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GEORGIA

Address by the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Georgia, H.E. Ms. Maia Panjikidze at the 966th meeting of the Permanent Council of the OSCE

October 10, 2013

Mr. Chairman, Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is my honor to address such a distinguished audience at the meeting of the Permanent Council of the OSCE in Vienna. For decades long, this very setting has served as one of the primary venues for high level political dialogues and substantive negotiations on issues of paramount importance for the OSCE community. As a result of our joint endeavours, through strengthening OSCE's institutions and mechanisms, we have been successful in ensuring security and stability of the entire OSCE area. Today, in the face of a continuous challenge to make the organization more effective and resolute, we need, first of all, to find ways to ensure in practice the respect for the Helsinki Principles and the implementation of the OSCE commitments in all three dimensions. We hope that the Helsinki+40 process will help us make tangible steps in this direction.

Excellencies,

Let me express gratitude for the opportunity to speak about the situation in my country – the ongoing reforms in Georgia, as well as the existing challenges, and put particular emphasis on the pressing security and human rights situation in the occupied regions.

I would like to start by once again stressing that Georgia, as a European state, fully shares the common European values – democracy, rule of law, respect for fundamental human rights and freedoms. The first peaceful transition of power through democratic elections in October last year was a clear confirmation of our unwavering commitment to these very principles. Our goal to hold transparent, free and fair elections, in full compliance with international standards and the best democratic practices has never been as steady as today. Throughout this year, the Government of Georgia has spared no efforts to ensure fair, pluralistic and competitive environment for the upcoming Presidential Elections in October 2013. We are confident that these elections will be exemplary and once again demonstrate that our commitment to democratic values is always translated in our concrete deeds. In light of the upcoming Eastern Partnership Vilnius Summit, this will once again convince our partners in the value of their support to Georgia on its path of the European and Euro-Atlantic integration.

We hope that international monitors from all relevant international organizations, acclaimed non-governmental institutions and the partner states will help us in ensuring the conduct of exemplary democratic elections. We are glad that the OSCE/ODIHR has already deployed the Election Observation Mission in Tbilisi, led by Mr. Matteo Mecacci, and the long-term observers have started their activities in mid-September. We would also like to express our gratitude to the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly for its decision to send the observation mission to Georgia.

In the light of our commitment to European values, we see the European integration process as a natural path for our country's development. European and Euro-Atlantic integration is the cornerstone of our foreign policy, which is determined by the choice of the Georgian people and embedded in our identity. This path has no alternative in Georgia and our commitment is unwavering. We are fully aware that this is not an easy journey – but a journey full of challenges and even obstacles. Yet, our pledge is eminent, we are resolved to follow this process step-by-step and consistently, by making full and effective use of all relevant instruments. We have achieved substantial progress in major priorities defined by the Eastern Partnership Roadmap that brought us to an important stage of the EU-Georgia cooperation. As we are heading towards the Eastern Partnership Vilnius Summit in November, our efforts are focused on making concrete deliverables. We hope that it will become a truly historic event by making the Europeanization of the committed Eastern European partners irreversible.

Dear Colleagues,

Our path to build a state based on rule of law and accountability is steadfast. The Government of Georgia is faithful to the open and participatory approach towards ongoing reform processes based on our active cooperation with the international community and the increased participation of civil society.

Let me briefly overview significant efforts undertaken since last October with the aim of strengthening democracy and rule of law, and ensuring protection and promotion of individual rights.

As a result of decisive steps made in this direction, the checks and balances between the legislative and executive branches of the Government has been restored, with Parliament increasing its oversight and control over the government.

Recently, Georgia has adopted a number of legislative changes aimed at increasing independence of the judiciary targeting wider decentralization and balanced allocation of powers within the judiciary.

Reform of the Prosecution Service of Georgia is aimed at strengthening its institutional independence, impartially and objectively.

