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Speech by Georgian Prime Minister Mamuka Bakhtadze at the 73rd Session of the UN General Assembly

2018-09-27



Madame President,
Mr. Secretary-General,
Esteemed Delegates,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great honor to address the General Assembly in my native tongue, Georgian, one of the most ancient languages of the world civilization and its integral part.

Today is the 27th of September, an extremely troubling and painful date in my country's history. 25 years ago today, the occupation of Georgia's historical part started, turning into the most severe challenge for Georgia's newly established statehood.

10 years ago, the Russian Federation launched yet another large-scale military aggression against my country, which resulted in the full occupation of Georgia's two historic and integral regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali.

10 years after this military aggression, our territories remain occupied. As a result of the ethnic cleansing, 10% of our population is still forcefully displaced, the rights of hundreds of thousands of our citizens are disregarded. The situation in Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Region is dire and alarming.

The situation in the occupied territories is a humanitarian disaster at its worst. The growing militarization of these regions is in full swing, and depopulation is intensifying by the minute. Because of the grave humanitarian, socioeconomic, and human rights situation, the population in the occupied regions has dropped 5-6 times since the occupation.

All this reiterates that the Russian Federation's main motivation was a military intervention to establish military bases in our territories, not to protect the rights or interests of the local population, as they publicly, officially declare. This true intention is witnessed firsthand on a daily basis by our citizens in the occupied territories.

Razor wires and other artificial barriers split families and violate fundamental human rights. Those who live along the occupation lines are even prevented from visiting houses of prayer and the graves of their ancestors. Our citizens are prohibited from educating their children in the native language.

Abductions, torture, and murder continue. Archil Tatunashvili, Giga Otkhзорia, and 18 year-old Davit Basharuli are the recent victims.

Because of these and many other cruel offences, the Otkhзорia-Tatunashvili List was created to include the names of those who committed these egregious crimes. We believe that those on the list must be held accountable through applicable international law.

The occupation and blatant disregard of the rule of law has created serious challenges to the stability and security of Georgia and the wider region. Due to the existing conflicts in the South Caucasus, even a minor incident may escalate into an uncontrollable process with subsequent heavy consequences.

The international community's firm support in the peaceful resolution of the Russia-Georgia conflict is critically important. The international community must stand together and stand strong in support of the principle of sovereign equality of states and the inviolability of their internationally recognized borders, because observing the fundamental norms of international law and protecting human rights is the only way of ensuring peace and security throughout the world.

Russia has yet to fulfill its international obligations and the 2008 ceasefire agreement reached through the mediation of the EU.

We, on the other hand, have fulfilled this agreement to the detail. Moreover, we have assumed the legally binding obligation of non-use of force. This reaffirms our irreversible policy of the exclusively peaceful resolution of the conflict.

Therefore, I urge the Russian Federation: fulfill your assumed and signed international obligations and withdraw your occupation forces from Georgia's territory!

We are actively trying to use the format of the Geneva International Discussions, yet our attempts at the negotiation table encounter unfounded and absolutely unacceptable resistance from Russia. I would like to reiterate that we attach special importance to the role of the UN in the Geneva Talks, which the UN co-chairs together with the OSCE and the EU.

In the 21st century, as people, nations, and cultures strive for greater integration and development, installing artificial barriers and barbed wires is absolutely unacceptable.

We want to break the deadlock in Russia-Georgia relations, but that can only be accomplished based on the respect for Georgia's territorial integrity, sovereignty, and the principles of international law.

Despite this injustice, our only response to these challenges is peace and Georgia's development. We have proposed a new peace initiative designed to overcome the humanitarian disaster in the occupied territories and create new opportunities for our citizens in the occupied territories. With this initiative, we are fighting to stop the process of depopulation in the occupied territories and to ensure respect for fundamental human rights.

We call this initiative A Step to a Better Future, which seeks precisely to provide the populations in the occupied territories with access to healthcare and education services, to create for them opportunities for commercial activities as a means for feeding their families and ensuring their physical survival.

Today, from this rostrum, I would like to address our Abkhaz and Ossetian compatriots: Georgia's every success is your success! We share a common historical past, which must pave the way for our future, which I am convinced will bring us peace and prosperity.

It is the Georgian authorities' duty to protect and guarantee the rights of every citizen, and we are committed to fulfilling this duty irreversibly.

You should enjoy all the benefits put in place by Georgia, be it human rights, education, healthcare, or visa-free travel to Europe. I would like to address especially the youth: Together, through joint efforts and pursuing opportunities, we will achieve success and prosperity. I want you to know that it is only in unity with you that we see our future.

And once again, I would like to urge Russia against undermining and compromising our peace initiatives, to enable the citizens in the occupied territories to lead a decent life.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

With its rich culture and ancient history, Georgia has always been standing by the world's civilized nations, contributing to the development of European and global civilizations.

Accordingly, we remain engaged in the fight against the challenges facing humankind. Today the list is unfortunately quite long; it includes conflicts, terrorism, migration and forced displacement problems, climate change, poverty, and grave human rights violations. Addressing these issues requires enormous effort and a strong political will from the United Nations and its' every Member State. All of us, each and every one of us, must confront these challenges to make the world a better place.

We strongly believe that pursuing national interests in the modern world should be based on mutual respect and in no way at the expense of one another.

It is precisely in this context that I would like to echo the theme of this General Assembly and reaffirm that we are committed to making our contribution to our shared goal of peaceful, equitable and sustainable societies, and to the strengthening the role of the United Nations for progress in achieving its goals.

