

**Statement by George Zurabashvili, Ambassador of Georgia in Ireland
at the meeting of the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence of the
Oireachtas**
(Dublin, 10 December 2020)

Dear Chairman Charles Flanagan,
Distinguished Members of the Joint Committee on Foreign Relations and Defense, TDs and Senators,

It is a great honor and privilege to be invited to this historic building the Leinster House by the respected Committee to represent my country and to brief you on the challenges Georgia has, the ongoing Russian occupation and also to share the progress Georgia has been successfully achieving towards further European Union integration as well as to mark out the excellent bilateral relations between our countries.

In speaking here, I am conscious that this is also the first opportunity I have had to address you since the respected Committee has been selected, moreover, since Ireland has been elected as a non-permanent member of the Security Council of the United Nations that I sincerely would like to congratulate you with.

Georgia's stated aspirations to the European and Euro-Atlantic integration, as well as its rigid democratic and economic growth have further solidified Russia's aggression against sovereign neighbor with the main intention to keep Georgia under its direct political influence and domination.

It is important to emphasize that the conflict in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions of Georgia is not an internal rebellion or a civil war but coordinated attack fomented, planned and carried out by the Russian Federation. Russia's military forces and units and Russian citizens directly participate in the military operations using Russian military equipment. The plans to storm and occupy Georgian regions were drawn up and approved in Moscow. Faced with well-trained and well-equipped military units of Russia, Georgia lost *de facto* control over Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions. As a result of Russian military aggression illegal, proxy regimes were created by Russia in both Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions of Georgia.

Throughout almost 30 years of the Russia–Georgia conflict from 1991 to the current days the ethnic Georgian population was subject to atrocities including mass murder, torture, rape and pillage. The Georgian nation has suffered through three massive waves of ethnic cleansing in both Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions of Georgia that nowadays has resulted in half a million IDPs and refugees that Russian Federation is responsible for.

During August 2008 war Russia conducted a large-scale military attack against sovereign Georgia on land, at sea, by air, and via cyberspace. As a result Russia has additionally occupied 125 Georgian villages and has burnt out, destroyed and flattened down houses of 35.000 Georgians in order to preclude any return of the expelled population, trying to change the trace of history, pretending Georgians never lived here. Those few who have escaped atrocities and have remained in Tskhinvali and Abkhazia regions are constant subject to massive human rights violations.

In April 2011, the Russian occupation forces have started the installation of barbed wire fences and other artificial obstacles along the occupation line in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions of Georgia, this process of borderization has further intensified and actively continues nowadays. The length of barbed wire fences barriers along the occupation line in occupied Abkhazia region exceeds 49 km and in Tskhinvali region 52 km. As a result, the local population is cut off the agricultural and grazing lands, potable and irrigation water systems, churches and cemeteries; residing on different sides of the occupation line over 800 families are eliminated to contact each other. Those few ethnical Georgians who are left beyond occupation line are deprived of fundamental human rights, including free movement, civil rights, property rights, education rights in native Georgian language, health services rights. The native Georgians are forced to take Russian passports or register as foreigners, they are forced to change Georgian names and surnames. Almost all original Georgian toponymical names of cities, villages and streets are also changed. We witness the frequent cases of illegal kidnapping, detaining, torture and murder of those who live along the occupation line. The brutality of such actions is beyond human nature.

Russian occupation forces continuously move the occupation line deeper into the country, seizing thousands of acres/hectares of Georgian lands, advancing closer to the vitally important East West highway, grabbing territories where crucially important pipelines carry oil and gas to the EU markets. The creeping occupation brings fear to the local population, destruction to the economy and

undermines security. Currently, 20% of the Georgian territory is occupied by Russia.

The Russian Federation refuses to fulfill its obligations taken by 2008 cease-fire agreement that has been mediated by the European Union under the French Presidency. The six-point agreement envisages the non-use of force that Georgia has signed unilaterally as Russia declines to meet this obligation. Georgia calls for withdrawal of the Russian troops from our territories as stated in the same agreement. Instead, Russia has built two illegal military bases in both occupied regions where over 10.000 Russian military and security personnel are stationed. In addition, Russia maintains 2.600 KGB/FSB agents and border guards to control the occupation line and adjacent territories. The Russian illegal military bases are well equipped with modern military hardware, including tanks, artillery, military drones, ballistic missiles with capability of wearing conventional and nuclear warheads. The navy of Russia's Black Sea Fleet is in a constant movement in the Abkhaz section of Georgia's territorial waters while military planes of Russia's air force constantly violate airspace of both regions. The permanent military drills conducted by Russia on the occupied territories constitutes further threat to the local and regional security.

We do remember well, after the war, in November 2008, the visit of the current Taoiseach and that time Foreign Minister Micheal Martin to Georgia. We remain immensely grateful to the Irish Government and the European Union for launching European Union Monitoring Mission, the non-military observers' mission with eight Irish serving on the ground in Georgia, observing the occupation line. However, again, the Russian Federation britches the cease fire agreement mediated by the EU and does not allow the EUMM Mission to cross the occupation line to carry out their mandate fully. Even worse, few months ago the occupation regime has kidnapped and detained one of the international observers.

Russia is continuing to violate the basic principles of international law by legitimization of forced territorial and demographic changes through occupation and ethnic cleansing and has recognized the so-called "independence" of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions of Georgia. Furthermore, through political and financial pressure, Russia forces the others to do so, like Venezuela, Nicaragua, Nauru, and the most recently Assad regime in Syria did.

