

GEORGIA: AT THE CUSP OF THE RUSSIAN-AMERICAN RELATIONSHIP December 16, 2002

by Mr. David Gamkrelidze, NCP Chairman

When President George W. Bush visited St. Petersburg following NATO's Prague Summit, President Vladimir Putin reaffirmed his commitment to promoting democracy and continuing Russia's orientation toward the West. Given the long-standing tensions between Tbilisi and Moscow that developed after the collapse of the Soviet Union, most Georgians are hopeful that Putin is earnest about his desire to shift Russian foreign policy away from its traditional confrontational stance with the West. We believe that Russia's treatment of our country in the forthcoming months will be a crucial litmus test of whether Putin's pro-Western, pro-democratic rhetoric represents a real change in policy--or is merely talk.

Georgians are concerned, however, that Putin's actions over the past several months reflect the latter. Throughout the summer and into the fall, there was a number of disturbing incidents, such as repeated bombing raids of Georgian territory by Russian military aircraft, including an August 23 raid that killed and injured civilians. This culminated in the Sochi ultimatum of September 10, 2002 (challenging Georgia to both immediately arrest and hand over to Russia so-called terrorist groups in the Pankisi Gorge, or face a preemptive strike).

At the same time, in Georgia's breakaway region of Abkhazia, Russian "peacekeepers" nearly started a new war in early August and there have been plentiful of smaller military provocations. Moscow is now permitting residents of Abkhazia to receive Russian passports, which will result in most residents of the region<officially recognized as an integral part of Georgia<being designated as Russian citizens.

The push for so-called "antiterrorist operations" in Pankisi point to Russia's old ways of relating to its neighbors<dominating them by force. Instead of supporting the U.S. Train and Equip Program aimed at strengthening Georgian military capacities, which will benefit Georgia, Russia, and the United States, Moscow has dismissed American efforts to train Georgian forces. Many Georgians believe that Pankisi itself is of little concern to Russia. In other words, when Pankisi is cleared of any remaining criminal elements, Moscow is prepared to find other hotspots inside Georgia that could be used to pressure Tbilisi<Kodori Gorge in Abkhazia and Javakheti region on the Georgian-Armenian border are just two such locations. Moreover, the Kremlin is arguing that it will take fourteen years to withdraw the rest of Russian troops from our country--even though Russia assumed the responsibility to withdraw its forces at the Istanbul OSCE Summit in 1999. It would behoove President Putin to follow up on the call contained in the Prague Summit Declaration for "swift fulfillment of the outstanding Istanbul commitments on Georgia." Finally, there are also concerns that Russian intelligence may seek to

promote instability inside Georgia as a way of influencing the upcoming 2003 parliamentary elections, in the hopes of engineering a pro-Russian successor to Eduard Shervardnadze.

These trends are troubling. Georgia wants to have good relations with the Russian Federation. We are an immediate neighbor; our two countries have close political, cultural and above all economic relations. We believe that it is, in the long run, in Russia's own national interests to have on its southern border a strong state with an effective national security apparatus and a consolidated democracy.

We believe that forging an effective partnership with the United States can help achieve these goals and help to stabilize the Caucasus, which would be a beneficial development for all parties, including Russia.

In August, with American assistance, Georgia began the first stage of an operation to cleanse Pankisi of criminal elements. We hope that Moscow understands that Washington is promoting Georgia's cooperation with NATO and other Euro-Atlantic structures not to oppose Russia, but to help strengthen the Georgian state and promote peace in the region.

We in Georgia recognize that we face a difficult task of strengthening our state and its democratic institutions. We must finish the job of ridding Pankisi of any criminals that still appear to be hiding there, and to restore our government's full control over the region. This we are determined to do and, with American military assistance, are actively doing. We must also ensure that the 2003 elections are fair, allowing the people to express their will about the future of the country freely.

We are well aware that a danger exists that the Citizens' Union of Georgia (CUG) will use its position as the ruling party to marshal pressure against the opposition, or may try to manipulate or falsify election results. We hope that the United States and Europe will remain active observers and will not allow the government to interfere with the democratic process. Georgia can be a real example of democracy for the entire region; the upcoming campaign and elections are a test of this democracy and how committed the current regime is to democratic values.

By the same token, we must promote true market oriented economic reforms, pursue constitutional changes that will establish checks and balances between the different branches of government, and protect fundamental Human Rights. At the same time, we must increase military spending, and use the American military assistance to the fullest to help build a Georgian army which can protect our country's interests and allow Georgia to become a serious candidate for NATO membership. We are well aware that by pursuing NATO membership as a serious goal, we create an attractive target to push for reform. "Joining NATO" helps to energize the government and parliament to enact needed reforms; we also feel that this helps to create a more attractive environment for additional aid and investments from abroad.

In all of these efforts, we are encouraged by American support that both expands democracy and protects U.S. interests in the Caucasus. The future of freedom and peace in the Caucasus, and the prestige of the United States in this vital region, hangs in the balance.

* The author is leader of Georgia's center-right New Conservative Party. He sponsored the resolution adopted by the Parliament on September 13, 2002 making NATO membership the principal foreign policy objective of the Georgian government. He would like to gratefully acknowledge the assistance of Irakly Areshidze, Visiting Fellow at the Central Asia-Caucasus Institute, Johns Hopkins University School for Advanced International Studies, in preparing this article.