

THE BROOKINGS INSTITUTION

SAUL/ZILKHA ROOMS

GEORGIA'S EURO-ATLANTIC ASPIRATIONS
IN THE EVOLVING REGIONAL SECURITY CONTEXT

Washington, D.C.

Monday, May 5, 2014

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. HILL: Ladies and gentlemen, can everyone hear in the back? Is the volume okay? Very good. I want to welcome everyone here today for a very important and special event for us here at Brookings. It's a great pleasure for us to invite back Irakli Alasania who has had many different guises before becoming the Defense Minister of Georgia. He also served here at the embassy many years ago, which is how we first got to know him in a very distinguished service.

Irakli Alasania's career and personal life really traces the full trajectory of Georgia's post-Soviet history and, of course, now against the backdrop of events in Ukraine and Crimea, all the questions about NATO enlargements and about the enlargement of the EU, many of us here I'm sure are feeling that we've gone full circle back again to the events of 2008 in Georgia, a very tumultuous time in transatlantic relations, another period when we had very much the spotlight on Russia and the relations with its immediate neighborhood.

Irakli's here today to talk to us about Georgia's perspective again on its transatlantic aspirations and also to offer some comments on how he sees the current situation and why Georgia hopes to see itself over the next few years. He's here to be a conversation so with you here in the audience. We have seats in the front here reserved for some of the Georgian delegation, but if people would like to fill in the front as well to give it more of a conversational edge instead of the barrier between all of us here, that would be great. So please feel free, if anyone would like to come and sit further down, because this is an opportunity also for you to be able to put some questions to the Defense Minister. Obviously when we set this up actually many months ago, we hadn't quite anticipated that we would really be in the eye of the storm in the way that we are.

And I'm sure that there's going to be a lot of observations including from you here in the audience.

So, Irakli, I want to just thank you very much for coming. I know this is part of a very busy time for you here this week. You have a lot of meetings, a lot of things on the agenda, and more things than you're anticipating on the agenda. And first of all I'd just like to ask you how you do see the current situation from Georgia's perspective? And, again, because this does put rice in the crosshairs once more, the questions of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic and transatlantic aspirations.

MINISTER ALASANIA: Well, first of all let me thank you, Fiona, for organizing this. It's always good to be back at Brookings and the States. And I think it's a very right timing for us to speak about what is the context of the perception that we have on the ground in the region about what's happening in Ukraine, how we let it happen. And, of course, what are the next steps that we, Georgians, will make to make sure that our path towards NATO, towards European Union integration, is unchanged and also how we're going to make sure that the credibility of the West, the credibility of the NATO as an organization, will be still continuing to be relevant, to safeguard the values that we all cherish: it's freedom and democracy and Europe holding free.

And I think that this cannot be the better time to discuss this in an honest, very open, way because I think what we need at this point is more clarity about who stands where. And I believe that Georgia's commitment to the Euro-Atlantic security is really a testimony of what we're doing in Afghanistan together with the other allies. And we are pleased to see that our work and efforts there are playing well, that we had very unexpectedly good elections, peaceful elections, in Afghanistan. And these are some of the things that Georgia is really a part of, that we are proud of that.

We are acting like a NATO country. We are acting like a European country because we believe that our future is within Europe. And we regard ourselves as future members and this is why we are preparing ourselves, institution-wise, in terms of the freedom, in terms of the democracy, and the military capabilities when the opportunity and historical opportunity will open up to Georgia to join the NATO and European Union.

We are soon anticipating to sign the very important agreement with the European Union. This is the agreement that we probably will be signing in late June, the Association Agreement with the European Union, that again is going to be a validation of the progress Georgia has made for the decade. And I just want to give a credit to all the administrations that worked hard to get Georgia where it is now on both sides actually in Georgia. The first president gave us the freedom. Another president, Shevardnadze, put us on the international map. The president, Saakashvili, made sure that the states, the institutions, are more strong. And now the current prime minister, Prime Minister Garibashvili, is making all the efforts to build on the successes of previous administrations and to take Georgia closer to Europe, closer to NATO. We had a very good meeting with Prime Minister Garibashvili and President Obama and the vice president just a couple of months ago, and the prime minister made sure that he was very clear about what Georgia is doing. We're looking in the future. We cannot be dragged back to the confrontation of the early '90s and we want to make sure that our policies, our economic policies and the foreign policies, are specifically working to make sure the Georgian people that elected us are now moving closer and closer to the European way of living standards. And this only can be done if the efforts that Georgia is making will be validated, will be appreciated, by the NATO and European countries. And one of the things that we're looking forward to is the signing of the Association

Agreement. The next step obviously is the NATO summit and what the NATO summit will decide how effectively they can ensure and assure the allies, but also the partners like Georgia. Georgia is the partner that actually reformed progress, transformed its military forces, is the biggest contributor per capita in Afghanistan. Now we're going to be the biggest non-EU contributor in the European-led operation in Central Africa. And I think Georgia is really proving itself to be worthy of the political and other investments that your country was putting in Georgia for the past 20, 25 years. And I think now we came to the point also after the tragedy and the aggressive war of Russia against Georgia in 2008 to learn the hard way, to learn the lessons, and we are now approaching the foreign policy and specifically the issue with Russia with a rather mature approach. We don't have any illusions that Russia will change its behavior or policies toward Georgia's territorial integrity or NATO aspirations. But we do hope that the fusion of tensions, the crease of the military rhetoric between two countries, will serve Georgia's interests best and it will give us more space to develop ourselves, develop our relationships with the Abkhaz and Ossetia and this is the course toward our policy actually: be uncompromising on the territorial integrity, be uncompromising on the NATO aspiration membership of NATO and the EU, but at the same time be sure that we're not going to give any pretext to anybody in the region, specifically to Russians, to attack us politically or otherwise.

At the same time we have now the agenda that is very full in the Ministry of Defense. We have ambition to transform the military forces to a fully professional army by 2017. We're moving into transformation inside the armed forces, giving them major projects like pay-by-rank system, reequipping ourselves with a more efficient and more effective defense capabilities. This is what we're also talking to our partners to have the

purely defensive capabilities and tools for Georgians to defend our freedom if it comes to that. Of course, the confrontation needs to be avoided and this is why we're putting all the efforts in Geneva format.

And also the Prime Minister appointed the Special Representative to talk with Russia economy on cultural and the trade issues, which also helps to diffuse the tensions between two countries. In the regional context and then I'm going to go, Fiona, to Ukraine, it's very important to have the regional partners and allies and strategic partners like Azerbaijan and Turkey to be thinking more and more how we can jointly safeguard and secure the critical infrastructure that runs through Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Turkey, that provides alternative energy resources to Europe. We have the pipelines. We have gas pipelines. We have the oil Baku-Tbilis-Ceyhan pipeline. We have also the railroad that we're just building. It's going through Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey that will connect the actually old Silk Road by railroad. These are the huge projects that will have tremendous strategic impact on the region, and this is why we're building this trilateral with them also to have another layer of economic, energy, and also, I mean, political security in the region.

