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EU Condemns Increase of Russian Troop Levels in Abkhazia, As President of Georgia Appeals for Peace

**“We can build our prosperity together,” President Saakashvili Tells Residents of
Abkhazia & South Ossetia**

**“Unilateral increase of Russian troops number in Abkhazia is irresponsible and
provocative step”: MFA of Georgia**

As Russia moved new troops into Abkhazia, provoking a sharp reaction from the West, President Mikheil Saakashvili appealed to residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia for unity, peace, and a shared future.

“We can build our prosperity together,” President Saakashvili said on the evening of April 29 in a nationwide address, in which he also highlighted Georgia’s recent peace plan for Abkhazia. “Our plan of action is not about war, but about creating jobs; it is not about strife, but about taking care of our children and the elderly, raising pensions, building better schools and hospitals.”

Russia, meanwhile, sharply escalated tensions yesterday by increasing the number of its troops stationed in Abkhazia. Heavy artillery, armored vehicles, and additional military units have already crossed the Georgian-Russian border at the Psou River into the separatist region. Russia claims that the move is within its legal limits, but the action drew a sharp rebuke from EU foreign policy chief Javier Solana. “Even if the increase in peacekeepers is within limits ... I don't think it is a wise measure to increase now,” Solana said.

Swedish Foreign Minister Carl Bildt wrote on his blog yesterday that Russia’s moves have created a very dangerous situation. “It is altogether obvious that this is part of a fast and worrying escalation of Russian measures for controlling territories. We are now in an obviously dangerous situation where one step leads to another. So it is important that there is a European reaction.”

Last week, a Russian MIG-29 fighter jet, operating illegally from inside Abkhazia, shot down an unmanned reconnaissance aircraft of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Georgia. On April 16, by order of President Putin, Russia extended a form of legal recognition to Georgia’s separatist regimes—triggering condemnation from the EU, NATO, and countries around the world.

Yesterday, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov threatened Georgia with “retaliatory action.” Lavrov invoked the supposed need to protect Russian “citizens” in the separatist territory; however, almost all those with Russian passports in Abkhazia hold them illegally, following a six-year-long passportization campaign by Moscow. Russia is now using this “manufactured diaspora” as cover for its increasingly bold attempt to annex Abkhazia.

Prime Minister of Georgia Lado Gurgенidze warned that the movement of soldiers and arms by Russia into the region would be seen as a bellicose act. “We will consider the additional soldiers and arms as illegal and potential aggressors,” he said after an emergency session of Georgia's security council. Prime Minister dismissed as “simply untrue” claims by Russia that Georgia had increased its own troop levels in Abkhazia, citing monitoring reports from the UN Observer Mission in Georgia that debunked the Russian assertions.

In his speech last night, President Saakashvili made clear that Russia sought to divide Georgia. “The more we speak about peace, the more this force speaks about war,” he said. “I will not allow our homeland and our people to be consumed by hatred and bloodshed.”

President Saakashvili noted that Georgia's peace proposals had won the unanimous support of the international community, which also has underscored its unwavering support for the country's territorial integrity. "The whole civilized world is openly and loudly saying today that the project of dividing Georgia into separate regions will never be realized," he said. "The world will never recognize separatist entities."

FULL TEXT OF SPEECH BY PRESIDENT MIKHEIL SAKASHVILI

My dear compatriots, our Abkhaz and Ossetian brothers and sisters...

I know that many residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, as well as in the whole Georgia, are still impoverished. Many are unemployed, many do not have even a basic income, and they meet enormous hardships struggling to sustain their families.

From the Psou River to the Red Bridge, and from the Roki Tunnel to Sarphi, our families struggle against poverty.

Three hundred thousand proud citizens of Abkhazia remain refugees in their own country... they cannot return to their homes, their villages, their relatives, the graves of their ancestors, and their numerous friends together with whom they grew up and studied in school.

If someone in Georgia is contending with poverty, these are, first of all, our refugees. But the same struggle faces those families divided from the rest of Georgia by the conflict—families that are left on the other side of the barricades and who live in Abkhazia and South Ossetia today.

My brothers and sisters,

Enmity and isolation are enemies of a proper, dignified way of life.

We all deserve much more. We can build our prosperity together. We all are sick and tired of the strife that has lasted for too many years.

I am sure that everyone in Georgia, and first of all you, our Abkhaz and Ossetian brothers, desire a much better life. All of us dream of a normal life for our children, not the way we have it today...

All of us dream of having jobs, a stable income, hope for the future; a tranquil and human life; not to be afraid of tomorrow, to live without our dignity being abused.

My government and I personally are completely dedicated to this vision.

Our plan of action is not about war, but about creating jobs; it is not about strife, but about taking care of our children and the elderly, raising pensions, building better schools and hospitals; it's not about isolation, but about developing tourism and agriculture, increasing the income of our people, creating the chance of a successful life for everyone.

I am sure that we will succeed together in realizing this plan. Our vision is not about destruction by enmity, but about construction through love.

I am very well aware of what is going on in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and I know how hard the life of your families is under the separatist, totally corrupt and criminal regimes. Such a life was not really your choice. But today the huge, brutal aggressor is trying to decide instead of you, to make the choice about your future instead of you, and to make us all stay forever in this state of conflict and strife—a state it imposed on us and which has brought us nothing but destruction and regression during the last 15 years.

