

Statement of the Group of Friends of Georgia at the 31st OSCE Ministerial Council Meeting

5-6 December 2024

This statement is delivered on behalf of Bulgaria, Canada, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Iceland, Ireland, Latvia, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Sweden, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America.

We reaffirm our full support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders.

Sixteen years since the Russian Federation's military invasion of Georgia, we remain deeply concerned over the continued occupation of Georgia's regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and underline the need for peaceful resolution of the conflict based on full respect for international law and commitments, including the UN Charter and the Helsinki Final Act.

We condemn Russia's military aggression against Georgia in 2008 in blatant violation of international law and express our concern that Georgia has been a target of Russia's hybrid tactics as well as conventional warfare ever since regaining its independence. We express our deep concern over Russia's ongoing illegal military presence, military exercises and violation of airspace in Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions. In this regard, we express deep concern over the steps taken to establish a Russian naval base in the Ochamchire district of the occupied Abkhazia region as another provocative attempt to destabilize the already dire situation on the ground and in the wider Black Sea region. We also reiterate our condemnation of Russia's continued war of aggression against Ukraine.

We welcome Georgia's compliance with the EU-mediated 12 August 2008 Ceasefire Agreement. We call upon Russia to fulfil immediately its clear obligation under the Ceasefire Agreement to withdraw its forces to pre-conflict positions, as well as its commitments to allow unfettered access for the delivery of humanitarian assistance and not to impede the creation of international security arrangements on the ground. We call upon Russia to reverse its recognition of the so-called independence of Georgia's regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and to ensure safe and dignified return of all internally displaced persons (IDPs) and refugees to their homes in a manner consistent with international law.

We condemn the steps aiming to incorporate Georgia's regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia into Russia's political, military, social, economic, judicial, and other spheres, including attempts at implementation of the so-called integration and alliance treaties between Russia and Georgia's Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions, which constitute a clear violation of international law by the Russian Federation and directly contradict OSCE commitments. We further condemn transferring Sokhumi airport to Russia for reconstruction and operation, illegitimate establishment of polling stations for Russian presidential elections in Abkhazia and South Ossetia regions of Georgia in March 2024, and so-called parliamentary elections in the South Ossetia region of Georgia in June 2024 without Georgia's consent. We are concerned over Russia's hampering the activities of international organisations operating on the ground

and restricting the confidence building efforts. We urge Russia to reverse its steps to incorporate Georgia's regions into its own government structures.

We are concerned over the continuous discrimination against Georgians on the grounds of ethnicity in Georgia's regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. We are also concerned about abuses, including severe restrictions on rights related to freedom of movement, education, residence, and property, particularly in connection with the destruction of the houses of IDPs. We condemn restriction of education in native Georgian language and its replacement with Russian in schools and kindergartens in Georgia's regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. We also condemn the obliteration and alteration of Georgian features of the Georgian cultural heritage monuments in both occupied regions.

We are particularly concerned over the ongoing installation of barbed wire fences and other artificial barriers along the administrative boundary lines (ABLs) and the lengthy closure of so-called crossing points, which have led to severe humanitarian consequences for the local population. We also condemn the unexpected closure of so-called crossing points of ABLs during the period around Georgia's October 26 Parliamentary elections preventing Georgian citizens from casting their votes and disrupting commerce and freedom of movement for the affected population. The partial and temporary re-opening of the so-called crossing points cannot be viewed as satisfactory. All so-called crossing points in Georgia's regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia must be reopened for all Georgian citizens residing on both sides of the ABLs.

Isolation and continuous restrictions on freedom of movement have further destabilised the situation on the ground and severely impacted the security, safety, well-being, and humanitarian conditions of civilians in conflict-affected areas, preventing their access to family, property, agricultural lands, religious sites, and cemeteries as well as Georgian government issued pensions, the free healthcare services and education available in Georgian Government controlled territory. This creates a risk for further depopulation of both regions.

We condemn the killings of ethnic Georgian citizens Davit Basharuli, Giga Otkhozoria, Archil Tatumashvili, Tamaz Ginturi, and Vitali Karbaia, and express concern for the death of Irakli Kvaratskhelia in illegal detention at the Russian military base in the Abkhazia region. We urge Russia to remove any obstacles to bringing the perpetrators to justice. In this context, we reiterate our support for Georgia's preventive steps aimed at eradicating impunity and note the Otkhozoria-Tatumashvili List adopted by the government of Georgia.

