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**STATEMENT BY MR. ANDREY KELIN,
PERMANENT REPRESENTATIVE OF THE RUSSIAN FEDERATION,
AT THE MEETING OF THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

8 March 2012

Regarding the visa-free regime and diplomatic relations with Georgia

Mr. Chairperson,

We should like to make the following comments on the statement by the delegation of Georgia on the decision by Tbilisi to lift visa requirements for Russian citizens.

Russia has always been in favour of maintaining and strengthening humanitarian links between our nations and of facilitating contacts between people as much as possible. The events of August 2008 and the subsequent severance by Georgia of diplomatic relations with the Russian Federation undermined these links.

But even in the current situation, Russia continues to do everything possible. Land and direct air links between the two countries have been restored; Russian travel visas are issued without hindrance to relatives, not to mention special humanitarian cases; cultural and scientific exchanges are encouraged. We see it as our task not to allow the traditional historical closeness of our fraternal peoples to be disrupted. We shall continue to adhere to this course in the future.

Regarding the Georgian initiative in this context, we feel obliged to point out the following. There are laws in Georgia which make a significant number of Russian citizens automatically subject to criminal prosecution when they enter the country. They concern all persons who have visited Abkhazia or South Ossetia even once in recent years. Any holidaymaker visiting Sochi who went on an excursion of a few hours to Lake Ritsa in Abkhazia will be regarded as a criminal on entering Georgia and will be subject to a fine or imprisonment of two to four years. And these are not empty words. A number of our citizens have already suffered this penalty. We should add that because of the severance by Georgia of diplomatic relations with Russia, the possibilities for offering consular or legal protection to citizens of ours who are in trouble in Georgia are severely restricted.

Being interested in strengthening relations between the people of Russia and Georgia, the Russian Federation has expressed its willingness to introduce a visa-free regime for the citizens of Georgia on a reciprocal basis. However, for this to happen, Georgia has to provide reliable legal guarantees for the safety of Russians visiting Georgia. In this regard, the

Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs also proposed to Georgia on 2 March this year that diplomatic relations between our countries be resumed.

We regret that when it came to concrete steps, Georgia once again proved to be unwilling to enter into constructive dialogue.

Thank you for your attention.