Dear Colleagues,

By establishing a democratic republic a century ago, Georgia made its civilizational choice to define the future of our nation-we belong in the common European family.

This choice remains unchanged as yet another strong argument in support of our European identity.

Georgia, with its values and contribution, has always been an organic part of Europe, which continues its path through successful cooperation with the EU.

When Georgia declared independence a century ago, its Constitution built on the very values and principles that remain relevant and progressive even today.

Suffice to say, the multiparty Georgian Parliament a century ago included five women of different confessions, an achievement rarely found even among the established democracies of that time.

The 100th anniversary of this event, the declaration of the democratic republic, is celebrated by my country this year. Georgia restored its independence 27 years ago and embarked on a path to build a modern democratic state. It may not seem like a long time in historical terms, but our young democracy has faced multifarious trials and tribulations over this period. Today's Georgia is the heir and successor to the values planted a century ago.

Georgia's progress in the recent years in terms of democratic consolidation, respect of human rights, and strengthening the rule of law is unequivocally a result of the country's fundamental reforms.

Our strong parliament, non-partisan president, independent judiciary, and effective government stem from our successful constitutional reform-consequently, the country is switching to the European parliamentary model of governance.

For us, the country's development fully focuses on a free human being and human capital created by free human beings. The ambitious educational reform, the modernization of the system of education will prove to be yet another breakthrough on the path to overcoming the challenges that face my country today. Only educated, motivated, confident youth can bring about progress, eliminate poverty, and place Georgia among developed and innovative economies.

A small, flexible, and effective government is counterbalanced by strong public and institutional mechanisms of control and civil society, which perfectly reflects our commitments under Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16.

Georgia's election last year as Chair of the Open Government Partnership is the country's recognition bearing witness to the effectiveness of our relevant efforts and bringing our society concrete results.

Protection of fundamental human rights and dignity is our top priority. In this regard, Georgia has emerged as the region's leading reformer in the recent years. Especially noteworthy is the fact that we have overcome a major challenge we inherited in the penitentiary system. Most notably, we have visible progress with regard to the respect of human rights in prisons.

We have implemented important judicial reforms, which we intend to continue by launching the next wave of reforms.

One of the main achievements of our political force is media freedom and media pluralism. In 2018, Georgia further improved its position in the World Press Freedom Index, and we have exceptional achievements in terms of internet freedom.

Civil society plays a definitive role in the process of democracy building. Without a strong civil society, especially in a young democracy, the country's harmonious development is unimaginable. We want an independent, strong, and active civil society to develop in our country.

Under our sustainable development policy, we have prioritized green policy and green economy.

At the same time, we are developing digital economy poised to advance the country to a qualitatively new level.

Our economic strategy relies on inclusive economic development and economic growth that reflects in the well-being of each citizen. We are successful in implementing this strategy seeking to transform Georgia into the region's economic, tourism, logistics, and educational hub, as evidenced by our leading positions in reputable international rankings.

Our country's unique geography and strategic location between Europe and Asia has positioned Georgia for centuries as an attractive meeting place for civilizations and cultural dialogue. We continue fulfilling this function, and we are implementing ambitious new projects to this end.

A few years ago, we addressed the world from this platform and offered to host the Silk Road Forum in Georgia. We have not only made this forum a reality but have also reclaimed Georgia's historical role in the wider Silk Road region.

Today, however, I would like to propose a new initiative and offer you to facilitate the Tbilisi Forum focusing on transforming the Black Sea Region and the Caucasus, currently areas of confrontation and challenges, into a space for peace, cooperation, and development.

Georgia's every achievement, its democratic and economic development, and leading regional positions across a number of directions is the very result of our European and Euro-Atlantic choice, which is enshrined in the Constitution and the relevant parliamentary resolution.

NATO-Georgia relations have become very dynamic and comprehensive. Georgia is a NATO aspirant country and an enhanced opportunities partner, the largest per capita contributor of troops in the Afghanistan Mission, thereby contributing to the architecture of global security.

You are all aware of the disturbing threat of transnational terrorism, which is much larger and overwhelming today than ever. Terrorism is the 21st century's common enemy. In the fight against this common threat, Georgia has always stood, and will continue to stand, shoulder to shoulder with the international community. Unfortunately, many valiant Georgian soldiers have fallen in this global fight.

We all agree that the fight against terrorism along with its prevention and adequate response is only possible through joint efforts and shared responsibilities. I am convinced that we will defeat this common challenge.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Georgia's pain is not a problem facing only one country.

In 2008, aggression against Georgia was perceived in the world as a problem in the relations between only two countries.

The way things unfolded further, however, showed that the then world was unprepared to provide an adequate assessment and response to this aggression.

Unfortunately, the United Nations proved to be ineffective in the face of this challenge. Moreover, the system of global security is eroding before our very eyes. Today's world needs a stronger United Nations!

Today, the international community needs institutions capable of properly evaluating and responding to the current challenges, or preventing the risks undermining global security.

As you know, debates on reform the UN originated in the 1990s, though we must admit that we cannot attest to any serious success in this direction so far. This is why the issue of reforming the United Nations remains relevant, and I believe it requires immediate action.

As the world faces the challenges of the a new era with problems yet to be identified, we all have a task of caring and jointly overcoming global challenges in order to ensure a peaceful and better world for future generations!

Thank you for your time.