

**Statement by Minister for Foreign Affairs of Georgia,
H. E. Gela Bezhushvili,
At the Fifteenth Meeting of the OSCE Ministerial Council,
Madrid 29 and 30 November 2007**

Mr. Chairman,
Distinguished Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me join all of you in expressing my appreciation to the Spanish Government for their warm welcome, and to commend the hard work and leadership of Minister Moratinos and his team throughout the Chairmanship period.

It is my distinct honor to address this Assembly today, and share with you my thoughts and impressions on how together we can strengthen our partnership and further advance our common aims and goals.

While Georgia has aligned itself with the statement delivered by Portugal on behalf of the European Union, allow me to briefly highlight some aspects of the OSCE activities to which we attach great value.

The three dimensions of the OSCE offer a unique set of mechanisms for advancing security and cooperation in Europe. Georgia is a strong supporter of this institution and the purpose of my visit with you today is to reaffirm that steadfast commitment.

Mr. Chairman,

Four years ago Georgia's Rose Revolution opened the way for our nation and people to recommit ourselves to promoting the common values and principles on which the OSCE was founded. During this period Georgia's democracy has matured. We have held four sets of free and fair elections that were monitored by this institution. As a result, our political system is more stable, our country is more prosperous, and our nation has taken great strides forward.

The people of Georgia recognize the contributions of our partnership with the OSCE in this and other fields, and we wish to extend our gratitude. At the same time, let me be clear that there are still many challenges ahead for Georgia and that the process of strengthening our democracy is one that continues today. It is in this spirit that we look forward to a future relationship with the OSCE defined by even more robust cooperation, and an ever stronger partnership.

The latest events in Georgia during this month constitute a test for our statehood and the strength of our democratic institutions. You are all by now aware of what

transpired on November 7th, when anti-democratic forces attempted to reverse our hard fought gains through the threat of violence and anti-constitutional activities. This was a difficult period for Georgia and I am pleased that the temporary measures that we were forced to enact have now been fully lifted.

Looking to the future, I want to make it clear that Georgia's commitment to building a full fledged democracy is unshakeable. This is the substance of our democratic mandate – a mandate given to us by the people of Georgia.

In response to these challenges, Georgia will conduct early Presidential elections, and Parliamentary elections later in 2008. The date of those elections will in fact be determined by the people of Georgia during a plebiscite held during the Presidential elections.

I would like to use this opportunity to assure the OSCE community that Georgia will spare no efforts to hold the upcoming elections in a fair, transparent and democratic manner. This means a fair electoral environment, equal access to the media, and above all, respect for the will of our voters.

Let me therefore reiterate our invitation to OSCE Member States and ODIHR to send their election observers to Georgia. We fully support ODIHR's mandate, and welcome their advice, assistance and on-ground efforts to ensure the fairness and openness of these elections. We encourage you to send as many observers as possible because we believe that a robust international presence is invaluable. It is this spirit of cooperation that I refer to when I say that Georgia seeks to ensure a robust partnership with the OSCE, now and in the future.

Specifically, we would like the OSCE to carry out monitoring of media coverage during the election campaign, to ensure that Georgia maintains and upholds media freedoms including the provision of equal opportunities for all political forces who wish to participate.

Mr. Chairman,

Georgia has faced many challenges during the past year. It is indeed abnormal by any standards in the OSCE community to suffer a bombing in March, a missile attack in August, and other security-related incidents throughout the year.

The August 6 missile attack of which the OSCE community is fully aware, illustrated the need for stronger crisis prevention mechanisms. I think that the efforts undertaken by the Chairmanship and the subsequent debates on this issue, prove that the Organization is healthy and very much committed to confronting threats to our common security. It is also clear that there is more that we can and must do.

We think it was important that discussions on this incident left no question marks about the details of the attack, and we view this as a real merit of this Organization.

