

'President' of Occupied Tskhinvali Region Speaks of Unification with Russia



NATALIA KOCHIASHVILI

Georgian Foreign Minister Davit Zalkaliani says the government will not allow what happened in 2008 to be repeated and 'be involved in provocations'. He said after meeting with his Danish counterpart that the country would not use force to restore its territorial integrity.

"Under the occupation, no referendum will have any legal force, especially since hundreds of thousands of our citizens have been expelled from their homes and, as a result of ethnic cleansing, are not allowed to return home. Here, too, we have the strong support of the international community and our friends... We are committed to this commitment and say we will not use force to restore territorial integrity. This is our legal obligation, which is very clearly supported by the international community," Zalkaliani said.

Danish Foreign Minister Jeppe Kofod,

who is visiting Georgia, considers the talks on the referendum in Tskhinvali 'unacceptable'. "The Strasbourg court has made not only a political but also a legal assessment of the occupation of Georgian territories," Kofod said.

March 30 it became known that a referendum on joining the Russian Federation will be held in the occupied Tskhinvali region in the near future. Recall that in August 2008, the armed forces of Russia and the de facto republic burned and destroyed Georgian villages in the Liakhvi gorge, leaving up to 30,000 Georgian citizens displaced. Since then, the de facto government has repeatedly asked the Kremlin to join, although Russia has so far refrained from annexing the occupied territories. The 'president' of the de facto republic of South Ossetia, Anatoly Bibilov, said that legal steps will be taken in the near future to allow the occupied Tskhinvali region to become part of Russia. According to him,

unification with Russia is a strategic goal of the so-called republic and they need to return to the so-called historical homeland. Bibilov recalled that in 2014, when Crimea became 'part of Russia', 'South Ossetia' had the opportunity to unite with Russia, but missed it. "We will not allow it to happen again," Bibilov said.

Currently, Bibilov is conducting a pre-election campaign, which is no different from the campaign of 5 years ago. Even then, Russia-backed Bibilov's main message was the unification of 'South and North Ossetia' into one republic within the Russian Federation, but his promises were not fulfilled and now he is coming out with the same messages. The so-called presidential elections are scheduled for April 10.

Unlike occupied Abkhazia, the occupied Tskhinvali region has a small number of civil activists who do not support unification with Russia. Their idea is to create an independent Republic of Ossetia.

In August 2008, after the Russian army invaded Georgia and occupied the region, the Kremlin recognized the so-called de facto state independence of South Ossetia on August 26. After the recognition, the 4th occupation military base was deployed in the occupied region, where, in addition to the troops brought from Russia, the personnel of the local army were also deployed. Now part of this base, including young people from Tskhinvali, are fighting against Ukraine on the Russian side. Ekho kavkaza spread that information on March 16, and 10 days later it was announced that an additional contingent would be sent. According to the South Ossetian Telegram, some of those servicemen returned from military operations in Ukraine. The case concerns, most likely, the residents of Samachablo regions, but the circumstances of the military's return are still unknown. Former de facto republican opposition leader Eduard Kokoity wrote on the Telegram that 'no one has the right to reprimand these guys or accuse them of cowardice. We need to find out the reason for what happened and find out how their participation was organized'. Earlier, Kokoity said that the troops sent to Ukraine for war should have 'elementary conditions'.

Meanwhile, it's been two days since residents of village Ergneti bordering occupied Tskhinvali have been hearing sounds of gunfire and explosions. According to locals, they are firing large caliber weapons in the occupied territory. "The training in Tskhinvali has become very active these 2 days. Is the sound of the use of massive bombing weapons. This is a very bad sign and reminds me of the beginning of the August 8 war. We must be very careful not to be provoked by the Russians," Ergneti resident, Vepkhvia Kasradze said. On March 29, the so-called Defense Ministry of the de facto republic reported that the training of the motorized infantry battalion was starting at the training ground in the occupied village of Dzartsemi. A battalion of the so-called de facto South Ossetian Ministry of Defense went to the training ground to improve its firearms and engineering skills.

PREPARED BY THE MESSENGER STAFF

Zelensky Recalls Ambassadors from Georgia, Morocco

President of Ukraine Volodymyr Zelensky signed decrees recalling Ukrainian ambassadors from Georgia and Morocco on March 31st, citing their failure to obtain imposition of sanctions on Russia or supply of weapons to Ukraine.

"Despite the great respect, if there are no weapons, no sanctions, no restrictions on Russian business, please look for another job. There are people who work with others to defend Ukraine and those who waste time trying to retain their positions," Zelensky said. The Ukrainian President also noted that he is expecting results from the work of Ukraine's ambassadors to South America, the Middle East, Southeast Asia and Africa in the near future.

"There are people who work with others to protect the state so that Ukraine can choose its future. We appreciate the actions of each such person. There are those who think only of staying where they are." The Ukrainian Ambassador to Georgia was recalled for consultations on March 1, citing the Georgian Government's refusal to allow volunteers in Georgia to take part in the war in Ukraine as the reason.

Russian Propagandist Simonyan against Customs Checkpoint between Russia and Occupied Abkhazia

Margarita Simonyan, editor-in-chief of Russia's state-run broadcaster RT arrived in occupied Abkhazia, where she opened the media center and met with de facto president Aslan Bzhania. Along with the positive impressions, on the Telegram channel Simonyan shared her dissatisfaction with the existence of a customs checkpoint on the river Psou (Abkhazian section of the Russian-Georgian border), which diminishes the dignity of millions of Russians.

