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Georgian President Launches Ministerial Working Group to Advance New Peace Plan for Abkhazia

Ministers Convene to Develop Roadmap to “Unlimited Autonomy,” Free Economic Zone; President Reaches Out to Russia & International Community

I. OVERVIEW

President Mikheil Saakashvili convened a meeting of key ministers on April 12 to begin developing detailed proposals on how to implement Georgia’s sweeping new peace plan for Abkhazia. The ministerial working group also was tasked with engaging the Abkhaz side in direct dialogue on the plan, as well as on related confidence-building measures endorsed by the international community.

The President called on Russia to become a “constructive part of the process,” and asked Foreign Minister David Bakradze to engage in talks with Georgia’s international partners about “creating international guarantees for Abkhaz autonomy.”

The peace plan, originally announced by the President in late March, offers “unlimited autonomy within the borders of Georgia.” It ensures representation for the Abkhaz in all key Georgian political institutions, and would give them a new post of Vice President of Georgia. They also would gain the right to veto legislation on the constitutional status of Abkhazia, and to issues related to Abkhaz culture, language, and ethnicity. The plan would establish a joint Free Economic Zone in the Gali region, including the sea port of Ochamchire.

The ministerial working group overseeing the plan’s development includes the Foreign Minister; Ekaterina Sharashidze, the Economy Minister; Justice Minister Nika Gvaramia; Temur Iakobashvili, State Minister for Reintegration; and National Security Council Secretary Alexander Lomaia.

The President asked the ministers over the next few weeks to prepare constitutional changes in Georgian legislation that can accommodate the main tenets of the peace plan, including the creation of the post of Vice President. The working group also will elaborate “concrete proposals” for the joint Georgian-Abkhaz Free Economic Zone in Gali and Ochamchire.

“There are no issues that we and the Abkhazians cannot solve through negotiations,” the President declared in first announcing the plan. “Unlimited autonomy, wide federalism, and very serious representation in the central governmental bodies of Georgia—all will be guaranteed, with the support of international guarantors.” The only issue not on the table, the President emphasized, was the “disintegration of Georgia.”

President Saakashvili also emphasized the critical role that Russia and the international community can play in ensuring the success of the peace plan. “We are seriously prepared to move the peace process forward and I hope that Russia will be involved in this,” he said. “The Russian Federation will become a constructive part of this process.”

The President noted, meanwhile, that Georgia already has asked the UN to review peacekeeping arrangements in Abkhazia. “I welcome that the UN has launched talks on revising the status of peacekeeping operation,” Saakashvili said. He added that Georgia’s international partners would play an indispensable role as guarantors of Abkhaz autonomy.

“The international community has developed a body of legal and political examples to accommodate minority demands within the context of national sovereignty,” President Saakashvili said in originally announcing the peace plan. “Constitutions enshrine rights and mutual obligations. After all, this is one of the great achievements of the European Union. Its foundation is the belief that democracy and prosperity provide room for all. That is what we are in the process of achieving in Georgia.”

II. HIGHLIGHTS OF THE ABKHAZIA PEACE PLAN

The responsibility for elaborating the details of the Georgian government's new peace plan for Abkhazia rests with a series of inter-agency working groups that will address legal, economic, and political issues. Once these groups have developed more fully rounded proposals, they have been asked by President Saakashvili to engage in a direct dialogue with the Abkhaz side—a dialogue that would involve the international community as well.

The ministerial working group also will be responsible for pursuing a series of confidence-building measures supported by the international community, and for developing additional such measures.

Among the highlights of the peace plan for Abkhazia are:

- 1. Broad political representation at the highest levels of the Georgian government:** The President offered the Abkhaz a series of political rights, including:
 - The right to occupy the post of Vice President of Georgia, which will be created specifically for the Abkhaz;
 - Guaranteed representation in all main Georgian government bodies, including Parliament and all ministries, as well as in local government.
- 2. Veto rights on all major legislation related to Abkhazia.** Abkhazian representatives will retain the right to veto all decisions related to:
 - Abkhazia's constitutional status and rights;
 - the preservation and further development of Abkhazian culture, language, and ethnicity.
- 3. Guaranteed rights to and support for cultural and educational freedom:** The Abkhaz population will retain the absolute right—and the necessary support—to develop their culture, their language, and their national identity.
- 4. The establishment of a jointly controlled Free Economic Zone:** The zones would be in the region of Gali and would include areas that have been depopulated due to the conflict, as well as the sea port of Ochamchire. The zones would be controlled by Abkhazian and Georgian authorities, without any other outside parties.
- 5. The gradual merger of Abkhazian and Georgian law enforcement agencies and customs services.**
- 6. International guarantees to ensure wide federalism, unlimited autonomy, and security:** The President offered absolute security guarantees to the Abkhaz authorities, and called for international community to play a fundamental role in ensuring these guarantees. He also invited the Russian Federation "to move from being a party in the conflict towards becoming a mediator in the conflict, together with other members of the international community."

III. PEACE INITIATIVES FOR TSKHINVALI REGION/SOUTH OSSETIA

In announcing the new plan for Abkhazia, President Saakashvili also tasked the ministerial working group with pursuing confidence-building measures in Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia.

These proposals build on Georgia's 2005 peace plan, which was approved by the OSCE Ministerial in Ljubljana. That plan is built on the unconditional protection of the principles of self-determination of nations, cultural identity, minority rights, human rights, and the freedom and equality of citizens, as stipulated by the Constitution of Georgia. (The full 2005 plan can be found at <http://www.president.gov.ge/?l=E&m=0&sm=5>)

Among the confidence-building measures announced by President Saakashvili were:

- The creation of a special program to ensure the reintegration of former combatants that emphasizes retraining and employment.
- The allocation of funds for the guaranteed purchase of agricultural goods from local farmers, including in those territories that are temporarily not under Georgian control.
- The granting scholarships to study abroad to 10 students from Tskhinvali. Also, the existing summer vacation program for schoolchildren will be enhanced for 2008.