Now, Ukraine, we may not anticipated at that time in Munich when we met and planned for this that things can go that wrong in Ukraine, but clearly at every level Russians were signaling that they will fill any void that West will fill for them security-wise in the region. And what happened in 2008 in Georgia is another reminder that things have not changed that much in the leadership of Russia. We are more mature. We are more careful. We are more mindful not to give any pretext. That's why we were so mature in addressing the security provocations in the Tskhinvali region and the the borderization and barbed wiring, separating Georgian and Ossetian families from each

other. We took up the existing instruments of actually monitoring mission of the European Union, and we're not lashing out in a rhetoric because we understand that there's really very complex situation and that Georgia should really be the country that will look like a mature democratic nation that cares about not only its interests, but also interests of the United States and NATO in the region.

At the same time now dealing with Ukraine, I don't see the easy way out. Nobody does. But we do know that down the road the nonrecognition policy of Crimea cannot be recognized as a part of Russia. Eventually the legitimate election and legitimate leadership in Ukraine, which is much needed at this point, and also the counterintelligence and the counter-corruption policies that need to be instrumented will get Ukraine back on track. It will take time, and that's why there's no need for wasting time and just be stalled in hesitation whether to support economically or militarily Ukraine to be stronger to cope with these challenges. The same way in Georgia. I think Georgia has demonstrated a number of times that with the transfer of power, with the democratic elections, with a consolidated nation, with new policies in free economic entrepreneurship, and, of course, with substantial as I mentioned contribution to security of the Euro-Atlantic area, that we deserve to be validated, acknowledged, and we deserve also to have the defense capabilities that will be tools for us if need will require to defend our country. So all of this said means that the Ukrainian crisis as much as we want them to end soon, it's not going to be the case. We Georgians are sharing the lessons learned from 2008 with Ukrainian counterparts. We, of course, condemn what Russia is doing there, the coercion and the instigation of the provocations in the East, and we are ready to assist in the, as I mentioned, lessons learned and intelligence-wise our Ukrainian colleagues. But, of course, it's them to decide their fate. It's them to take

control of the situation, and we hope and we pray for them that they are going to be successful in actually pacifying the East and making sure the elections will go rather in a peaceful environment.

Now, NATO: The NATO Summit is in September. We have three or four months still to go and my main objective on this visit in Washington, D.C., is to talk on the Hill and talk to the State Department, Pentagon, and other officials who are working on Georgia to make sure they understand the difference between what was the reality in 2008 about the MAP, about the progress in NATO, and what's the difference today. As I mentioned, Georgia has progressed, checked all the boxes, and now it's time for the NATO to make sure that they are giving the signal to Georgia and the region and there cannot be any third party, Russia or whoever it will be, that can block our aspiration to join the club, because it's value-based and it's performance-based. And this is why we have faith that the next summit will grant Georgia another solid, very concrete and comprehensive, step to fully integrate ourselves to NATO. If I were the decision maker, my point is that we should not be only talking about MAP. We should be talking about accession talks because this is why Georgia is qualified to be a partner that can bring some security on the table. At the same time the policy of the opponents and Russians to occupy the land of the neighbor is not only because they are looking strategically on that part of the territory of Georgia, but because precisely they know that the West-thinking, pre-Ukrainian crisis was that if you have territorial disputes, if you have the territory occupied by the neighboring country and the neighbor country is a nuclear country, you don't qualify to get membership. So this is why their calculus is specifically actually adapted to the responses that they may get from NATO. Now it's the change. Now I think what happened in Ukraine again demonstrated we need to change the

approach. The West has to change the approach. And they have to be willing, if Georgia will qualify, and with all the actually qualifications that are there, they should be ready and signaling that they will be really ready to accept Georgia as a member if Georgia will have a solid, sound, and irreversible peace dialogue with our president. This is what happened in the German case. Germany was occupied, but the decision was the very right decision to accept as a NATO country member. It was Germany. And this is exactly what Russians understand, that if we're going to create the reality, a reality which will be, I think, unprovoking and it's erroneous thinking in some of the actually places that we're going to provide NATO's membership action plan to Georgia to provoke Russians to do more harm. I don't think it's the right thing. Actually I think quite the opposite. If the solid and very powerful message will be that yes, if the country's qualifications are in the right places, we will accept them as members. And this is why I think that the post-Ukrainian crisis thinking in NATO should be really changed. And I hope that in coming months our dealings with European partners, with Germans, with Dutch, with French colleagues which are skeptical at that time, this is why we're demonstrating and now is a different time. Now Georgia is mature. It's not provoking. It cannot be dragged into the provocation. Our military capabilities are raising so we can contribute. We're going to be part of the NATO response force in 2015 and 2016, a part of EU-led operations, our capabilities highest. I mean, our soldiers and your soldiers are trusting each other because they're in a fight. So this is why the capabilities that we together with the United States and NATO countries raise then the institutional changes that we made, anticorruption, transparency, and the parliamentary oversight of the armed forces, is exactly the right things that we were told to do 5 or 6 years ago and it's met. It's effect. So I think the best way to go along about the next NATO summit will be just to make the

decisions concentrated on the qualifications and merits, not just thinking about who will be irritated by this.

MS. HILL: I think you've laid out that very clearly. And I guess what's on everyone's mind here in Washington, D.C., of course, is the big debate about Ukraine, which you're touching upon here. It's been out in repeated opinion editorials and articles in the press about whether there should be some agreement to diffuse the crisis in Ukraine about Ukraine not joining NATO in the future, in many respects a walking back of the Bucharest declaration about Georgia and Ukraine not being members of NATO now, but certainly in the future, which, of course, just preceded the war in Georgia. I mean you've already laid out that some of those issues trying to separate NATO off from the EU now is probably not possible in any case. The trigger supposedly for the war, the pretext at least, for the war in 2008 was the Bucharest declaration, was the aspirations for Membership Action Plan for NATO. But, of course, what we're seeing in Ukraine has been very different. This has been the Association Agreement. Before, EU did not seem to be a trigger anyway for a confrontation.

You very interestingly said that you've set up a special envoy to deal with Russia on the economy. You've obviously taken onboard quite a lot of lessons. If you're looking beyond the big debate, I'm sure you're going to get a lot of questions here from the audience about this issue about how to diffuse the situation with Ukraine. If you put aside some of the inevitable perspectives and think about some of the things that you've been doing. And here I know that you're the Defense Ministry, but you've also been the representative to the United Nations, you've also been the Minister for Integration. You've dealt with a whole host of issues in your long and very distinguished career in Georgia. What kinds of ideas might we get if we look beyond the immediate crisis?

Envoys to deal with the economic issues? What other ways might there be of diffusing the tension if we look ahead, from the lessons that you've learned?