Russian Federation continues the illegal process of de-facto annexation of these regions through signing so-called "treaties on alliance and integration/strategic

partnership” with Abkhazia and Tskhinvali occupation regimes, thus fully incorporates Georgia’s occupied regions into Russia’s military, political, economic, social and legal systems. Few weeks ago, the Russian President announced the creation of common socio-economic and defence space with the occupied Abkhazia region of Georgia.

Through these destabilizing steps in an attempt to change sovereign borders in Europe, the Russian Federation poses a serious threat to peace and security on the European continent. It is of crucial necessity that the international community does not turn a blind eye to the alarming processes that the Russian Federation is carrying out through de-facto annexation of Georgia’s occupied territories and projecting power in the wider Black Sea region and the South Caucasus.

Georgia remains firmly committed to the peaceful resolution of the conflict and de-escalation of tensions with Russia based on respect of Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity and has undertaken concrete steps by adopting “A Step for a Better Future” the peaceful integration program for both regions.

The response of the European Union as a guarantor of the Ceasefire Agreement needs to be stronger, more decisive and resolute for defending the principles to respect the agreement, to call on Russia to implement its obligations under the EU-mediated 2008 Ceasefire Agreement, to cease its illegal steps towards de-facto annexation of Georgia’s occupied territories and withdraw its military forces from Georgian soil.

We appeal to our international partners and allies to demonstrate firm stance and make strong public statements and actions by the respective Capitals, giving a due assessment to the mentioned illegal developments. The European Union and the international community should make Russia accountable to the international law. Russia’s doctrine that strong is always right is totally wrong as in the modern world the rule of law must govern and the justice must prevail.

We are grateful to the Irish Government and to the Oireachtas for supporting Georgia’s territorial integrity, for co-sponsoring multiple UN resolutions on safe and dignified return of the IDPs to their true homes and for the motions passed on in Oireachtas, as I anticipate to see other resolutions on Georgia’s territorial integrity and EU membership as a reiteration of your continues support.

Today, here, in speaking to you, in speaking to Ireland as a friendly nation, as a full-fledged EU member state and as a newly elected non-permanent member of the Security Council of the United Nations, I remain confident that occupation Georgia faces and the crimes against humanity that Georgians suffer, from the devastating policy of the Russian Federation will be stronger condemned, efficiently tackled and resolute and the actions towards de-occupation will be executed. We are not living in a perfect world but definitely, we together can make it more human, more secure and better protected.

In parallel the country is progressing well towards the European Union Integration. A strong leadership of the Government based on the nation's destiny towards the European and Euro Atlantic integration that is also firmly reflected in our Constitution, achieves our success. The Georgian Government has declared to submit the EU membership application by 2024.

The European values are exactly what determines Georgia's European path, we Georgians share exactly the same values as you do and our shared past is an integral part of our shared future. Therefore, we are confident that only by embracing political and economic interdependence we both can progress and develop further.

But dreams do not work unless you do. In frames of Eastern Partnership, we have signed Association Agreement with the European Union that opens a new chapter in Georgia's relations with the EU. In this direction, our next goal is to join the Single market, Single Euro Payment Area, Single Telecommunication space, incorporate into Educational domains, Transportation Network and many, many more.

Since the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement signed with the European Union the EU has become the major trade partner for Georgia with the 12% increase in our trade balance sheet.

Georgia invites the Irish businesses to enjoy our favorable location, a gateway from Europe to Asia, as we provide free market access to over 2 billion population market through Free Trade with China including Hong Kong, Central Asia and all neighboring countries. Avoidance of Double Taxation is another strong incentive for the Irish companies. The competitive advantage of Georgia is based on the rule of law with a liberal market economy and well-regulated property rights, easy, friendly and corruption free business environment, skilled and cheap labor force with well-spoken English, low utility costs, good internet

connectivity and rapidly developing infrastructure. The bold share of the phenomenal progress Georgia has achieved within last decade comes along elementary tax code system designed by the Government to ease business conditions. By World Bank Easy to Do Business Georgia is ranked 7th in the world and with Economic Freedom Georgia is ranked 5th by the Fraser Institute

Georgia possesses huge potential of green hydropower generation. We are studying closely the project to construct a novel Black Sea Underwater Electricity Transmission Line to supply the EU with so needed green energy. In the world of digitalization, the internet cables stretching along the sea bed are among top priorities as currently the Black Sea has turned up as a sea of connectivity.

Georgia contributes to the global security and participates in all count terrorism operations led by the United States and in various EU peacekeeping missions.

Though EU membership is not currently on the table, it is our goal that Georgia becomes a member of the European Union. We call the EU to further shape cooperation with Georgia as with a potential candidate country. Being defined as a potential candidate country will be a sign of a big support to Georgia's democracy and will certainly further consolidate Georgia's democratic and economic reforms.

Nowadays, the increasing bilateral relations require reciprocating by the Irish Government to open the Irish Embassy in Tbilisi that will definitely contribute to the Irish global footprint policy, also, will benefit Ireland, as a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council and will open new horizons for Irish businesses and combined will contribute to our bilateral friendly relations. We also hope, that Ireland will join the EU Schengen states decision to open borders and will provide visa free excess to the Georgian citizens that will contribute to our people-to-people relations, as people are the main asset that any nation has.

Our friendship is strong and firm and the relations sincere, reliable and trusty. We commit the best we can to support Ireland wherever you need and whenever you say on the international arena and all multilateral formats of our competence. We remain more connected, more interactive and more relevant than ever before.

Thank you.