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1329th MEETING OF THE OSCE PERMANENT COUNCIL**

12 August 2021

**On the 13th anniversary of the savage operation of the Georgian armed forces against  
the population of South Ossetia**

Madam Chairperson,

Last Sunday, we recalled the tragic events that took place 13 years ago. Back then, specifically on the night of 7 August 2008, the Saakashvili regime, in gross violation of international agreements on the peaceful settlement of the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict, launched a barbaric full-scale military operation against South Ossetia. This outrageous and brutal act of violence directed against the population of South Ossetia was cynically described as “an operation to restore constitutional order”. The methods for restoring that “order” which were applied by the Georgian military during that terrible night against the peaceful inhabitants of a sleeping Tskhinval turned out to be a massive artillery bombardment using Grad multiple-launch rocket systems and the invasion of the South Ossetian capital by ground forces of the Georgian army and special forces of the Georgian Ministry of Internal Affairs, supported by tanks and armoured vehicles. The Russian peacekeepers’ camp was stormed, as a result of which ten of them were killed and dozens wounded.

According to the available data, 162 inhabitants of South Ossetia lost their lives and 255 were wounded as a consequence of that criminal decision by the authorities in Tbilisi. More than 2,500 residential buildings were destroyed, of which over 1,000 were damaged beyond repair. The OSCE’s office in Tskhinval was shelled too. Furthermore, 29 educational facilities, 17 transport facilities, 68 km of gas pipelines, 160 km of water supply lines and 458 km of overhead power lines were partially or completely destroyed. From 7 to 16 August 2008, more than 36,000 Ossetians left the territory of South Ossetia, most of them elderly people, women and children.

After visiting Vladikavkaz on 16 August, Marc Perrin de Brichambaut, the then OSCE Secretary General, shared his impressions of what he had seen: “As we moved on to Vladikavkaz and met refugees, we were overwhelmed by the unfolding human drama. ... I was truly moved by the stories I heard from refugees and from injured civilians in the central hospital ...”

It is important to understand that the events of August 2008 did not start from a clean slate. I shall not go into the history of the matter, though, if necessary, I am willing to demonstrate, on the basis of numerical data, the “achievements” of the Georgian Government’s chauvinistic policy line since the late

1980s. After coming to power at the end of 2003, Mikheil Saakashvili openly began to threaten to use force to solve the “South Ossetian problem” and consistently worked towards dismantling the negotiation format and causing the peacekeeping operation to be wound down. The authorities in Tbilisi brazenly ignored the ceasefire regime in the conflict zone, which had been established with the OSCE’s assistance. These facts are reflected in the joint summary reports of the military observers at the time, including some deployed by our Organization.

One factor that helped to exacerbate the situation was the militarization of Georgia, which by August 2008 had taken on proportions quite incommensurate with the country’s defence needs and encompassed virtually all aspects of the development of military capabilities. Suffice it to mention that the personnel strength of the Georgian army increased by 30 per cent in 2007. In terms of rate of growth in military expenditure, Georgia was ranked first in the world by 2008, when such spending accounted for 8 per cent of its annual gross domestic product.

The Georgian aggression of August 2008 was carefully planned. The fact that the Georgian Government had been deliberately preparing for a military invasion of South Ossetia is confirmed by a report (dated 7 August 2008) of the OSCE Mission to Georgia that was published here in Vienna on 8 August 2008, in which reference was made to “significant movements of troops and equipment on the Georgian side towards Gori from the east and west”. Signals sent out at various levels to the Georgian leadership at the time indicating that solutions involving the use of force with regard to South Ossetia were unacceptable and would not be tolerated were ignored by Georgia.

The attempts by the Georgian Government to present itself as the injured party in the eyes of the international community do not stand up to scrutiny. In the report of the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission established under EU auspices and headed by the respected Swiss diplomat Heidi Tagliavini that was published on 30 September 2009, it is stated clearly and unequivocally: “Open hostilities began with a large-scale Georgian military operation against the town of Tskhinvali and the surrounding areas, launched in the night of 7 to 8 August 2008. Operations started with a massive Georgian artillery attack.” The Georgian leadership with Mr. Saakashvili at its head bears complete responsibility for the events of August 2008, the deaths of Russian peacekeepers and civilians, and the colossal economic and material damage inflicted on South Ossetia.