MINISTER ALASANIA: Well, I mentioned that the first and foremost we need to have legitimate leadership in the Ukraine and so that's why election is now top priority for everybody. We need to get this right. And, of course, it will require the dialogue and talks with Russian leadership by United States and European leaders and that's what's going on.

Most important that we saw in this crisis and what is also reassuring to Georgia is that the United States and European leaders are talking and almost on the same page on this. And this is very important for us to be reassured that the United States and Europe are working hand-to-hand on this to prevent future escalation.

Two other things that I also mentioned, but I'm going to reiterate is that the difference between Georgia and Ukraine is that we don't have that much larger Russian population inside that they can work on. At the same time I think the infiltration level is very high there rather than in Georgia, of the Russians in institutions, and the corruption are the two things that I think is very important to the leadership in Ukraine to understand that needs to be changed. But it's not going to change overnight. That's why they need help. That's why they need substantial economic package, and I know the IMF and the world leaders are working on this. And also they need more military assistance, of course, advising how to put the old Soviet-type military into the modern fight-capable armed forces. Also it will take time, but we need to start this. And what I was asked last week about whether we're going to be in favor or not, but just what we think about the military assistance to Ukraine. Of course, they need this. They need this because the West reaction also, besides the economic and financial sanctions, should be the

combination of these smart sanctions with the military deterrent. Without that, I think the sanctions, the economic and financial sanctions, will not have that effect that we would like to have.

It's very good that the allies were reassured, more troops, more capabilities in the eastern part of NATO, but now it's time to think about the various ways how to reassure the partners. We were talking about the prolonged exercises and drills on the ground in Georgia, for example, the NATO and U.S. forces, which we've been doing limitedly but we have to expand this to enhance this. I mentioned that there should be more defensive capabilities provided for the partners. Again, we now know responsibly how to behave with these weapons. We know how to use them because we've been trained to do so. So all of these in combination will have a deterrent effect for future expansion.

But I think most importantly for Ukraine now is to concentrate on the elections and to find the common ground with the eastern side's population and to have the leaders that will be more appealing for both sides, east and west. I think they're up to a tremendously complicated task. And as I mentioned, we military-wise are experienced, we're trying to share with them, and we also share intelligence information about what's happening there. But the major issue here will be again when the Ukraine will have a legitimate leader that will be capable of making decisions and the decisions -- he will be speaking for the Ukrainians. So that's most important and immediate steps that should be taken.

MS. HILL: Thank you. Let me open it up to the floor. I'm sure there's lots of questions along the lines of things that we've already discussed. We're also being joined by Ambassador Suleymanov from Azerbaijan. And if he would also like to say

something at some point, you can. We're delighted that you were able to join us today.

AMBASSADOR SULEYMANOV: Thank you. I'm late, but that would be fine.

MS. HILL: Okay. Now, I don't want everyone to be shy here because I noticed some stirring before. We can't have got you all panicked and then -- yes, please. Thank you. And if you'd identify yourself before the question so we know who's asking the question. Thank you so much.

QUESTIONER: Hello, everyone, and hello, Irakli.

MINISTER ALASANIA: Hello.

QUESTIONER: I'm Angela Tlustenko with AnaCom. The question I have is twofold. We mentioned legitimacy of government, legitimacy of government in Ukraine, and you say when we'll have legitimate government. Number two is law and international law. We have perhaps a period in history where international law is being questioned or perhaps even the legitimacy of the current situation in the entire Eastern European and Central Asian countries being questioned by one country in particular, and the United Nations is sort of responding and maybe not. Irakli, you have been in this field of international affairs and you have some background in law, so could you please comment on what you mean on legitimacy of the Ukrainian government? And also, what are your thoughts and views on how to uphold international law under current circumstances? Thanks.

MINISTER ALASANIA: Thank you for the question and I want to actually make one thing straight. I was meaning the legitimate elections, not -- I mean government is legitimate and there were, of course, parliamentary elections that led to these changes. Of course, it gives them full legitimacy to speak and on behalf of the

Ukrainian people. I was probably, missed that part, the legitimate elections and legitimately elected the president through this election. That's what I was meaning by the legitimacy. Of course, there's no question in the current leadership's legitimacy in the Ukraine.

Was there another one?

QUESTIONER: The question about the upholding of international law.

MINISTER ALASANIA: Oh, yes. Well, what I said about the nonrecognition policy, of course, it means that nobody will recognize that we have to push for Crimea as a part of Russia. And it's part international law and by international standards, it's part of Ukraine and that's how we see it, how Georgia and other countries except one country see this. So we have some experience in actually dealing with this nonrecognition policy, and we are also actually ready to share with our Ukrainian colleagues how we did this, how it was sustained. And I'm pretty sure the international community are in the right place on this and it will continue like this, of course. Thank you.

MS. HILL: I suppose the situation is quite similar to the status of the Baltic States during the whole Cold War period after World War II, when the Baltics were incorporated into the Soviet Union, but were never officially recognized.

MINISTER ALASANIA: Recognized by the West, yes.

MS. HILL: So that's a continuation I think of the same system. And there were obviously procedures within the United Nations for dealing with that.

I think the question of the legitimacy of the presidency or the presidential election is going to be a very acute one. I mean, how do you think we'll going to deal with the situation if, for example, it's not possible for the elections to take place in some of the

key cities in eastern and southern Ukraine, which I thought might be one of the objectives of the current crisis. And we know in many other electoral settings in times of crisis and political upheaval, a lot of questions will get posed after the fact.

MINISTER ALASANIA: We still have, I don't know, 25 or 20-some days before the elections.

MS. HILL: Yeah, 20 days today. Yes, it's the 25th.

MINISTER ALASANIA: And we will see how it's going to play out. I mean if the control will be gained of this separatist region by Ukrainians, then there's a chance to have the elections there as well. I think it's going to be up to the Ukrainian leadership to decide whether it's a go for this or they can think about some other options. But it's still too early to judge whether it can be postponed or it will be conducted in the parts of the Ukraine. I think it's going to be very important to all the regions to participate, and we all know that. There's no need to repeat about this.

So we'll see how it's going to go forward. There was a meeting by President Obama and Angela Merkel just a few days ago. I'm pretty sure that they talked about this, how to deal with this. They're in touch with the leadership in Moscow. There was some kind of statements from Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs a few days ago about kind of them engaging themselves in a dialogue between East and West. But two things that I think that everybody should agree is that we cannot have the outcome when the foreign policy will be somehow, the foreign policies choices of Ukraine, will be depending on the regional leaders. So their part should -- I mean, the federal government and the president has to be all the authorities to lead the foreign policy, and we don't want to have a situation where someone can block the foreign policy choices of Kiev after these arrangements. And there were talks about federalization or however

they're going to deal with this, it should be in the best interests first of all of Kiev and Ukraine as a nation that is whole. This is why it's going to be very delicate talks. Probably a lot of them will happen behind the scene. We don't have enough information to judge from here, but I think we still have time to make necessary steps from the West to make sure that the elections can be conducted.