In addition to the consolidation of justice sector reforms, the Government of Georgia is highly devoted to the protection of social rights, especially those of vulnerable groups. National Concept of Tolerance and Civil Integration was adopted to promote and enhance minority rights in the country.

We are actively working towards empowerment of women and promoting gender equality. The protection of the rights of the child constitutes one of the key priorities for the Government of Georgia.

The amendments and additions to the Labor Code, entered into force in July 2013, represent a major step forward in the way of regulating labor relations in Georgia through bringing labor laws to full compliance with the international labor conventions.

Media became free from the governmental pressure and the Georgian public has access to the diverse and pluralistic information.

In this context, let me, particularly emphasize fruitful cooperation that Georgia values with the OSCE and its institutions. Close cooperation with the Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the High Commissioner on National Minorities, the Representative on the Freedom of Media has allowed Georgia to achieve tremendous progress in its democratic reforms and further solidify its democratic achievements. We

are grateful to the ODIHR that immediately responded to our invitation to monitor the trials of former officials with the aim to ensure the transparency of the process, and in February 2013 launched a special project in Georgia. We highly appreciate the assistance and expertise provided by the OSCE institutions on a number of issues. This leads me to specifically stress the importance of safeguarding their independence and autonomy.

Excellencies,

While the utmost part of my intervention should have focused on Georgia's cooperation within the OSCE and our vision on the challenging issues pertaining to our common priorities, I must express our extreme concern over the critical situation in two regions of Georgia currently under the Russian occupation – the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions.

As you are aware, since January 2013, the Russian occupation forces and FSB border guards have intensified the large-scale installation of barbwire and fences along the occupation line in the Tskhinvali region in the Gori, Kareli, Kaspi and Akhgori districts. In recent months, this process has further extended. By now, the total length of barbwire along the Tskhinvali occupation line has reached 35 km and the process of arrangement is still in progress.

The installation of artificial obstacles along the occupation line significantly affects the livelihoods of the local population, divides families and communities, and prevents people-to-people contacts. The installation of barbwire in the villages of the Tskhinvali region has already affected around 65 Georgian families, while several of them were forced to flee their places of residence left behind the occupation line, thus, creating a further wave of IDPs. Residents are prevented from accessing the local cemeteries, agricultural lands and potable and irrigation water systems and reaching emergency medical services.

The people residing within the occupied regions and in the adjacent areas are deprived of their fundamental rights and freedoms, including, but not limited to the freedom of movement, family life, right to education in native language and other civil and economic rights.

Russia's illegal activities cause particular concern of the Government of Georgia in the context, when - Moscow continues persistent militarization of Georgia's occupied regions; - fails to reciprocate the non-use of force pledge; - refuses to allow the EUMM to monitor

the security situation inside the occupied regions, as provided by its mandate and continues to block humanitarian access therein.

These illegal activities are totally inconceivable against the backdrop of the positive dynamic recently established in the economic and cultural relations, and a number of constructive steps undertaken by the Government of Georgia with the aim to de-escalate and normalize relations with Russia. Furthermore, while Georgia has demonstrated its good will, and in an effort to depoliticize the Olympic games, made a difficult decision to participate in Sochi, Moscow decided to use this event for political motives and opted for a provocative manner. In the face of such destabilizing processes and provocative acts, we remain committed to our peaceful and pragmatic approach and are not going to react in a same provocative manner.

At this forum, let me, once again call upon the Russian Federation to immediately stop and reverse the process of the barbwire and fence installation along the occupation lines in the Tskhinvali and Abkhazia regions, to comply with the 2008 Ceasefire Agreement and its commitments under international law, and cease the ongoing flagrant violations of fundamental rights and freedoms of the population residing in the occupied territories and in their vicinity.

What can the OSCE do in response to deteriorating security and human rights situation in the occupied regions of Georgia and along the occupation line?

First of all, we attach special importance to the enhanced and dynamic role of the Co-Chairs and the OSCE, in the Geneva International Discussions - vital to secure stability in the occupied regions of Georgia, ensure the safe and dignified return of IDPs and refugees to the places of their residence and find a peaceful solution to the Russia-Georgia conflict.