We remain deeply concerned by ongoing arbitrary detentions around the ABL involving vulnerable groups, and in some cases people with severe health problems. We call for the immediate and unconditional release of Irakli Bebuia, Kristine Takalandze, Giorgi Mosiashvili, and all those under arbitrary detention.

We note the January 2021 judgment of the European Court of Human Rights in the case concerning the armed conflict between the Russian Federation and Georgia in August 2008 and its consequences, including its findings that Russia exercised effective control over

Georgia's regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia following the 12 August 2008 Ceasefire Agreement, including through its military presence. The Court also ruled that Russia, in violation of the European Convention on Human Rights: tortured Georgian prisoners of war; arbitrarily detained and killed Georgian civilians; was responsible for their inhumane and degrading treatment; and prevented the return of ethnic Georgians to their homes. Moreover, the European Court of Human Rights adopted another judgment in the case “Mamasakhlishi and Others v. Georgia and Russia” on 7 March, 2023, which confirmed the effective control of the Russian Federation over the Abkhazia region of Georgia even before Russia’s war against Georgia in August 2008, and its full responsibility for human rights violations in the occupied region. We recall the decision of the ECHR of 28 April 2023, which ordered the Russian Federation to pay up to 130 million Euros in favour of conflict-affected Georgian citizens. We note the two ECHR judgments of December 19, 2023 - one defining the responsibility of Russia for the killing of Georgian citizen Giga Otkhozoria, and the other affirming Russia’s responsibility for the illegal detentions of Georgian citizens in the Abkhazia region of Georgia. In its latest ruling on April 9, 2024, the ECHR confirmed multiple violations of the European Convention on Human Rights caused by unlawful “borderisation” by the Russian Federation. We call on the Russian Federation to fully comply with these judgments, including by allowing internally displaced persons (IDPs) to return to their homes in safety and dignity.

We also note the decision of the International Criminal Court (ICC) of 2022 that issued arrest warrants for war crimes committed against ethnic Georgian civilians during Russia’s invasion in 2008 and noted the alleged role of a now deceased Russian military official uncovered by the investigation. We call on Russia to cooperate with the ICC.

We support the effective functioning of the Geneva International Discussions (GID) as the only format of negotiations between Georgia and the Russian Federation to address implementation of the EU-mediated 12 August 2008 Ceasefire Agreement, as well as the security, human rights, and humanitarian challenges stemming from Russia’s invasion of Georgia in August 2008. We underline the necessity of progress on the core issues of the discussions, including withdrawal of Russian Forces and establishment of international security arrangements in Georgia’s regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as stipulated in the Ceasefire Agreement, and on ensuring the safe, dignified, and voluntary return of IDPs and refugees in accordance with international law. We regret the permanent disruption of the GID rounds due to walk-outs by participants from Russia and its de facto authorities at the agenda item on IDPs and refugees. We strongly support applying the Women, Peace, and Security agenda in the GID in order to facilitate inclusive and sustainable peace and security on the ground.

We express our support for the Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms (IPRMs) in Ergneti and Gali and emphasize the important role they can have in preventing any escalation and in helping to protect the safety and security of people on the ground. We express our great concern over the lengthy suspension of the Gali IPRM and urge its resumption without further delay or pre-conditions, in line with the ground rules.

We reaffirm our unwavering support for the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM) and call upon

Russia to allow the EUMM to implement its mandate in full, including by enabling the EUMM's access on both sides of the ABLs. We condemn the recent incident in which Russian forces temporarily held the EUMM monitors in Georgian government-controlled territory while the monitors were fulfilling their duties. At the same time, we call on Russia to enable full and unhindered access by international human rights organizations to Georgia's regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

We support the comprehensive de-occupation and peaceful conflict resolution policy of the Government of Georgia. We support the Georgian Government's "A Step to a Better Future" initiative and its "Peace Fund for a Better Future", aimed at improving the humanitarian and socio-economic conditions of people residing in Georgia's regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia and at fostering confidence building among divided communities and stand ready to support.

We encourage the OSCE's engagement in the process of finding a peaceful resolution to the Russia-Georgia conflict. We regret the closure of the OSCE mission to Georgia in 2009 and encourage the OSCE participating States to decide on the reopening of the OSCE cross-dimensional mission in Georgia, including a monitoring capacity able to operate unhindered across the ABLs. The reopening of the mission would strengthen considerably the OSCE's engagement in the GID and IPRMs. Furthermore, the re-establishment of a field mission would support the OSCE's work in every phase of the conflict cycle.

The Group of Friends of Georgia will continue to raise awareness of the conflict and of developments on the ground, hold Russia accountable for meeting its obligations and commitments, and advocate for the conflict's peaceful resolution.