MS. HILL: And Georgia's a much smaller country than Ukraine is territorially and obviously in terms of population, but you also face the same questions about federalization at various points. I mean before the war in 2008, there was a lot of pressure also put on Georgia because of its history of various kingdoms and a very diversified ethnic composition that Georgia should also contemplate about. I mean, how have you dealt without them for the last several years?

MINISTER ALASANIA: It was at certain stages it was proposed by the Russian mediators at that time. In the '90s there was a federation and there were confederation ideas, but I don't think it had any meaningful kind of substance at that time. I mean, the situation in Georgia is very different because Abkhazians were [inaudible] while they were ethnically cleansed from Georgian population. And if there's going to be any vote or any kind of thinking about what kind of relationship Tbilisi [inaudible], it should be within the say of the ethnically cleansed population as well, which were a majority. So that's why it was very different from the very beginning.

And, of course, we do now think that we also made a tremendous mistake in dealing with Abkhazia and Ossetia. For at least 20 years we passed on a lot of opportunities when we could have actually elevated a trust and built a confidence with both sides. We should have actually concentrated more on people-to-people relationships and building economic ties and infrastructural ties rather than being fixed

only on the political side of the confrontation. But we learned from this and this is why today Georgia's policies first that we reconfirm the previous government's pledge that there's no military solution to the conflict with Abkhazians and in the region on various levels, presidential, prime minister's level. Second, we are opening the relationship on economic and other sides with Abkhazians and Ossetians. We want people to trade. We want people to actually tear down the barriers that were built by Russians recently. And there's health care and other benefits we want to extend towards them and eventually it will work. It's not going to work overnight, but we feel that that's the only way. That's the only approach that we have.

And later down the road when the trust will be elevated by the negotiating parties, then we're going to start talking about how we're going to rearrange Georgia within the nationally recognized borders. I think that it may take years, 5, 10, or whatever years it will take. That's the only path that we're going to be going through. And I think that we reassured pretty much our Abkhazia and Ossetians now that their security, legitimate security concerns are heard in Georgia. We're thinking about this and we are sending very positive signals to them. It will work eventually. Now Russians are blocking everything. Right up to the Olympics, the security, heavy-handed actually, shot down was not making comfortable Abkhaz, Ossetians either. They're not happy with being under the occupation and being like a canker sore on the Russian military. They're not happy with that. I know this. We know this. And I'm pretty sure with the policies that we are putting through and the prime minister is actually putting through, down the road there will be thinking more how to be part of Europe together with Georgia rather than stay under the constant Russian military occupation. But we need to be patient. This is one we learned, not habitual tool for Georgians to be patient, but we're learning this and

we learned this in how dealt with the internal confrontations, how we dealt with the aftermath of the elections in 2008 we made with each other. I mean, it's very different, and I'm proud that our society has matured that far.

MS. HILL: I'm going to just come to the audience again in a moment, but you said something very important about the economic aspects of this. And, again, because defense is your portfolio, I'm more playing to some of your other career positions here. But Georgia will be signing the EU Association Agreement sometime in late June. I mean that does raise the question of the trade relations with a broader neighborhood. And obviously with Turkey as the perpetual candidate country for the EU, that's one thing. We've mentioned trying to overcome the barriers with South Ossetia and Abkhazia through trade, but also Armenia has made the decision to join with the Eurasian Union. Azerbaijan is still in more of a neutral position when it comes to various trading blocks. But that is going to be rather an issue of this, at least the appearance of artificial barriers; and that being at the root of the current conflict over Ukraine between Eurasian Union and the European Union's Association Agreements. I mean, what are your thoughts in looking forward about how to address that?

MINISTER ALASANIA: Well, first on the Association Agreement, we're going to sign this and then going to be the talks about liberalization with Georgia. And I just want to make sure that you know that just a few days ago Parliament passed the end to discrimination law, which we're very proud that it was passed. And that's, again, another side of the maturity of Georgian society. And this will enable us, down the road, pretty much within the year to have the liberal regime with Europe. This is something that we're going to offer to Abkhaz and Ossetians as well. This is something that they're looking at very interestingly, and these are the tools that will be provided by the West and

Europe and other countries to make Abkhaz and Ossetia interested in talking with Georgia and having something joint with Georgia. As the regional context goes, I mean, we cannot stress more the relationship, the strategic importance of relationships with Turkey and Georgia and Azerbaijan.

And as I mentioned we're putting together some trilateral -- actually, by the way, the day after tomorrow or tomorrow, the three presidents will be meeting in Georgia -- and also we're thinking of transferring this trilateral to the security field as I mentioned, how to protect the critical infrastructure. And that part, of course, the movement of trade and businesses is tremendously helpful for Georgia's economy. I mean, a new project, the Trans-Anatolian project, will bring hundreds of working places and millions of dollars into Georgian economy as well as Azerbaijan and, of course, Turkey. So these are the things, I think, eventually will be considered by Armenians to be part of. I mean I'm not going to go into details of how the decisions were made to join Customs Union or Eurasian Union. This is the choice of Armenian leadership. And, by the way, I want to stress that we have very good relationship with Armenians. We are blessed that we have that kind of possible relationship, to be friends with Azeris, Turks, Armenians, and I think that also stresses the importance of Georgia as a convening power within the region that can be utilized and used in the future as a potential of getting those people who are not talking pretty much today to the negotiating table. But I believe that the Armenians are looking soberly on their status today, and I'm pretty sure and convinced that there is a place for them in the future in this major international energy and other projects because without them, this whole corridor or the safe Caucuses cannot be completed. And I'm pretty sure that the Azeris are having this same potential, I mean, eyeing the same potential in the future.

So in that context I think the Association Agreement has given a lot of good leverage and assurances to the Georgian public that they can go and trade in Europe. It will elevate also the quality of the production that we are having in Georgia. After the Russians shut down our wine market, our wine production, and the export has grown in the countries we never had before in Europe and the United States and other places. So it's helpful, very helpful to us, and I cannot underestimate the importance of the Association Agreement. But then again, when a country like Georgia is performing and kind of becoming the role model for the post-Soviet transformation in the region, this should be validated by everybody and by NATO as well. And this is why we're looking forward to the NATO Summit with the hopeful eye that that validation and very strong instrumental signal will be sent to Georgia.

MS. HILL: Thanks. Over here, please.

QUESTIONER: Good afternoon, everyone. I'm Michael Sudef from the Czech Republic's Embassy. My question is about the NATO Summit, actually. You just told that the summit should approve something that sends a strong signal, should validate Georgia's progress, and should be something that is another substantial step towards Georgia's accession towards NATO. My question is: how the steps should look like in your view. Should this be only the Membership Action Plan or should it be also or could it be also something else and if so, how it should look like?

And the second question, if this substantial step is not made in September, what risks do you see from this not being made, like in terms of the public support to NATO's accession in Georgia, Russian steps, any other adverse consequences of this step not being made? Thank you very much.