Georgia highly values the Geneva International Discussions and remains committed to it as the key format for the implementation of the 12 August Ceasefire Agreements.

As you are aware, in the framework of the Working Group I, one of the central items pertains to the Non-Use of Force. It should be clearly emphasized that the progress on this issue is possible only after the Russian Federation reciprocates the Georgia's unilateral legally-binding non-use of force pledge, undertaken by the President in November 2010 and reiterated by the new Parliament of Georgia in March 2013.

Unfortunately, our efforts within the Working Group II aimed at providing practical solutions to humanitarian needs of the conflict-affected population are met with the destructive attempts of other participants to instrumentalize the humanitarian issues for their political purposes. Russia should accept the applicability of internationally recognized basic norms and principles, and start constructive talks on the safe and dignified return of IDPs and refugees within the framework of the Geneva Discussions.

Georgia highly regrets that since last few rounds, we are witnessing destructive attitude of the participants, orchestrated by Moscow, to hinder the work within the Working Groups and prevent us from advancing on the substantive issues. To end the deadlock, ensure the unhindered run of work within both Working Groups enabling us to reach the substantive results, OSCE's enhanced commitment to the Geneva Discussions is central.

Second, we need to redouble our efforts to work towards the restoration of a full-fledged and comprehensive OSCE presence on the ground, equipped with the peacekeeping and police mandates within the occupied regions.

Third, it is important to further reinforce OSCE's active engagement in the implementation of concrete initiatives for the benefit of the population divided by the war aimed at meeting their humanitarian needs, building confidence and trust and facilitating reconciliation between the war-affected communities. We welcome OSCE's active efforts in this direction and are willing to further enhance and upgrade our cooperation in this regard.

Finally, the ongoing human rights violations in Georgia's occupied regions require your immediate attention and adequate measures. With the aim to prevent the further deterioration of the situation on the ground and overcome the humanitarian deadlock, we need to effectively restore an international human rights monitoring mechanism in the occupied regions.

Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen,

By bringing this alarming situation to the attention of the international community, the Government of Georgia appeals to the OSCE and its participating States to undertake appropriate measures and concrete steps in response to the deteriorating security and human rights situation along the occupation line and within the occupied regions of Tskhinvali and Abkhazia. In this regard, let me once again welcome the recent statements made by the NATO Secretary General, Mr. Anders Fogh Rasmussen, the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Ms. Catherine Ashton, as well as

the steadfast position of the United States of America and other partner states condemning the ongoing installation of fences and other obstacles along the occupation line of the Tskhinvali and Abkhazia regions of Georgia by the Russian occupation forces.

While we all recognize the immense importance of maintaining the wide-ranging and constructive dialogue among the participating States of the OSCE in this floor, the ultimate test of the effectiveness of the OSCE is the concrete and tangible results, statements of good will translated into specific actions, Organization's mandate fulfilled in its increased ability. Let us all redouble our efforts to strengthen the role that the OSCE is playing in all dimensions of its unique security approach that will inevitably contribute to more security and stability of my country and the entire region.

We genuinely hope that the efforts of the Ukrainian Chairmanship in the run-up to the Kyiv Ministerial Council Meeting will give an impetus to the revival of OSCE's institutional and operational capacities.

Mr. Chairman,

Let me once again stress that Georgia remains a strong advocate of the OSCE's success. We all should make more tangible and resolute steps towards the realization of a security community. Georgia stands ready to actively and constructively engage in the 'Helsinki+40' process. We believe that the process, among others, should help us make progress towards the peaceful resolution of the existing conflicts in the OSCE area. This will enhance the effectiveness of the organization as a body with unique geographical scope and comprehensive security approach that tackles the challenging security matters and improves stability in and beyond Europe. Wish you all success in effectively implementing the task ahead of us.

Thank You.