed last week, adding that it "deplores, in this regard, the decision taken by the Russian Ministry of Defence on 31 May 2008 to send its forces to Abkhazia to restore the rail and road infrastructure in the breakaway region in accordance with the presidential decree."

During the debate, MPs were forceful in their condemnation of Russia. "Under the label of peacekeeping a war is being incited today, and we're standing dangerously close to this war," said MP Katrin Saks of the PSE. "It's important to give a clear assessment to the situation in Abkhazia and to express unequivocal support to Georgia."

Said Jacek Saryusz-Wolski, Chairman of European Parliament's Foreign Affairs Committee: "The European Parliament should show firm commitment and support the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia. We should call on the UN Security Council to boost the mandate and resources of UNOMIG to progressively establish truly independent international peacekeeping forces. We should recommend that the EU Council and Commission take a more active role and engage in conflict resolution."

Meanwhile, Ferrero-Waldner praised Georgia's proposals for resolving the separatist conflict in Abkhazia. "We have welcomed President Saakashvili's proposed new peace initiative for Abkhazia," she said. "I think it is important that this is developed in a way that constitutes a basis for a constructive dialogue with all parties involved."

In the past three months, Russia has sharply increased its military presence and activity in Georgia's region of Abkhazia, in violation of international agreements. The United Nations confirmed that on April 20 a Russian jet shot down an unarmed and unmanned surveillance drone of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgian over Georgian airspace. Russia has continued to illegally build up the number of troops, with the latest increase taking place on May 30, when Russia sent 400 "railroad troops" to the region of Abkhazia.

Russia also has extended its economic and legal relations with Georgia's territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, engaging in a form of de facto annexation of Georgia's territories. In March, Russia unilaterally withdrew from a 1996 CIS embargo against the region of Abkhazia that banned weapons transfers to the separatist rebels. On April, 16 then-President Putin issued a decree allowing for official legal and economic ties to Georgia's territories. The EU, NATO, the US, and others have called for Russia to rescind the decree.

DEBATE IN THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

"The recent decisions taken by the Russian Federation on strengthening links with the separatist de facto authorities in Abkhazia and South Ossetia represent an erosion of Georgia's territorial integrity, and these measures have increased expectations of future recognition in the two separatist regions and, therefore, undermine efforts to find a peaceful solution. The Commission therefore calls on the Russian Federation to withdraw these decisions – or, at least, not to implement them, as the European Union has also clearly expressed in its statement."

"We have welcomed President Saakashvili's proposed new peace initiative for Abkhazia. I think it is important that this is developed in a way that constitutes a basis for a constructive dialogue with all parties involved."

"I think that an overall revision of peace mechanisms, as for instance suggested by the UN Secretary General in his latest report on Abkhazia, could help bring forward the peaceful settlement of these conflicts, if this is supported by all parties. We should all stand ready to play a more active role in supporting these efforts."

Let us not forget that, in the past four years, Georgia has made tremendous efforts to move forward toward a democratic and market-oriented society."

Benita Ferrero-Waldner, European Commissioner for External Relations

"The European Parliament should show firm commitment and support the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia. We should call on the UN Security Council to boost the mandate and resources of UNAMIG to progressively establish truly independent international peacekeeping forces. We should recommend that the EU Council and Commission take a more active role and engage in conflict resolution."

Jacek Saryusz-Wolski, Member of the European Parliament

"A flood of petrodollars is making Russia a resurgent power but, regrettably, it sees everything in zero-sum terms. Putin's foreign policy priority – to reconstruct something looking like the old Soviet Union – has been focused on what Russia patronisingly refers to as its 'near abroad' – the former Soviet republics in the Baltics, Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, where Russia is determined to retain its sphere of influence. They are being punished for looking westwards towards NATO and the EU, rather than towards Moscow."

Georgia, under the Western-oriented reformist President Saakashvili, has suffered considerably from Russia's heavy-handedness. Aside from using trade and energy supplies as diplomatic weapons, Putin has consistently sought to undermine Georgia's territorial integrity through tacit support for the breakaway, self-styled republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The arrival of yet more Russian soldiers in Abkhazia – supposedly as peacekeepers but undoubtedly combat ready – and the shooting down of a Georgian drone recently has provocatively increased tension in the region."

Charles Tannock, Member of the European Parliament

"I know from my visits to Georgia that the country is making real efforts to strengthen its ties with the European Union. I think . . . that we should now support Georgia at this time of crisis and in the face of what a colleague a few moments ago described as Russian imperialism."

Russia has never accepted the territorial integrity of Georgia with respect to Abkhazia or South Ossetia. I am concerned that the European Union is not doing enough to stop this escalating violence. History will not pardon us if we do nothing. Do nothing and the whole area could dissolve into a war – a war which no one will win."

So my message this afternoon is to do everything within your means, at the highest level, to ensure that everyone, above all the Russians, understands how dangerous the moves are that are taking place in this area and that we have got to stop this escalation before we have another Balkan crisis."