This brutal and irresponsible force is trying, even today, to drag us into a conflict—one that would be profitable for it, but destructive for us. It is trying to make us believe that we will build prosperity through destruction and enmity.

Maybe, years ago, some of us really believed in this. But today, we know very well that it is a lie.... We know by virtue of our experience of 15 years that it is impossible to build one's happiness on enmity and destruction.

The whole civilized world is openly and loudly saying today that the project of dividing Georgia into separate regions will never be realized. The world will never recognize separatist entities.

Dividing Georgia by force, against the will of our people, through imposed conflicts: This would mean that our children could never have a chance to live normal lives, pursuing their dreams. They would always live under the shadow of war, strife and fear.

We must not let this happen. We must stand up together and say that we are not enemies, that we have one common enemy, and that is the enmity itself. The enmity that does not come from our own roots, that was imposed on us, and that we have never chosen ourselves.

That is why in order to achieve our common goals—prosperity for our families and the defeat of poverty—there is a single path we must follow. It is the road to freedom and democracy, the road to cooperation, to building prosperity and a strong nation. This is the only road to progress and development for our families and our children.

And these are not words said in vain. In order to achieve these goals, the Government of Georgia has developed a peace plan, supported by the whole democratic world. It provides an absolute guarantee that in unified Georgia, the security of each and every citizen will be protected, as well as the rights and freedoms of each and every ethnic group. The political and economic autonomy of the Abkhaz and Ossetian people will be safeguarded. Their great cultural heritage will be guaranteed and supported.

Once more, we present our peace initiative for Abkhazia, which includes:

- The creation of the office of vice-president of Georgia, which will be held by an Abkhaz and who will have the right to veto any constitutional issue related to Abkhazia;
- Guaranteed representation in the central government of Georgia;
- International guarantees for broad federalism and unlimited autonomy;
- Guarantees of protection of cultural, linguistic, and ethnic identity;
- Security guarantees;
- Creation of a unified system of justice, tariffs, and customs and border protection;
- Creation of free economic zones.

Our aim is not just territorial integrity, but the restoration and development of the relations that our peoples have had for centuries and which were temporarily halted as a result of the devastating influence of an external force.

Together we have a great future, though we must work hard to restore what has been destroyed. But before we speak about the future, I want to underscore that modern Georgia, this common homeland of ours, offers you so much even today.

This modern Georgia and our common unity within it offer you peace and security, which is so lacking now.

This modern Georgia offers you a life without the tyranny of gangs and the rule of the criminal bosses.

Today's Georgia offers you full opportunities for free, lawful business activity, without the interference of others.

We offer you far better education and medical care for your families.

Modern Georgia offers you true freedom of choice, where nobody can force you to become another country's citizen or imprison you for wishing to elect your own parliament and president.

Today's Georgia offers an open economy and borders, order and the rule of law, safety and better prospects for development.

Modern Georgia offers peace and extends its hand of brotherhood to you.

On the other hand, there is a dark force that claims the authority to make decisions about your future—a force that deprives you of the ability to make your own choices—a force that speaks with us on your behalf.

The more we speak about peace, the more this force speaks about war...

We speak about demilitarization, while on your behalf this force speaks about intensified militarization...

We speak about free economic zones, while this force speaks about setting up new military bases and checkpoints...

We speak about increasing economic ties, while this force, on your behalf, talks about increasing its military contingent.

Why is this happening?

We do not wish for war, and it is impossible that this is what you desire. I am confident that Abkhaz and Ossetians, as small peoples, do not need confrontation—they only need to be protected and cherished.

Confrontation is only desired by the force that does not leave you choice.

Their wish is for us all to be defeated. I want everyone to understand that the presence of this force does not lead to the protection of Abkhaz and Ossetians. It only leads to the fueling of hostility that aims to defeat Georgians, Abkhaz, and Ossetians alike.

It seems there is a group of people currently atop the Russian government that aspires to complete the ethnic cleansing in Abkhazia—to clean out not only Georgians, but the Abkhaz as well.

I want to give you a firm promise that I will not allow that to happen.

I will not allow our homeland and our people to be consumed by hatred and bloodshed.

Now, as our ill-wishers seek to impose their nefarious plan upon us, we face a moment of truth—we must decide what to do with the full weight of responsibility for future generations on our shoulders.

Our unity is now a historic necessity. This is the only way for our survival and progress.

STATEMENT OF THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF GEORGIA

April 29 — Today the Russian Federation took yet another irresponsible and provocative step by unilaterally increasing the number of so called peacekeepers in Abkhazia, Georgia, without seeking prior approval and consent of the Government of Georgia.

The Government of Georgia strongly condemned this act of aggression disguised as peacekeeping operation.

The Georgian State border at the river Psou was violated when armored vehicles, heavy artillery and additional military units entered the territory. The scale of this provocation was made evident by a statement of the Russian Ministry of Defense (29 April, 2008) according to which fifteen new checkpoints have been opened on the administrative border of Abkhazia, Georgia, without Government of Georgia permission.

Georgia has consistently drawn the attention of the international community to the destabilizing role of the Russian military contingent in the conflict zones. Today's large-scale military build up in Abkhazia, Georgia represents yet another act of aggression and dangerous new step by Russia that increases the risk of escalation of the conflict, and peace and security in the whole region.

Georgia appeals to the international community and international organizations, including members of the Group of Friends of the Secretary General of the United Nations take urgent and firm actions to stop military aggression of Russia against Georgia.