MINISTER ALASANIA: Well, I would respond that I'm not worried about

the wordings of how it's going to appear in the resolution after the summit. What I'm worried about is how to avert next attack on Georgia and if the attack will occur, how can it defend our country. And this is exactly how the Membership Action Plan will be granted and the decision will be made to increase the footprint of the allied military presence on Georgian soil, whether there's going to be exercises and drills. I think this brings the security. We think that this provides specifically the deterrent that we're talking about. So there's again erroneous thinking that whether we're going to give MAP or air defense to the countries that are partners close to Russia, it will provoke Russia to do more crazy things. No, it's not like that. I think the history has proven that if you create the reality on the ground, this is exactly what the assurances for the countries that you're doing business with and also a deterrent for the aggressor. And I think also the Membership Action Plan is next logical thing that was imprinted in the resolutions and declarations in Bucharest and other places. If we're going to come up with something else that will provide the amount of political security support, that's up to NATO allies to discuss this and we don't want to jump into the discussions where we don't belong at this point. We have laid out our arguments. What's most important in our arguments: we are acting as a NATO country member, with all the qualifications. Now it's up to them to make the decision and we cannot make this decision for them unfortunately today, but what we can do is assure you that, first, we're not going to be provoked by Russians. We're dead serious that we're not going to give any pretext for us to be dragged in into provocation. And second, MAP or whatever step will be, we don't see it and look at this as a security provider like fifth article. People are somewhere scared that well, they're going to misunderstand that this is not the fifth article and this is not the Alliance pledge to defend military. We know this. We've noticed this in 2008 and we are pretty sure that Georgian

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wider public understands this. But what we need, if you cannot come to defense of Georgia, to have tools that, if need occurs to defend our freedom. So this is two things. The political and security decisions on the summit and providing tools that we need, self-defensive tools, that's what I want to underline, for Georgia to defend its freedom. So there's two things in parallel that we're talking about.

MS. HILL: Thank you. I've got several people. Ambassador Suleymanov and then the gentleman behind him. The gentleman over here, the lady here. So Ambassador Suleymanov, the microphone is coming down your way. Thank you.

AMBASSADOR SULEYMANOV: I think the Minister can hear me. Minister Alasania, welcome to Washington. Always good to see you. I have a quick question. You mentioned the importance of the infrastructure of energy projects going to Georgia and it's true that the significance of Georgia in this particular case is very difficult to overestimate. In fact, that's a key country for all of us. However, they do pass to specific territory in Georgia and both Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Kashagan, actually the expansion of the South Caucasus also goes [inaudible]. You mentioned earlier that there is no Russian-speaking population in those numbers in Georgia that could pose problems in terms of the protection of that population from the outside. However, I just wanted to check with you. I understand that significant numbers of people in [inaudible] and Ossetia now carry passports of a different country and that's not really a new approach, because that was used before but apparently now the question is not so much on a particular language of a population, but rather on a passport. So if you could comment on that and whether it matters or not in this case.

MS. HILL: I'll just elaborate on this. I was having a discussion not so

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long ago with someone from Tajikistan who pointed out, in fact, that Tajikistan actually has official dual nationality, the only of the former Soviet republics to maintain that. And at least a quarter of the 1 million roughly labor migrants in Tajikistan, many of whom actually don't speak Russian particularly well, actually hold Russian passports. And so this issue of the compatriots in Russia does not necessarily mean ethnic Russians are Russian-language speakers or at least national language speakers who would pass an examination because a lot of the ability to apply for the passports has been lowered in some cases for former Soviet citizens. So I think what the ambassador is talking about, very specific in the case of Georgia, but broader in the region, there is now this larger issue in question about people who are passport holders, but are not necessarily ethnically Russian or even native Russian-language speakers.

MINISTER ALASANIA: Well, true. They're holding Russian passports as well, Armenian passports as well. But let me start with saying that the multi-cultural Georgia is, because of that, is very, very interesting country and very proud country because Armenians played a lot of key roles in the development of our country historically. And we have, as I mentioned, a wonderful relationship with Armenia as well, but the Georgian-Armenians, how we want to call them, they're now more and more integrated into Georgia social fabric and previous government has done a good job in providing the communications and roads and all the other infrastructure to be built for them to feel that they are part of Georgia, they are part of development of new Georgia that will have a shared interest of Armenians as every population and others. That's what Georgia is about actually because it was always multi-cultural.

At the same time, of course, the actions that Russians are making and how they dealt with passports claiming that they need to deal with their own population is

something that we're worried about and it's been an issue for years. But I think the engagement of the Georgian-Armenians in Georgia's social life and now political life because of the new local election and new local code of the elections gives a lot of authority to the regions for them to feel secure, feel that their political ambitions will be actually materialized in the local councils. All of this gives less and less chances to someone who wants to use this population against Georgia, give them less and less chances to do this. Of course, we should be very vigilant and we are doing everything that we can to make sure that they feel that they are part of the bigger Georgia and this kind of games will be total destructive to all of us, Georgians, Armenians, and everybody.

So I don't see that the population will be, or can be, dragged into the type of the instability that we're seeing now in the Ukraine. And the only way actually to avoid this in the future is more integration. That is what I was referring to: more schools, more participation in Georgian armed forces. We have Armenians serving proudly in the Georgian armed forces, as well Azeris. We're making sure that they understand it is their country. And I don't think there is the appetite inside the population in that region or in Armenia as well to do something that will threaten our common and shared interests. Of course, there always will be operatives, GRU [inaudible] and other intelligences services, that will try to somehow stir troubles up, but our country intelligence services is also active and we're working hard to make sure that infiltration that happened in the other areas of post-Soviet state will not be the case in Georgia.

MS. HILL: Okay, the gentleman behind here. Thanks.

QUESTIONER: Michael Enders, independent consultant formerly a USAID officer in Georgia. Three years ago we had a chat and you had indicated there was a hope that with the passing of the Saakashvili regime that there would be a

possibility for improved dialogue for reform in Abkhazia. From your comments it sounds like this has not come about. I was wondering if you could give an update on this.