Robert Evans, Member of the European Parliament

"Let us not dilute today's message. Firstly, there will be no tolerance of provocative acts by Russia. Secondly, the territorial integrity of Georgia cannot be undermined in any way and, thirdly, peacekeepers in the potential breakaway regions must be neutral and trusted by all sides. Russian troops clearly do not meet these criteria."

Urszula Gacek, Member of the European Parliament

EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT RESOLUTION

European Parliament resolution of 5 June 2008 on the situation in Georgia

The European Parliament ,

- having regard to its previous resolutions on Georgia, in particular those of 26 October 2006⁽¹⁾ and 29 November 2007⁽²⁾ ,
- having regard to its resolution of 15 November 2007 on strengthening the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP)⁽³⁾ , and its resolutions of 17 January 2008 on a more effective EU policy for South Caucasus⁽⁴⁾ , and on a Black Sea Regional Policy Approach⁽⁵⁾ ,
- having regard to the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the European Communities and their Member States, of the one part, and Georgia, of the other part⁽⁶⁾ , which entered into force on 1 July 1999,
- having regard to the ENP Action Plan endorsed by the EU-Georgia Cooperation Council on 14 November 2006,
- having regard to the UN Security Council resolution 1808(2008) of 15 April 2008 that supports the territorial integrity of Georgia and extends the mandate of the UN Observer Mission in Georgia (UNOMIG) until 15 October 2008,
- having regard to the recommendations adopted by the EU-Georgia Parliamentary Cooperation Committee on 28-30 April 2008,
- having regard to the declarations by the Slovenian Presidency of the Council on behalf of the EU on the escalation of tension between Georgia and Russia of 18 April and 2 May 2008,
- having regard to the Statement of Preliminary Findings and Conclusions of 22 May 2008 of the International Election Observation Mission to the Georgian parliamentary elections,
- having regard to the conclusions of the investigation by UNOMIG of 26 May 2008 into the shooting down of a Georgian unmanned aircraft,
- having regard to the conclusions on Georgia of the General Affairs and External Relations Council of 26 May 2008,
- having regard to Rule 103(4) of its Rules of Procedure,

A. whereas the European Union remains committed to further developing and deepening its relations with Georgia and supports the necessary political and economic reforms, measures to

establish solid and efficient democratic institutions and an effective and independent judiciary and further efforts to combat corruption, thereby creating a peaceful and prosperous Georgia that can contribute to stability in the region and the rest of Europe,

B. whereas following a Presidential decree Russian ministries and other state agencies were instructed to establish official ties with counterpart agencies in the Georgian breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia,

C. whereas the Russian Federation withdrew from the 19 January 1996 decision of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Council of Heads of State which prohibits the signatory states from any military cooperation with the separatist authorities of Abkhazia,

D. whereas in May 2008 Russia unilaterally deployed further troops and moved heavy artillery into Abkhazia under the auspices of a CIS-sanctioned peacekeeping mission, and announced its intention to establish 15 additional check-points along the administrative boundary-line; whereas Russian representatives announced that the number of troops of the Russian battalion stationed in South Ossetia may be increased,

E. whereas on 20 April 2008 a Georgian reconnaissance drone was shot down over Abkhazia; whereas the recent report by UNOMIG on the incident indicates that the reconnaissance drone was shot down by a Russian aircraft; whereas the report also states that Georgia should stop sending these reconnaissance drones over Abkhazia,

F. whereas no official high-level meetings have taken place between Georgian and Abkhaz representatives under the auspices of the United Nations (UN) since October 2007; whereas the Georgian President Mikheil Saakashvili has put forward new proposals concerning the resolution of the conflict in Abkhazia, which include broad political representation at the highest levels of the Georgian government, granting veto rights on all major legislation related to Abkhazia, and establishing international guarantees to ensure broad federalism, unlimited autonomy and security,

G. whereas Georgia has taken official steps calling for the revision of the current peacekeeping format or the replacement of the Russian peacekeeping contingent currently deployed in Abkhazia,

H. whereas on 15 May 2008 the UN General Assembly adopted resolution A/RES/62/249 recognising the right of "refugees and internally displaced persons and their descendants, regardless of ethnicity" to return to Abkhazia and emphasising the importance of preserving the property rights of refugees and internally displaced persons, including victims of reported "ethnic cleansing",

I. whereas the Tbilisi authorities have suspended bilateral talks with Moscow on Russia's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in protest at the Russian decision to step up cooperation with the self-proclaimed republics of Abkhazia and South Ossetia; whereas the Russian ban on imports of Georgian wine and agricultural goods is still in place,

J. whereas a nationwide plebiscite took place in Georgia on 5 January 2008; whereas at NATO's 2-4 April 2008 summit in Bucharest no membership action plan was offered to Georgia but a political commitment for eventual membership was made,

K. whereas Russia's granting of citizenship to Abkhazians and South Ossetians, enabling them to take advantage of the EU-Russia visa facilitation agreement, is increasingly disadvantaging Georgian citizens as a similar agreement between Georgia and the EU is not yet in place,

