

Joint statement of the Group of Friends of Georgia

Current Issue – Fifteen years since the full-scale military aggression against Georgia by the Russian Federation

This statement is delivered on behalf of Bulgaria, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Sweden, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America.

1. We reaffirm our full support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders.
2. Fifteen years since the Russian Federation's military invasion of Georgia, we remain deeply concerned over the continued occupation of Georgia's regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and underline the need for the peaceful resolution of the conflict based on full respect for international law and commitments, including the UN Charter and the Helsinki Final Act.
3. We condemn Russia's military aggression against Georgia in 2008 in blatant violation of international law and express our concern that Georgia has been a target of Russia's hybrid tactics as well as conventional warfare ever since regaining its independence. We express our deep concern over Russia's ongoing military presence as well as military exercises and violation of airspace in Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions. We also reiterate our condemnation of Russia's ongoing war of aggression against Ukraine.
4. We welcome Georgia's compliance with the EU-mediated 12 August 2008 ceasefire agreement. We call upon Russia to fulfil immediately its clear obligation under the ceasefire agreement to withdraw its forces to pre-conflict positions, as well as its commitments to allow unfettered access for the delivery of humanitarian assistance and not to impede creation of international security arrangements on the ground. We call upon Russia to reverse its recognition of the so-called independence of Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions and to ensure safe and dignified return of all IDPs and refugees to their homes in a manner consistent with applicable international law.
5. We condemn attempts at implementation of the so-called integration and alliance treaties between Russia and Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions, aiming to incorporate Georgia's regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into Russia's military, social, economic, judicial and other spheres, which constitute a clear violation of international law by the Russian Federation and directly contradict OSCE commitments. We urge Russia to reverse this process.
6. We note the January 2021 judgment of the European Court of Human Rights in the case concerning the armed conflict between the Russian Federation and Georgia in August 2008 and its consequences, including its findings that Russia has exercised effective control over Georgia's regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia following the 12 August 2008 ceasefire agreement,

including through its military presence. The Court also ruled that Russia, in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights, tortured Georgian prisoners of war; arbitrarily detained and killed Georgian civilians, and was responsible for their inhumane and degrading treatment; prevented the return of ethnic Georgians to their homes; and failed to conduct investigations into killings of civilians. Moreover, the European Court of Human Rights adopted another judgment on the case “Mamasakhlisi and Others v. Georgia and Russia” on 7 March, 2023, which confirmed the effective control of the Russian Federation over the Abkhazia region of Georgia even before Russia’s war against Georgia in August 2008, and its full responsibility for human rights violations in the occupied region. We recall the decision of the ECHR of 28 April 2023, which ordered the Russian Federation to pay up to 130 million euros in favour of conflict-affected Georgian citizens. We call on the Russian Federation to fully comply with these judgments, including by allowing internally displaced persons (IDPs) to return to their homes in safety and dignity.

7. We also note the decision of the International Criminal Court (ICC) of 2022 that issued arrest warrants for war crimes committed against ethnic Georgian civilians during Russia’s invasion in 2008 and note the alleged role of the Russian military official uncovered by the investigation. We call on Russia to cooperate with the ICC.

8. We are concerned over the continuous discrimination against Georgians on the grounds of ethnicity in Georgia’s Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions and abuses, including severe restrictions on rights related to freedom of movement, education, residence and property, particularly in connection with the destruction of the houses of IDPs. We condemn the decision to replace instruction in Georgian language with Russian in schools in both occupied regions. We also condemn obliteration and alteration of Georgian features from the Georgian cultural heritage monuments in both regions. We call on those in control to enable full and unhindered access by international human rights organisations to the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

9. We are particularly concerned over the ongoing installation of barbed wire fences and other artificial barriers along the administrative boundary lines (ABLs) and by the closure of so-called crossing points in the South Ossetia region of Georgia for the last four years. The partial and temporary re-opening of the so-called crossing points cannot be viewed as satisfactory. All so-called crossing points with Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions of Georgia must be reopened for all Georgian citizens residing on both sides of the ABLs.

10. Isolation and continuous restrictions on freedom of movement have further destabilised the situation on the ground and severely impacted the security, safety, well-being, and humanitarian conditions of civilians in conflict-affected areas, preventing their access to family, property, agricultural lands, religious sites and cemeteries as well as Georgian government issued pensions, the free healthcare services and education available in Georgian Government controlled territory. This creates a risk for further depopulation of both regions.

11. We remain deeply concerned by ongoing arbitrary detentions around the ABLs involving vulnerable groups, and in some cases people with severe health problems. We, call for the immediate and unconditional release of Irakli Bebuia, Kristine Takalandze, Asmat Tavadze, and all those under arbitrary detention.

12. We condemn the killing of Georgian citizens Archil Tatumashvili, Giga Otkhozoria, and Davit Basharuli, and urge Russia to remove any obstacles to bringing the perpetrators to justice. In this context, we reiterate our support for Georgia's preventive steps aimed at eradicating impunity and note the Otkhozoria-Tatumashvili List adopted by the government of Georgia.

13. We support the effective continuation of Geneva International Discussions (GID), as the only format with the Russian Federation to address implementation of the EU-mediated 12 August 2008 ceasefire agreement, as well as the security, human rights, and humanitarian challenges stemming from the unresolved Russia - Georgia conflict. We underline the necessity of progress on the core issues of the discussions, including on the non-use of force, establishing international security arrangements in Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions and ensuring the safe, dignified, and voluntary return of IDPs and refugees in accordance with international law. We strongly support applying the Women, Peace and Security agenda in the GID in order to facilitate inclusive and sustainable peace and security on the ground.

14. We express our support for the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms (IPRMs) in Ergneti and Gali and emphasise the important role they can have in preventing any escalation of the conflict and in helping to protect the safety and security of people on the ground. We express our great concern over the lengthy suspension of the Gali IPRM and urge its resumption without further delay or pre-conditions, in line with the ground rules.

15. We reaffirm our unwavering support for the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) and call upon Russia to allow the EUMM to implement its mandate in full, including by enabling the EUMM's access on both sides of the ABLs.

16. We welcome the multi-stakeholder process for developing a comprehensive "State Strategy for de-occupation and peaceful conflict resolution" by the government of Georgia and the launch of the strategic review of the reconciliation and engagement policy. We support the Georgian government's 'A Step to a Better Future' peace initiative and its supplement "A peace fund for a better future", aimed at improving the humanitarian and socio-economic conditions of people residing in Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions and at fostering confidence building among divided communities. We urge active work on reconciliation and engagement programs and stand ready to support.

17. We encourage the OSCE's engagement in the process of finding a peaceful resolution to the Russia-Georgia conflict. We regret the closure of the OSCE mission to Georgia in 2009 and encourage the OSCE participating States to decide on the reopening of the OSCE cross-dimensional mission in Georgia, including a monitoring capacity able to operate unhindered across the ABLs. The reopening of the mission would strengthen considerably the OSCE's engagement in the GID and IPRMs. Furthermore, the re-establishment of a field mission would support the OSCE's work in every phase of the conflict cycle.

18. The Group of Friends of Georgia will continue to raise awareness of the conflict and of developments on the ground, hold Russia accountable for its obligations and commitments, and advocate for the conflict's peaceful resolution.