MINISTER ALASANIA: Yes, we enacted actually the strategy, an engagement strategy, that is from my standpoint of more realistic and more thinking about the people-to-people contacts, more thinking about building trust between the war-torn societies rather than concentrate only on a political dimension of the confrontation. But we never had illusions that it will happen that fast. And I'm in touch and other officials and state minister for the reintegration in touch with Ossetians and Abkhazians, we feel the improvement of the climate and the trust that occurred after the change of the government in 2012. Well, it depends on us now on the Georgian side and the government and how effective we will reach out to them provided the existing challenges by the Russian occupational forces. And that's why I'm mentioning the health care projects, the educational projects, the economic and trade connections -- this is our priority at this point. And I'm pretty sure that what we're doing in Gali region, which is predominantly Georgian, in providing some services to them and [inaudible] and other regions of the Abkhazia and the same in other directions will provide the fruits, will provide the grounds for future possible breakthrough in the dialogue as well. But I don't see that it's about to come in a couple of years, but we're laying the groundwork for the future breakthroughs. And on that part, not only on Abkhazia, I'm a believer in the Russian-Georgian relationship as well. We have a future. We had a past, but we have a future. But I don't hold my breath that something will change in the coming 8 to 10 years. So I think these 10 years will be like a minefield going through the relationship with Russia, not giving them any pretext to provoke us on anything or giving the pretext to attack us, but at the same time to build the cultural ties and the ties with the trade

partners on the other side. We increased actually the Georgian agricultural goods and wine market in the Russian markets. The Russian tourism tripled in the past year. It's good. People are talking. People are going to give more information to each other and other than hearing all propaganda stuff that is going on TV. So this is, I think, the good thing that is happening, and this is diffusing the tensions and gives more ways of thinking about how we're going to deal with each other in terms of the war that we had in 2008. But I wouldn't hope for the quick fixes, but this is the long-term thing. Again, patience will be crucial here.

MS. HILL: Thanks. This lady here.

QUESTIONER: Thank you, Fiona. Thank you, Mr. Minister for your thoughtful comments. I wanted to ask you a question about something you alluded to in your opening remarks and that is the debate that's raging here in Washington led by Dr. Kissinger on one side who suggests that the speed with which we enlarge NATO was the problem that we were poking a finger in Russia's eye and those of us on the other side such as myself who would say that the lack of leadership in Bucharest in 2008 and the lack of a vision for future enlargement created this problem and that Putin was opportunistic. Could you please comment on that?

MINISTER ALASANIA: Yeah. Well, last thing we want is to get in the middle of that debate. So we are blessed that we have strong support from both parties and that Georgia is the kind of issue and the security and the defense of Georgia is the issue that is bipartisan. And, of course, we have our arguments, and we're telling our arguments to everybody – to Dr. Kissinger that we met in Munich Conference, the Prime Minister and myself had a meeting with him and explained where Georgia stands today. I think clearly without U.S. leadership on the NATO expansion and NATO integration, I

don't see the hopes that we have materializing in coming months. And I do hope that coming months that we will be in position, Georgia will be in position, specifically after the assessment that will be out there in June on how we are performing and how the reforms and the readiness for the qualifications will be out there. I think it will give you more instruments and the tools to convince the other side that this is the right thing to do.

MS. HILL: Well, fortunately Finland in the middle of this right now, or unfortunately, if you're Finland. There's a lady over here and then the gentleman on that side. Can the people that want to ask a question make sure I got you...and up here as well. Thank you.

QUESTIONER: Good afternoon, Mia Kay from Voice of America, Georgian service. My question is what can the United States do, specifically what steps, in the upcoming months to make sure Georgia doesn't get punished for its Euro-Atlantic aspirations especially before signing the Association Agreement and then for the NATO summit? Thank you.

MINISTER ALASANIA: Well, the U.S. has been doing a lot for the past decade to support Georgia's statehood. And just one fact that we've been training by U.S. about 11,000 Georgian troops pre-deployment to Afghanistan-Iraq. That speaks of itself how much fruitful how relationship is and we have now the armed forces that are capable of doing what they need to do.

The other thing is, of course, politically the U.S. has been tremendously supportive after the 2008 war and this \$1 billion pledge that you made, the United States made, after the war and also worked with Europe to match up with other \$3.5 million was the assistance that helped Georgia to survive the 2008 war consequences.

Now, we are probably at the point of the highest in our relationship with

the United States. We have a strategic partnership that was signed. We had by a previous president a wonderful, very fruitful, honest meeting by President Obama, Vice President Biden, and Irakli Garibashvili just a few months ago. And we agreed that there's going to be enhancement of the military cooperation. We agreed to a bunch of things that we need to be capable of defending ourselves. We don't see and we don't think that we anticipate the U.S. militaries to provide security for Georgia in Georgia because it's our job. We're going to do it. But the tools that now the U.S. is providing step by step and hopefully will be decided in coming weeks will prove to be the effective tools of anti-armor and anti-air defense. That will give us the capabilities that we need to reassure the Georgian public that we are ready. This needs to be avoided, of course, confrontation, but if it occurs we should be ready.

Now, as was mentioned, the leadership on the championing of the next wave of enlargement and specifically on the Georgian side, whether it's going to be MAP, whether it's going to be not MAP, but the instruments that will be sufficient enough to have the political integration possible to NATO with Georgia. That's up to U.S. and other allies to decide, but I think without their leadership in coming months and specifically after the assessment that will be out there on the aspiration countries in June, then I think it's going to be crucial. So the self-defense capabilities that we need to have in the long run and the MAP or something that will lead us to have tools to integrate fully into NATO, these are the two things that we're talking with the United States.

MS. HILL: Thank you. There's a gentleman here.

QUESTIONER: Hello. Gabriel Barr from Library of Congress and my question is you have a strategic partnership with the United States and NATO. Do you have any kind of cooperation, military, with China and what kind? Thanks.

MINISTER ALASANIA: No military cooperation whatsoever so far, but I think the China angle is, of course, very interesting due to understandable reasons. And I think we're putting now more on economic side relationship with China rather than on the military side. I think, as we were mentioning, the railroad that will be going through Azerbaijan, Georgia, Turkey that will connect pretty much China to Europe to the railroad that will pretty much be the resurrection of the Old Silk Road with new kind of type of connections. So this is something that we're more concentrating with China. We have a lot of -- actually China's expert is coming out in Georgia actually, finding the ways to build the businesses and together with Georgia. So it's all moving, but not on the military and security side.

MS. HILL: Thank you. The gentleman on the aisle here. Then there's another gentleman back here with a red tie and then on the aisle further back. Thank you, sir.

QUESTIONER: Thank you. My name is Malcolm Ewing. Minister, I've seen a lot of criticism that the cease fire arrangements that were negotiated in 2008 by France and the European Union with Russia have not been respected by Russia, not been implemented fully. My question is: are you and the Georgian government satisfied with the implementation of those arrangements and if not, what might the West do more effectively to hold Russia accountable for agreements that it makes and then does not fulfill particularly at a time when a Ukraine-Russia is once again not respecting its diplomatic agreements and, as recently as the Geneva Agreement just a few weeks ago to deescalate in the Easter Ukraine, and has not followed through on those commitments? Thank you.

MINISTER ALASANIA: Thank you. Well, they were in a breach of that

agreement the day after they signed it because it called for the armed forces of both sides to go in pre-war positioning. So that's one where they were [inaudible] in breach for 6 or 7 years now.