L. whereas, despite efforts to conduct Georgia's elections in line with international standards, the International Election Observation Mission to the Georgian parliamentary elections of 21 May 2008 identified some problems which should be addressed in due course,

1. Expresses its deep concern at the escalation of the situation in Abkhazia and calls on all parties to refrain from actions that could further destabilise the situation; calls for renewed international

efforts to bring the parties back to dialogue and restart the peace process with a view to reaching a lasting and comprehensive settlement;

2. Expresses its deep disapproval at Russia's announcement that it would establish official ties with institutions within the separatist authorities of South Ossetia and Abkhazia; deplores, in this regard, the decision taken by the Russian Ministry of Defence on 31 May 2008 to send its forces to Abkhazia to restore the rail and road infrastructure in the breakaway region in accordance with the presidential decree;

3. Reaffirms its full support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognised borders and calls on Russia to revoke this decision, which undermines the international peace efforts in which Russia is also taking part;

4. Supports the efforts that have been made to calm the situation through talks between the High Representative for the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP), President Saakashvili and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Viktorovich Lavrov; urges the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus to find ways to facilitate a dialogue between all parties concerned, and to try to restore a degree of mutual confidence;

5. Urges the Russian Federation to withdraw its additional troops in Abkhazia immediately; takes the view that the present peacekeeping format must be revised since the Russian troops have lost their role of neutral and impartial peacekeepers and calls for a deeper European involvement in these frozen conflicts in order to move the peace processes forward;

6. Calls on the Council to consider bolstering the international presence in the conflict zone by sending an European Security and Defence Policy (ESDP) border mission, drawing on the positive experience of the European Union Border Assistance Mission (EUBAM) at the Transnistrian section of the border between Moldova and Ukraine, while suggesting that the Member States could take a more active role in UNOMIG; calls on the UN to boost the mandate and the resources of UNOMIG;

7. Calls on the UN Security Council, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) and other international organisations to support the proposals of the Georgian Government for new alternative negotiations and peacekeeping formats, which include the progressive establishment of truly independent international peacekeeping forces;

8. Calls, in this regard, on the Council and the Commission to raise the issues of Abkhazia and South Ossetia firmly with their Russian counterparts at the forthcoming EU-Russia summit and during the negotiations on a new strengthened partnership agreement, and urges the Russian authorities not to oppose an eventual ESDP mission in the region including an EU presence in civilian and military peacekeeping operations;

9. Calls for an investigation and inspections by the UN into whether all relevant UN Security Council resolutions are being closely followed by all actors in the conflict zone, including whether heavy weaponry is present;

10. Takes note of the outcome of the parliamentary elections on 21 May 2008 and the findings of the International Election Observation Mission, which states that overall the election day was calm and generally was assessed positively, and that substantial progress has been made since the January presidential elections;

11. Stresses, however, that further efforts have to be made in close cooperation with the international community to address and solve all the problems identified in the electoral process caused by the inconsistent and incomplete implementation of the OSCE and Council of Europe standards, and to improve and consolidate Georgia's democratic achievements; calls on the Georgian authorities to deal with all complaints about the electoral process in a transparent manner and to work on further improvement so that trust and confidence in the electoral process can increase further;

12. Calls on all political forces in Georgia to respect the rule of law, to commit themselves to constructive dialogue and compromise and to refrain from further polarising Georgian society;

recognises that the lack of trust between the government and the opposition parties is an obstacle to further democratic development and expects all political forces to strive for a democratic political culture where political debates take place in parliament and political opponents are respected and constructive dialogue is aimed at supporting and consolidating Georgia's fragile democratic institutions;

13. Supports Georgia's aspirations to speed up the process of integration with the European Union in the framework of an enhanced ENP;

14. Calls on the Council and the Commission to speed up the opening of negotiations on the EU-Georgia visa regime in order to conclude the visa facilitation and readmission agreements with Georgia in the near future so as to ensure that citizens of Georgia are not disadvantaged in relation to those holding Russian passports in the separatist regions;

15. Welcomes the Council Conclusions of 18 February 2008 on the ENP concerning the need to start negotiations on deep and comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DFTAs) where possible; urges the Commission to seek a rapid agreement with Georgia on its ambitions and to secure a negotiation mandate from the Member States; hopes for further progress on this matter during the French Presidency;

16. Welcomes the setting-up of the EU-Georgia Subcommittee on Justice, Freedom and Security with a view to stepping up the bilateral dialogue and implementing the ENP Action Plan;

17. Hopes that Georgia will make full use of the additional financial possibilities provided by the Neighbourhood Investment Facility (NIF), in particular in projects relating to infrastructure, energy and environmental protection, but calls on the Commission to pay increased attention to education, democracy building and social areas;

18. Instructs its President to forward this resolution to the Council, the Commission and the Member States, the President and parliament of Georgia, the OSCE, the Council of Europe and the President and parliament of the Russian Federation.