However, to ensure that incidents of this nature are prevented in the future, we should consider reactivating existing rapid reaction mechanisms and establishing new ones if necessary.

It is far more alarming that such incidents always happen in, or in close vicinity to, the zones of territorial conflicts, thus posing a threat to the peace processes.

Mr. Chairman,

The OSCE has been a strong partner in helping resolve Georgia's territorial conflicts. Our approach to the resolution of the conflicts in the Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Georgia is based on peaceful initiatives, which are open and inclusive. We believe that the residents of these regions must be given a chance to enjoy the same freedoms and prosperity as in the rest of Georgia. To do so, we are offering residents of these regions a genuinely democratic future, with pledges of economic prosperity and the full realization of individual and collective rights and freedoms.

With this goal in mind, we have created a representative and inclusive State Commission to elaborate proposals for the future status of the former South Ossetian Autonomous District. Recently, the OSCE community was briefed on these developments. We would like to once again reiterate - the work of this Commission is open to all interested parties and includes all communities from South Ossetia, and outside the conflict zone. We are approaching a solution to the conflict in South Ossetia and we would like you take part in it. With enhanced cooperation, settlement of the conflict will be made easier and swifter.

Unfortunately, current conflict resolution frameworks no longer reflect realities on the ground. While we do not reject these frameworks, now is the time for the international community to show a flexible but resolute approach. In short, it is time for all of us to do more for the cause of peace.

We would like to make it clear that in Abkhazia, Georgia we, the entire OSCE community, cannot and should not tolerate continued violations of the rights of the victims of ethnic cleansing that took place in 1992-94 which was recognized by the OSCE in the Budapest, Lisbon and Istanbul summits. The illegal sale of property and continued denial of the right of IDPs and refugees to return to their places of residence, to speak and be taught in their mother tongue, is simply unacceptable.

That is why we are calling upon the international community to start a Comprehensive In-Depth Review of the current peace process, including fundamental changes in the legal basis, and negotiation and peacekeeping formats. The strong position of Georgia is that conflict resolution mechanisms should contribute to the reintegration of conflict regions into the Georgian state by improving economic, social and political ties between the communities. I believe this is our common approach. Again, let us do more to advance it.

Mr. Chairman,

It is worth stressing the great importance of the measures undertaken by the OSCE in Georgia. Implementation of the Donors' Programme on economic rehabilitation is a clear demonstration how we can successfully rebuild a war-torn region. Georgia is proud to increase its financial contribution to this process by 250.000 Euros.

We welcome the idea of increasing the number of OSCE Mission monitors in the Tskhinvali region to further advance security and trust. I would like to commend the work of these monitors and express my hope that they will continue playing an instrumental role.

I especially would like to stress the importance of the current OSCE Border Monitoring Support Programme. It is a valuable component of Georgian border security and we would appreciate the support of the OSCE to further extend and enhance it.

Mr. Chairman,

Allow me to briefly touch upon issues related to the CFE treaty. I would like to reaffirm our strong position that the ratification of the adapted CFE Treaty is of the utmost importance for European security and the full implementation of the 1999 Istanbul commitments is essential for ensuring peace and stability in this region.

I would like to note the progress made in the withdrawal of the Russian military bases from Georgia. We are actively involved in the negotiations over the only remaining issue, that is the closure of the Gudauta military base, and we are ready to find a mutually acceptable solution.

Mr. Chairman,

Concluding my statement, I would like to confirm once again that Georgia remains committed to pursue extensive reforms aimed at strengthening our democracy in line with European standards, with the goal of full integration into Euro-Atlantic institutions. This is an irreversible process, supported by a broad consensus among Georgian society, including the full spectrum of political actors.

Finally, allow me to extend sincere sympathies and wish for every success to the incoming Finnish Chairmanship in 2008 and to reiterate Georgia's unremitting support of its endeavours. Georgia is looking forward to cooperating closely on our common agenda in the OSCE.

I thank you for your attention.