On the other side they were actually even during the last couple of months there were abductions of journalists, abductions of local population, imprisoning them in Tskhinvali for the kind of incriminating the state border crossing illegally or whatever. So they're testing us. They were testing previous government; they are now testing our government. How are we going to react to this? Are we going to fall into provocation or are we going to lash out do something stupid that they're going to take as a pretext to do more harm? But we demonstrated to them that it doesn't make any favor to them because Georgia is not provoked, but at the same time with these types of actions, they're damaging their image also within Ossetia and Abkhazia. So I think in the long run it fits perfectly in our future relationship with Abkhazia and Ossetian to make sure that Russians not there out of taking care of their national security or other interests. They're there to keep Georgia from being part of Europe and free. And this is why I think constantly, of course, on the Geneva talks our partners, United States and others, and we are reminding them that they need to fulfill six-point agreement forged by the EU. We don't have illusions that it's going to happen tomorrow, but definitely I'm pretty sure that down the road we will be able to focus more attention on this six-point agreement fulfillment and implementation.

Now, what's happening in the Ukraine today is tragic, but I also see that Ukrainians are getting more and more capable of addressing some of the security issues. And I see that, down the road after the elections and when things will get pretty much more or less in the orbit to be controlled, I see that Georgians and Ukrainians can

actually come together because these are the two countries that were directly affected by occupation of Russian forces, and we can do together, join our forces together and campaign together around fulfillment of the occupation of our two countries.

MS. HILL: Thank you. There's a gentleman here.

QUESTIONER: (inaudible), former ambassador to NATO, Georgia's former ambassador to NATO. Irakli, one of Ukraine's key takeaways that it doesn't matter whether you're striving to become a member of NATO or EU, actually the fundamental problem with Russia is that in acceptance of any free society, any signs of democracy, or any basis of a strong statehood. So from my perspective I think that this is the fundamental problem between Russian-Georgian relations and Ukrainian case is another manifestation of that.

So my question is: given this current situation in acceptance of Russia and its sovereignty, borders, or any other signs of statehood, what is the basis of the future Georgian-Russian relations? How Georgian-Russian relations can be normalized if the other side simply doesn't accept the fundamentals of your basis, of your statehood? Thank you.

MINISTER ALASANIA: Well, first of all Georgia doesn't have the luxury not to speak with Russians. We don't have the luxury not to speak with the enemies. It's a small country with limited resources. And second of all, we don't have illusions that we're going to change this thinking in Russia with our actions. First, our objective is not to give any pretext to Russians to attack us. This is one thing. And another I think we need to have a long-term view on this. I'm pretty sure things will change in Russia in 10, 12 years from now. I mean, look, they're even raising their own worst enemies, their own children that they're sending to be educated and living in the Western societies, and

they're going to be very different when looking at the things rather than their current leaders. So I believe that the next generation of leaders in Russia will be more sober, but at the same time will be more free of the clichés that the previous generations or [inaudible] educated generations had. So this is where we need to target. And if we're not going to start today, then we're just going to drag our time. So this is why we're investing I think with the cultural and social relationship with them to make sure that they're not only receiving the image of Georgia through the propaganda, but also from the societies they're connected.

So this is why I think our approach is very right, and I think it was wrong approach of the previous administration in Georgia just to isolate Georgian society from dealing with Russians. Maybe there was a sentiment right after the war; it's understandable, but we have to be more strategic thinking. This is also -- we made a lot of mistakes previous to Abkhazia and Ossetia, to isolating them. It didn't serve our interest. We need to deisolate Abkhazia and Ossetia as well to make sure that they are in contact with us and they know better world than Russia is West. So I think what we're doing, whether we're going to be successful or not, we're going to judge it 4 years from now on an election ballot. But I think it's the right strategy. I think we're right to invest in a future relationship with Russia, which I believe is possible.

MS. HILL: You're putting your finger on a very important element to the debates here right now, too, about how the United States and European allies and partners should also deal with Russia. And part of the debate now about sanctions is also about containment and isolation of Russia. And from looking at recent opinion polls in Russia, obviously there's a much more closed media environment there than there is here. We made all kind of debate about how fair minded all the various media coverage

is, but it's certainly the case that if you're in Russia and watching Russian television, you're not getting much of a sense of the debate that's going on in the outside.

We've also got a lot of polling information showing that 70 plus percent of Russians don't have a passport, so they're not necessarily traveling, including probably not to Georgia or anywhere either. Part of the arguments about building up Sochi and now Yalta and other Crimean holiday destinations is to actually discourage people from traveling further. And we also know there's been a massive brain drain. Many of the people who have been educated overseas -- we have 40,000, that's a statistic we always hear here in the United States of Russians who work in Silicon Valley and still show no great intention in going back. I mean that's just one small fraction of all the people who were working outside of the Russian Federation. I mean, how do we deal with that based on what you said? In some respects, it's easier and more difficult for Georgia, simultaneously. You have proximity. There's a lot of still understanding and you have a very large Georgian outspread in Russia. There's contacts there. People can travel backwards and forwards. But if you play out this on a larger scale, I mean what would you advise the United States and Europeans to consider if they're now thinking about how to deal with the immediate crisis and how to deal with this longer term process?

MINISTER ALASANIA: Well, when I talk it applies to the Georgian-Russian relationship. You have luxury to do more as a state. If I were in the United States, of course, my strategy would have been different than we have now in Georgia because of the obvious reasons. I think there's no doubt that whatever you're doing to make sure that Russians are paying a higher price, economically, financially, is the right thing to do. And eventually it will get them, no doubt about this, because they're not strong economically. Their financial system is not viable to survive this. And this is the

right thing. While I was arguing that you need to add more military deterrent to it, which is the deployment of more military in Europe, Eastern Europe, and possibly in Georgia, of course. So this is the only way to respond at this point to the crisis that we have with Russia -- I mean, you have, as the West, and we have, as a country, with Russia.

I think also that pretty much people are thinking long term with Russia as well. I mean there are a lot of people here in Washington that are thinking about how these things will develop 10, 20 years from now, and they're taking into account what I also mentioned here that Russia will be different in 10 years. And Russia's new generation, a new middle class, will hopefully be more actively engaged in the politics, and their thinking of the world is very different than the current leadership's. And this is the way I see the hope of the breakthrough in the relationship and fixing the major fundamental problems that we have with them, the territorial problems and then occupation. And until then -- I mentioned it and I'll repeat it -- it's a minefield. We have to be very vigilant, very careful, and at the same time very strong on two things: our NATO and EU membership and territorial integrity.

QUESTIONER: (inaudible), Johns Hopkins. Apart from reading the book from Dr. Hill about Putin, what will you suggest us to do in positive, vis-à-vis Putin? I mean we did something wrong or not?

MS. HILL: So a big question. Have we done something wrong or not?

MINISTER ALASANIA: Well, I think it's a relationship that have actually gone up and down for years. When we were here as young diplomats, when we met Fiona, there was another administration here, the Clinton administration I guess, and nobody believed at that time that we could build Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan. Everybody was skeptical that Russians will not allow this, but it happened because you were consistent,

you were pushy, and there were leaders to take this seriously. So I think the best thing to do is to just create the reality on the ground. Just do things in Caucuses, do things in Ukraine, do things in Eastern Europe, and, of course, this will really make an impact. I'll mention smart combination of the sanctions, economic sanctions and military deterrent, that's the only way I think that can be applied in this situation.