Russia saved the population of South Ossetia by stopping the Georgian war machine and conducting an operation to force Georgia to sue for peace. The movement of Russian troops into South Ossetia and then Georgia was absolutely lawful, being as it was in exercise of the right to self-defence – a right enshrined, in particular, in Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations – after the large-scale attack by Georgia on the Russian armed forces’ peacekeeping units deployed to South Ossetia in accordance with the Dagomys Agreement of 1992. The United Nations Security Council was informed by the Russian Federation about its exercise of the right to self-defence.

The Georgian Government’s attack on South Ossetia and its contemplation of a similar scenario for Abkhazia compelled them both to safeguard their security and right to exist through self-determination as independent States. On 26 August 2008, guided by fundamental international legal instruments, Russia recognized the independence of the two Trans-Caucasus republics.

At present, Russia is successfully developing alliance-based co-operation with the Republic of Abkhazia and the Republic of South Ossetia in various fields. This co-operation has long acted as a stabilizing factor in the South Caucasus, as manifested by, for example, the constructive participation of our countries in the Geneva International Discussions on Security and Stability in the Trans-Caucasus. We take the view that the key task of this dialogue format is to conclude a legally binding agreement on the non-use

of force between Georgia on the one hand, and Abkhazia and South Ossetia on the other. We are convinced that such a step would inject essential stability into the region, which would in turn help all the sovereign States in the Trans-Caucasus to flourish.

In Russia we have never equated the criminal Saakashvili regime with the Georgian people. We are prepared to restore relations between our States to the extent that Georgia itself is prepared to do so.

### **Additional remarks**

We have just heard arguments from our colleagues that have nothing to do with reality. We will once again have to go through the facts and demonstrate, on the basis of documents, the true state of affairs.

Behind their flowery rhetoric, the distinguished Permanent Representative of Georgia and the speakers who preceded her carefully avoid replying to a straightforward question that is of key significance. Who actually killed the Russian peacekeepers and attacked the civilians of South Ossetia? Who launched the “operation to restore constitutional order” on 7 August 2008? (That is how the bloody attack on South Ossetia was designated by Brigadier General Mamuka Kurashvili.) The answer is clear: it was the Georgian armed forces. And that is reflected in the aforementioned report by the Independent International Fact-Finding Mission.

It is spelled out in black on white there that the hostilities began with a massive artillery attack from the Georgian side. To quote from the document: “The shelling of Tskhinvali by the Georgian armed forces during the night of 7 to 8 August 2008 marked the beginning of the large-scale armed conflict ...”; “There is the question of whether the use of force by Georgia in South Ossetia ... was justifiable under international law. It was not.” The report includes, in an annex, copies of Mr. Saakashvili’s criminal orders launching a military operation in South Ossetia.

On 8 August, the OSCE Mission to Georgia issued a report that states: “Shortly before midnight [on 7 August], the center of Tskhinvali came under heavy fire and shelling, presumably also from GRAD systems and artillery stationed outside the zone of conflict.”

All this demonstrates why Georgia had been procuring offensive weapons on a massive scale over a number of years before the August 2008 aggression. The Georgian Government certainly found a use for both these weapons and the special forces that had been trained with the help of foreign instructors.

The premeditated attack by the Georgian armed forces on South Ossetia also explains why the Georgian Government so stubbornly kept rejecting our emphatic proposal to sign a legally binding document on the non-use of force to settle the South Ossetian conflict – in the same way that it refused to sign a similar document regarding the Abkhaz conflict.

Consider the material published by the Western media in August 2008, for example, in *The New York Times*, *The Sunday Times* and the BBC. Even despite all their bias, the truth sometimes found its way out into the open. I am referring to the statements by eyewitnesses to those tragic events, namely by two staff members of the former OSCE Mission to Georgia: the deputy head of the Mission, Ryan Grist, and the leader of the military observers in the Georgian-South Ossetian conflict zone, Stephen Young. Their testimonies corroborate the facts of Georgia’s cruel onslaught on Tskhinval and its attack on Russian peacekeepers.

