



United States Mission to the OSCE

Response to Ambassador Hakala, Head of the OSCE Mission to Georgia

As delivered by Chargé d'Affaires Kyle Scott
to the Permanent Council, Vienna
June 11, 2009

Thank you, Madam Chairwoman.

The United States warmly welcomes to the Permanent Council the Head of the OSCE Mission to Georgia, Ambassador Terhi Hakala. We thank you for your comprehensive report. We appreciate your strong leadership, and commend the extraordinary dedication with which you and your staff have met the unprecedented challenges of the last eight months.

We sincerely regret that you had to report today on the end-of-mandate procedure for the OSCE Mission to Georgia. The United States strongly supported the Mission, and worked for months to ensure its continuation.

We believe the Mission played a critical role in conflict resolution efforts, not only helping to build confidence and encourage dialogue, but also working to improve security on the ground. The Mission's military monitoring officers were especially critical to these efforts, and undoubtedly helped reduce tensions in the region.

In addition to all of this, the Mission implemented a wide range of human rights, democratization, and economic development programs, and assisted the government of Georgia in implementing OSCE commitments. We particularly appreciated the Mission's efforts to help strengthen civil society, protect the rights of minorities, build effective democratic institutions, and promote freedom of the media. We also supported the Mission's Economic Rehabilitation Program, and hoped it would further the conflict resolution process by encouraging dialogue and improving the lives of people on both sides of the South Ossetian administrative boundary line.

Regrettably, the opposition of one participating State prevented the Mission from continuing its valuable work – and brought us today to this disappointing juncture. In mid-May, after months of intensive consultations, the Russian Federation rejected the Greek Chairmanship's status-neutral proposal for a continued OSCE presence in Georgia, after insisting on extensive amendments that were unacceptable to the great majority of OSCE participating States. Russia's rejection of the Chairmanship's artfully crafted compromise followed a similar move at the end of last year, when Russia blocked consensus on a constructive proposal put forward by the Finnish Chairmanship. We note that both proposals were supported by the overwhelming majority of participating States. Russia's repeated rejections of sound compromises ultimately forced the OSCE Mission to Georgia to cease its operations, dismiss its personnel, and sell off its assets – a sad fate for one of the OSCE's largest and most important field presences.

This is not the first time Russia has blocked or forced the cessation of OSCE activities in Georgia. Allow me, Madam Chairwoman, to remind the Permanent Council that Russia, in 2004, called for the closure of the OSCE's Border Monitoring Operation in Georgia. That operation had successfully addressed a difficult issue between Georgia and Russia, and helped enhance transparency in the border region. But Russia blocked consensus on proposals to renew the operation's mandate – despite efforts to make the operation more efficient, and despite the host country's request that it continue – and the operation ceased after its mandate expired on December 31, 2004. Later, Russia repeatedly ignored calls for the establishment of a permanent checkpoint at Didi Gupta, international monitoring of the Roki Tunnel, and an increase in the number of OSCE monitors in the South Ossetian region.

Russia's actions then and now are inconsistent with Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Karasin's statement to the Permanent Council just last week, when he said an OSCE presence in the region is "not only useful, but also essential." The deputy foreign minister acknowledged the importance of OSCE observers in establishing stability in the region and introducing "a normal language of communication" – but despite this, and to our great disappointment, Russia has not acted in ways that would guarantee the continued operation of OSCE observers or the broader Mission.

In fact, many Russian actions in Georgia, such as its establishment of military bases in the breakaway regions, and its deployment of FSB border guards to the administrative boundary lines, have undermined rather than improved stability in the region. The same holds true for allowing Russian companies to explore for oil and gas in Georgian waters, and for promoting illegitimate elections in the South Ossetian region.

We remain hopeful that Russia will seriously consider the detrimental consequences of these actions. We urge Russia to honor the commitments it made in the August 12 cease-fire agreement and the September 8 implementing measures, which call for Russia to withdraw its troops to positions held prior to the start of hostilities, and to provide free and unhindered humanitarian access to the South Ossetian and Abkhaz regions of Georgia. Again, we remind Russia that it has a responsibility to ensure that respect for human rights is upheld and international humanitarian law is observed in those areas of Georgia that are under Russian occupation.

In closing, Ambassador Hakala, the United States again thanks you and your staff, and commends your extraordinary work. We are deeply saddened by the fate of the OSCE Mission to Georgia, and sought for months to prevent this outcome.

We remain committed to finding a peaceful resolution to the conflicts in Georgia, and will continue to support Georgia's sovereignty, independence, and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders.

Thank you, Madam Chairwoman.