

LAST UPDATED: APRIL 24, 2008, 11:00 • TBILISI

Georgia’s Values of Democracy, Freedom and Dignity Are Under Attack from Russia: President Saakashvili

In Address to Nation, President Underscores Determination to Unite Country, Redouble Reform Efforts & Engage International Community

I. INTRODUCTION

President Mikheil Saakashvili, in an address last night to the Georgian people, reiterated his government’s commitment to the country’s peaceful reunification, despite a sharp escalation in aggression by Russia.

“Our choice is whether, in the face of these worrisome events, we are pushed away from our cherished values of democracy, freedom and dignity—or whether we embrace them even more firmly,” the President said. “In the coming days and weeks, therefore, even as we address this very serious security situation, I, the President of Georgia, will refuse to move even a single inch away from our core values.”

The President highlighted the diplomatic steps Georgia is taking and the widespread support its peace plan for Abkhazia has received. The European Union, the United States, and NATO all have forcefully rebuked Russia and asserted their unwavering support for Georgia’s sovereignty.

President Saakashvili confirmed that Parliamentary elections will proceed as planned on May 21, and that Russia’s provocations will have no effect on the implementation of Georgia’s reform program. He underscored that the reunification of Georgia’s territories remains his highest priority, and that fostering prosperity and democratic freedoms is the surest path to peace.

President Saakashvili also announced that he would regularly brief opposition leaders on all foreign policy developments as a means to maintain Georgian unity.

I. FULL TEXT OF SPEECH

My fellow Georgians: I want to speak with you tonight about a series of events that threaten our nation’s security, and the steps I am taking to address these threats.

Over the past four years, my goal has been to ensure our security as a sovereign, peaceful, democratic state, while also working towards a peaceful resolution regarding our conflict territories, so that we can once again enjoy full territorial sovereignty, and ensure a peaceful, prosperous life for all our people, including those in the regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

To reach those goals and ensure our security, we have built a modern military and strengthened our ties with Europe and NATO.

For the same reason, we have also worked to improve our relations with Russia. I invited President Putin to my inaugural, and I was pleased that we were able to achieve the resumption of air flights with Russia in recent weeks.

To resolve the issues in our conflict territories, I also offered a new and unprecedented peace plan in recent weeks, which included assurances of autonomy and other protections for the people of those regions. That plan received expressions of support from the EU, NATO, and the USA.

Increasingly provocative acts by Russia

Unfortunately, even as we pressed these initiatives aimed at peace, we have seen in recent weeks an increasingly provocative set of actions by Russia regarding the conflict zones that are a part of Georgia's territory.

First, Russian leaders lifted the CIS restrictions, which since the mid-1990s banned shipments of arms and materiel into Abkhazia.

Then last week Russia adopted steps to reject Georgia's jurisdiction over Abkhazia and South Ossetia, and instead to extend diplomatic recognition to these territories, as if they were separate nations.

Then on Monday, in an act of armed aggression, a Russian Mig-29 plane illegally took off from Gudauta military base [in Abkhazia] and attacked and destroyed an unpiloted Georgian police plane.

These actions disturbingly renew a pattern of Russian aggression from earlier years: Russia's bombing of Abkhazian territories in 1992-93; the Russian support for ethnic cleansing in these territories during that period; and the bombing by Russian planes of Georgian territories just last year.

These new actions, like the earlier ones are unprovoked, illegal, totally unacceptable, and dangerous for Georgia, and for the whole region.

This is not only our view. Russia's actions have now been condemned or criticized by the European Union, NATO, the United States, and numerous other nations.

Georgia's determined response to be guided by a clear set of principles...

Tonight, I want to explain how we are addressing these blatant and illegal provocations, and what other steps I plan to take in the coming days and weeks to protect Georgia and the values that define our nation.

Our actions will be guided by a set of clear principles.

We will insist on our territorial sovereignty.

We will not accept incursions or illegal actions toward our territories.

As an expression of our peaceful, democratic values, we will place the primary emphasis on working diplomatically with our friends, allies, and future allies to protect our security and peace and to reverse Russia's pattern of aggressive and irresponsible actions against Georgia.

And as a sovereign nation, we will not rule out any action necessary to ensure our self-defense.

To press our case diplomatically, I have already talked by telephone with foreign leaders, including those from Europe and the United States. On Monday, I had a direct and difficult conversation with President Putin, to demand an explanation, which he was unable or unwilling to give.

Yesterday, I sent our Foreign Minister, Davit Bakradze, to meet with the American Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice, and other members of the United States administration, to explain our grave concern over these recent events.

We have also requested a meeting of the United Nations Security Council to review these actions by Russia and take appropriate steps. We will continue to use all possible diplomatic channels to protect our sovereignty and security. We will continue to make the point: Russia's actions prove anew why it is so important for us, like all other nations, to enjoy freedom from aggression, freedom from incursion, and freedom to decide with what other nations we will cooperate and ally.

Georgia's values under attack

As we take these steps, we need to understand what the threat is. It is not only against our land and our people. It is really our values that are under attack.

As Georgians, we value freedom, democracy, and peace.

The exercise of those values is what drove our Rose Revolution and what animated our democratic reforms ever since.

Perhaps, for leaders who are not committed to freedom and democracy, it is inconvenient to have these values displayed on their border. And that may explain why these provocations should happen just as we are about to exercise our free political rights in an election; or when we exercise our right to associate our future with the friends and partners we choose, by forging closer ties with NATO and Europe.

Russia and her leaders must make their own choices about whether they will define themselves by trying to undermine the values of peace, democracy, and freedom when other free nations practice them.

We have our own choice to make. Our choice is whether, in the face of these worrisome events, we are pushed away from our cherished values of democracy, freedom and dignity — or whether we embrace them even more firmly.

In the coming days and weeks, therefore, even as we address this very serious security situation, I, the President of Georgia, will refuse to move even a single inch away from our core values.

Our upcoming parliamentary election will take place as scheduled, on May 21, as the people of Georgia have decided, with no delays. And we will put our democratic values on display once again by ensuring it is the freest and fairest balloting in our history.

To show that we cannot be deterred from our freedoms, we will also press ahead with the economic and social improvements we have been steadily pursuing. We will not permit the work we are doing to achieve more employment, better living conditions, and a Georgia without poverty to stop, or even slow down.

We are all united as Georgians

And just as we are committed to the integrity of our territory, we will demonstrate that we are committed to the integrity of our national will.

There are many issues on which we may be separated on partisan lines, but on issues of security, we are all united as Georgians. To ensure that remains the case, I will be in constant contact with the leaders of opposition parties to get the benefit of their insight and advice, and to ensure that we all stand together in the face of this threat to our national unity. I do not ask that they agree with me on every point. But I do want to make sure they are fully included in our discussions.

Finally, I will ask you, our compatriots, the people of Georgia, to remain patient and steadfast during this period. In the coming days, many of us will celebrate Easter, and I wish all of you peaceful holidays. But as we celebrate the resurrection, I ask that you reflect on the resurrection our own country has achieved in recent years—moving toward greater freedom, greater security, and greater respect in the world.

Our work on earth is imperfect and never-ending, and we still have far to go. But during this season of resurrection, let us join in shared determination not to let slide from our hands what we have worked so hard to attain; and instead to hold dear to our values, to press ahead with our progress, to press ahead toward better relations with all nations, including Russia, and to stand together in defense of our values, our nation, and our security.