At the same time, an article appeared in the German weekly news magazine *Der Spiegel* under the intriguing headline “OSZE-Beobachter machen Georgien schwere Vorwürfe” (“OSCE observers level

serious charges against Georgia”). Referring to OSCE military observers, the magazine reports that the Georgian President deliberately lied to the West when he claimed that the artillery shelling by the Georgians of Tskhinval was a forced measure in response to the incursion of Russian troops. The article goes on to say that the Georgian leadership had made intensive preparations for the attack on South Ossetia and begun it even before the Russian military equipment passed through the Roki Tunnel. The OSCE military observers cited by *Der Spiegel* referred to the Georgian attack as a “war crime”. We find particularly indicative the conclusion drawn by the source quoted by the German magazine, who had personally seen the initial reports filed by the OSCE military observers: “Saakashvili lied 100 per cent to all of us, the Europeans and the Americans.”

And now to quote something contemporary. A few days ago, at an event held in Tbilisi on 8 August to mark the anniversary of those events, the Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Garibashvili, described Mr. Saakashvili’s actions as “anti-State provocations”.

As for the operation to force Georgia to sue for peace, we shall say it once again so that the message may finally get across. The movement of Russian troops into South Ossetia and then into Georgia proper was absolutely lawful in the situation that had arisen, being as it was in exercise of the right to self-defence enshrined in Article 51 of the Charter of the United Nations. This happened after a large-scale attack by Georgia on peacekeeping units of the armed forces of the Russian Federation. Now, there should be no juggling with the facts regarding the status of these Russian military personnel. For they were indeed peacekeepers and killing them was a most serious war crime. They were legally stationed in South Ossetia in accordance with the Dagomys Agreement of 1992. Under this agreement a Joint Control Commission was established that also included Georgian representatives. In the Commission’s decision of 6 December 1994 on joint forces for the promotion of peace, the Russian peacekeeping battalion was described as “the guarantor of relative stability in the conflict zone”. That is, it had been recognized as such by the Georgians as well.

The leadership of Russia had no other choice then but to repulse the Georgian warmongering. This decision was lawful and just; it was in keeping with the moral requirement to protect the lives of people, most of whom were Russian citizens. Incidentally, granting citizenship of one’s country to persons living abroad is a sovereign right of any State. Applying for citizenship is a human right.

The Russian military operation pursued a single goal, namely to halt the Georgian aggression and prevent the possibility of repeat attacks. It was organized and conducted in a manner strictly commensurate with the threat posed by Georgia. Once the military operation was over, the Russian Federation withdrew its armed forces from the territory of Georgia in accordance with the settlement plan worked out jointly by the Presidents of Russia and France, Dmitry Medvedev and Nicolas Sarkozy. The Russian peacekeepers’ withdrawal was confirmed by the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office, Alexander Stubb, in a statement on 9 October 2008 and in conclusions by the Council of the European Union.

As for the mythical “Russian occupation”, there is no such occupation. On 26 August 2008, President Medvedev signed decrees on recognition of the independence of South Ossetia and Abkhazia by the Russian Federation, and on 17 September he signed treaties of friendship, co-operation and mutual assistance with these two republics. In this way the legal foundations were established for providing the population of South Ossetia and Abkhazia with robust security guarantees: civilians were thus given the opportunity to live and go about their work normally. In its decision to recognize the sovereignty of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Russia was guided first and foremost by the provisions of the Charter of the United Nations, by the United Nations Declaration of 1970 on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States and by the CSCE Helsinki Final Act of 1975. Today we may observe how the two republics are developing steadily and in an undoubtedly positive way.

The argument advanced by the authorities in Tbilisi concerning Russia's "occupation of Georgian territory" is utterly groundless and amounts to no more than a fabrication of propaganda. In international law, "occupation" refers to the temporary presence of one State's troops on the territory of another during a state of war between the two. Moreover, authority in the occupied territory is exercised by the military command of the occupying State.

Today, in the context we are concerned with here, there are Russian military contingents in the region. But they are on the territory of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in accordance with bilateral agreements with these independent republics, which separated from Georgia in strict conformity with the norms of international law after they were attacked by Georgian troops. Furthermore, Abkhazia and South Ossetia have their own democratically established and fully operating legislative, executive and judicial branches of government; political parties are active in both.

If you want to discuss the contemporary state of affairs in the region, then it is necessary to do so with the participation of representatives of the sovereign States concerned – that is, Abkhazia and South Ossetia – as is the case, for example, during the Geneva International Discussions on Security and Stability in the Trans-Caucasus.

Thank you for your attention.