MS. HILL: Okay, so we have to be smart and maybe do more and talk less, right?

MINISTER ALASANIA: Yes.

MS. HILL: Difficult to closet Brookings, but anyway. We have to talk a lot here. Sorry, the mike's on its way down.

QUESTIONER: Alexander [inaudible], HIS. Thank you very much. I just thank you very much, Minister, for your informative comments, very interesting. I wanted to ask you two questions very quickly. One about the statement that you made at the Atlantic Council about the positioning of the defensive assets on Georgian territory by the Alliance. And, in particular, I'm interested is it supposed to be an interim security guarantee in the run-up to Georgia's potential Membership Action Plan? That's the first question.

And the second question has to do with the fact that in both March and April we had registered airspace violations by the Russian aircraft from breakaway regions from Abkhazia and from South Ossetia. And I was wondering in the context of these discussions, do you have any contingency plans for something like that happening again? Thank you very much.

MINISTER ALASANIA: Thank you. First, we do have contingency plans that we're putting together. After the war there was more than 900 violations of Georgian

airspace by Russians. This is why it's important to have the effective air surveillance system that will fixate whatever is happening in our space and also build up the credible air defense system. This is one of the priorities that we have combined with a counter mobility systems that we need to have.

Now, about my remarks in the Atlantic Council where we were talking about what NATO can do, I referred that these are the steps that will be effective. And I really do think that you just can't raise the expectation of the country, can't expect from the country to be a good partner in Afghanistan and elsewhere, then say that one day you're going to become the NATO member and then leave him hanging out there without any meaningful tools to defend themselves because it really works quite opposite in the eyes of the enemies, the Russians, for example, right?

So we need to have these two things coming together. I mean integration and capabilities on the ground and this is why I think that this is worth discussing. We are discussing this with our counterparts. Of course, the decision is not ours, but we're not waiting for this. We are doing everything we can with our militaries to retain and have the capabilities that we will need to meet our obligation toward nations to defend them, if need occurs.

MS. HILL: Thank you. Yes, this gentleman here.

QUESTIONER: [name inaudible] Can you please elaborate on your negotiations with NATO on Article V? If Georgia joins NATO, would it be extended retrospectively to the occupied territories in South Ossetia and Abkhazia? And, if it does not, if in the future God forbid and Georgia is attacked from those territories, which are Georgian territories, how is that going to be justified on the part of NATO?

MINISTER ALASANIA: Well, that's a good question, but let me tell you

that we are having the step-by-step approach to the integration. And now we're talking about the Membership Action Plan because it's the next logical step that was written in the declaration in Bucharest. And the Membership Action Plan doesn't have anything to do with the fifth article, so we're not discussing this. When are we going to get this and will we have another step of the integration, then we're going to start discussions, of course, formally about how to deal with the fifth article in the current context of what's happening in Georgia. So it's too early to have these discussions. And I want to make sure and stress that we also see the next step not having tied down into the fifth article. So allies should also know this and we're talking with them about this, that we don't see membership action plan or next plan as a security blanket on Georgia. This is not just a validation of what we are doing, this is a validation of our aspirations and this is a good signal for the region that if you perform, if you do things, if you are qualified, you're going to get closer to the NATO eventual membership. So this is why we're not discussing this. In general, of course, there are a lot of things that we can put together. There are examples as I mentioned, the German and other examples, how to deal with the territory. This is occupied currently by the foreign forces. But, so to say, the rest of the country can be brought into the protection of fifth article. So this is a future discussion I would say. It's not a discussion we have to have today.

MS. HILL: Do we have any other questions on the floor? I have one other item just to raise in the EU context. You mentioned in passing about next steps on European security-related issues with the EU. You also mentioned some of the prospects of Georgia taking part in North Africa, for example. I mean how would you envisage, once we get through the Association Agreement and all the other things, some of the cooperation with EU, particularly on the humanitarian side of some of the missions.

I mean this is obviously a very important thing that the EU is involved in, very different from NATO.

MINISTER ALASANIA: Well, right before initialing the Association Agreement, it was early December or whatever, in November we signed the framework agreement with the EU to be part of security and defense policies. And right at the first time we were approached by the European Union after that that we need your help and assistance in the Central African Republic and Mali. We hear this and we went right back to them and said yeah, we're ready because we have capabilities, we wanted to be part of the European defense and security as well rather than only being active in NATO. And we pledged already the troops through generation conference that happened a couple of times and we from the very beginning contributed already. We're now going through the technical discussions about the logistical and airfield, airlifting, side and it will be probably all done by a week or so in early June. In June we're actually expecting the deployment of Georgian troops in Bangui together with French and other allies. Estonians are also part of it and other allies as well. So it's a huge deal for us and it was a moral decision as well because when we've heard that we need to avert the possible genocide or ethnic cleansing or something like that, we felt that it was the right thing for Georgia to do because there was no one in the world to come to help us in early '90s where we were doing these things in the country. No one came to stop us for killing each other. So this is why it was morally right thing and right decision and Prime Minister Garibashvili made sure that this political decision was made. We're going to do it.

MS. HILL: Now, in terms of the popular response to this, I mean how have you seen that play out in opinion?

MINISTER ALASANIA: Well, that's good because I think the fact that the

Parliament unanimously supported this, majority and minority, it speaks that the Georgian public is united in defense, security, and foreign policy. The fact that 81 percent of population is supporting NATO, and 85 percent of population is supporting the EU integration speaks that there is unity within the nation about where we belong and where we want to be. And that gives us confidence, of course to be more proactive. You can't find that much support in European and NATO countries I think. So I believe that what we're doing is not just politicians making decisions, but it's a public choice, Georgian people's choice, which was demonstrated in plebiscite in 2008; 75 percent of them voted for this. That's why I'm confident that we will not give any advantage to the forces that are coming in now in Georgia, establishing the new NGOs for support of the European Union, Eurasian Union and Customs Union. And we all know who's funding this, how this works, and I don't think that will affect the public opinion because we are very strongly determined to be where we want to be in Europe and Euro-Atlantic community. Thank you.

MS. HILL: Well, that seems like a good place to stop, on a positive note.

MINISTER ALASANIA: Fiona, thank you so much. It was wonderful.

MS. HILL: Thank you very much for joining us. I know you have a very busy schedule here. Thank you very much for coming.

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I, Carleton J. Anderson, III do hereby certify that the forgoing electronic file when originally transmitted was reduced to text at my direction; that said transcript is a true record of the proceedings therein referenced; that I am neither counsel for, related to, nor employed by any of the parties to the action in which these proceedings were taken; and, furthermore, that I am neither a relative or employee of any attorney or counsel employed by the parties hereto, nor financially or otherwise interested in the outcome of this action.

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