"Incomparable, beautiful land, friendly, cordial people. Our people. Now they are fighting with us, for us. Now explain to me why there is a need for this infamous customs checkpoint that gets on the nerves of our citizens, diminishes the dignity of the millions of Russians who cross this border every year, as well as our allies who are now shedding blood for us. Now is not the time to do that, but later I will tell you who needs it and why. There are many interesting things out there. Meanwhile, thanks to the soldiers, thanks to their mothers and fathers." On September 27, 1993, after the fall of Sokhumi with Russian military assistance, about 300,000 people were displaced from Abkhazia. After the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, Moscow recognized the 'independence' of the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

EXCHANGE RATES: US DOLLAR - 3.1013 | EURO - 3.4496 | GBP - 4.0732 | 100 RUSSIAN RUBLE - 3.6773 | SWISS FRANC - 3.3506 |

Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, Kazakhstan Sign Declaration on Trans-Caspian East-West Corridor



► The declaration on the Trans-Caspian East-West Middle Corridor aims at strengthening the transit potential of the signatory states.

BY KHATIA BZHALAVA

Georgia, Azerbaijan, Turkey, and Kazakhstan have signed a declaration on the Trans-Caspian East-West Middle Corridor, which aims at strengthening the transit potential of the signatory states.

According to the Ministry of Economy and Sustainable Development of Georgia, the declaration underscores the significance of strengthening cooperation and integrating the Trans-Caspian East-West Corridor into the international transport system.

The document also focuses on the significant role of the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars (BTK) railway line in promoting competitive

transport between Europe and Asia. The declaration also emphasizes the need for infrastructure investments to increase the quality of transport operations along this route.

Last year, Georgian Economy Minister Natia Turnava stated at a meeting held within the Ministerial of Transport in Turkey that Georgia's role in the Middle Corridor is very important. She stressed that for decades, Georgia has been actively involved in various interconnection initiatives, including TRACECA, the Middle Corridor, the Black Sea-Caspian Sea Corridor, which aims to develop efficient, short, and reliable transport routes between Europe and Asia. She

also stressed that Georgia has actively been developing transport infrastructure.

It is noteworthy that Kazakhstan had been in the works to redirect its export and transit cargo through alternative corridors as Russia faces international sanctions over its war against Ukraine. As Kairbek Uskenbayev, the Minister of Industry and Infrastructure Development of Kazakhstan, announced on Tuesday, export and transit cargos from Kazakhstan would be redirected to the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TMTM) crossing Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey. According to him in order to develop cargo transportation via the TMTM, it is also planned to create a container hub on the basis of the free economic zone seaport of Aktau.

Guram Guramishvili, the Deputy Economy Minister of Georgia announced yesterday that about two million tonnes of oil and other oil products of Kazakh origin would pass through Georgia's oil terminal in the Black Sea town of Batumi in 2022-2023. Guramishvili stressed the 'competitiveness' of the Georgian corridor, stating that statistics of cargo transported by international rail were characterized by growth dynamics despite the global pandemic.

Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum: Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova show good levels of normative and legal approximation to the EU



On 30 March, the Eastern Partnership Civil Society Forum released the Eastern Partnership Index 2020-21, its monitoring tool that helps to assess the performance of the six Eastern Partnership countries and their progress towards sustainable democratic development and European integration.

The publication focuses on Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, as they were forced to urgently apply for EU membership under pressure from Russian aggression against Ukraine.

The results show that all three countries have already cemented considerable normative and legal approximation to the EU, suggesting that they are on track towards fulfilling the Copenhagen Criteria that all potential candidates must satisfy to apply and eventually become a member of the EU. The EaP Index demonstrates steady improvement from 2015 towards the standards set out by the Copenhagen Criteria – a functioning market economy, stable democracy, strong rule of law, and acceptance of all EU legislation – in all three countries. Varying degrees of progress were recorded in the areas of democratic rights and elections, human rights and protection against torture, state accountability, freedom of speech and assembly, and public administration.

According to the results, the progress was not always linear, with inertia and backsliding also apparent: "All three countries continue to struggle with the fight against corruption, and Georgia and Ukraine lost a significant number of points in relation to the independence of their judiciaries." However, the progress achieved over the last seven years reflects the far-reaching effects of the three countries' Association Agreements (AAs) and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements (DCFTAs) with the EU, and the role that EU assistance continues to have in ensuring democratic developments in line with the EU acquis, the EaP CSF states. During the same timeframe, Armenia – which ranks fourth in the EaP Index scorecard – also improved its performance, particularly on indicators pertinent to democracy and good governance, "but was less impressive with regard to policy convergence", says the EaP CSF. The country's score reflects both the progress made prior to its withdrawal from the Association Agreement with the EU, and the democratic reforms that have been implemented since the Velvet Revolution of 2018.

Belarus and Azerbaijan remain at the bottom of the EaP Index ranking. Both countries scored lower in 2020-21 than in previous editions of the Index, suggesting that the gap between the two worst performers and the leading four became palpably wider. The Forum concludes: "The results of the Eastern Partnership Index 2020-21 seem to suggest that the choice of a European path, combined with a responsive European perspective and dedicated financial, administrative and technical framework, can motivate and guide effective democratic progress", adding that granting EU candidate status to Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia would step up EU assistance, and further support their journey along the path to a functioning market economy, a stable democracy and strong rule of law that the AA trio is already on.



► According to Guram Guramishvili, the Deputy Economy Minister of Georgia, about two million tonnes of oil and other oil products of Kazakh origin would pass through Georgia's oil terminal in Batumi in 2022-2023.

FRIDAY APRIL 1

Day Sunshine
High: 22°C

Night Partly cloudy
Low: 9°C

SATURDAY APRIL 2

Day Partly cloudy
High: 25°C

Night Partly cloudy
Low: 11°C

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