

Testimony by Deputy Assistant Secretary George Kent
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Subcommittee on Europe and Regional Security Cooperation
Hearing on “Bolstering Democracy in Georgia”
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Chairwoman Shaheen, Ranking Member Johnson, distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for inviting me today to discuss our policy goals regarding Georgia, our efforts to bolster democracy and counter Russia’s destabilizing actions in Georgia, and the challenges posed by recent developments in Georgia and the South Caucasus region in general.

I would like to start by thanking you, Chairwoman Shaheen, for your sustained interest and personal involvement in Georgia’s success over the years, dating back at least to 2012, and your role as an election monitor in a landmark election that led to a peaceful transfer of power in Georgia. Bipartisan Congressional interest in and support for Georgia have been the reliable bedrock for the United States’ policy and programming.

I would also like to thank this Committee and others in Congress for their generous support for U.S. policy in Georgia. Our diplomatic engagement, policy advocacy, and assistance programs in Georgia have helped the country make real strides over the years in advancing the democratic reforms and economic development its people aspire to, as well as in defending itself against Russian aggression. Nine years after the 2003 Rose Revolution, Georgia modeled a peaceful transfer of power after the 2012 elections you observed, Chairwoman.

Since Georgia’s independence nearly 30 years ago, the United States has aimed to help Georgia succeed as a prosperous democracy able to defend itself and contribute to collective security. The billions in assistance the United States has provided since 1992 has made a huge difference in Georgia’s transition from a newly independent, former Soviet republic to a free-market democracy eager to contribute to collective security in both the regional and global contexts. While there is much work to be done, much has been accomplished, often in close partnership with the United States.

U.S. economic assistance fosters a rules-based business environment, supports the implementation of Western business and trade standards, and increases opportunities for U.S. businesses. These efforts are critical to increasing Georgia’s ties to the West and decreasing its economic reliance on the Russian

market. Georgia ranks 7th in the World Bank's 2020 "Doing Business" ratings and has effectively eradicated low-level corruption.

Georgia recovered after the 2008 war with Russia and, with our support, has built resilience to continued aggression. Russia uses its occupation of 20 percent of Georgia's territory, economic leverage, cyber attacks, and disinformation to try to force Georgia to abandon its Euro-Atlantic aspirations and to sow division and distrust. Russia's attempts to control and exploit the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia through borderization, arbitrary detention of Georgian citizens, restrictions of movement, and other measures threaten European security. They also endanger the lives and culture of people living in these Georgian regions.

The United States is using diplomatic engagement, assistance programs, and strong public messaging to push back against malign actions and enhance the prospects for positive change. We remain committed to supporting Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders.

We strongly condemn the ongoing Russian occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The United States is an active participant in the Geneva International Discussions to address the consequences of the 2008 conflict in Georgia. We continue to call on Russia to fulfill its obligation under the 2008 ceasefire agreement to withdraw its forces to pre-conflict positions, and also to reverse its recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

On top of U.S. security assistance, U.S. programs work to enhance economic opportunities in communities close to the Administrative Boundary Lines (ABL) with Abkhazia and South Ossetia and promote confidence-building among people on both sides of the ABL, civil society groups, and the Georgian government.

These activities support the Georgian government's peace plan, which aims to reduce the isolation of the people of the occupied territories and their dependence on Russia. More broadly, Georgia's government has taken important steps to integrate marginalized populations into Georgian society, including ethnic and religious minorities.

Outside of its borders, Georgia remains the United States' key strategic partner in the South Caucasus and an important partner in the Black Sea region. Georgia has been a steadfast partner of NATO, contributing more to the NATO mission in Afghanistan than a number of alliance members. Georgia has deployed

approximately 850 troops to the Resolute Support Mission (RSM) in Afghanistan, fights without caveats, and has seen 32 soldiers killed in action, and more than 290 wounded.

In support of the pledge made at the 2008 NATO Summit in Bucharest, and reiterated at the 2018 Brussels summit, we continue to support Georgia's choice to pursue NATO membership and closer ties with the Euro-Atlantic community. U.S. security assistance to Georgia reinforces these goals and promotes U.S. national security priorities by building Georgia's capabilities to deter Russia, increasing Georgia's interoperability with NATO, and enabling Georgian troops to partner with us in coalition operations.

In recognition of Georgia's significant contributions to international security, Georgia is one of NATO's first Enhanced Opportunity Partners and holds a regular dialogue with NATO on the reforms needed to meet NATO's performance-based standards, as well as the values undergirding the alliance. At the April 2019 NATO Foreign Ministerial, Allies agreed to a Black Sea Package that also focused on increased cooperation with Georgia and Ukraine. In 2020, NATO approved an updated package of measures to further help build Georgia's defense capacity and its interoperability with NATO. NATO Secretary General Stoltenberg hosted recently appointed Prime Minister Garibashvili March 17 reviewing the relationship and the road ahead.

Efforts to bolster Georgia's Western orientation are particularly critical in the aftermath of last year's intensive fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh. The deployment of Russian troops as "peacekeepers" to Nagorno-Karabakh now means Russia has "boots on the ground" in all three South Caucasus countries. Turkish and Russian troops now jointly man a cease-fire monitoring center in Azerbaijan.

The 3+3 regional platform proposed by Russia, Turkey, and Iran seeks to take advantage of this new dynamic to further increase Russian, Turkish, and Iranian influence in the region. Georgia fears being hemmed in by – or cut out of – competing infrastructure and other development projects as a result. We are currently exploring ways in which the United States can support greater cooperation among the South Caucasus countries while preserving their sovereignty and freedom of action.

The United States welcomes Georgia's successes thus far and wants to see Georgia continue on its path to a more robust democracy, with governing institutions that demonstrate integrity, have the capacity to counter Russian and

other malign influence, and will allow it to achieve the European and EuroAtlantic aspirations of its people.

While Georgia faces challenges in the region from outside actors, it also faces serious challenges within its own institutions and body politic. Georgia has real work to do in strengthening its democracy, both to meet the demands of its citizens and to stand as a proud counterexample to the Russian model of governance. Georgia's commitment to democracy and the rule of law is a fundamental element of our strategic relationship, as well as the precondition for the country's further progress.

Over the years, U.S. programs have worked with Georgian government partners as well as civil society to promote justice sector reform, judicial independence, and accountability. U.S. assistance also helps Georgia improve electoral processes, level the electoral playing field, and enable citizens to demand better representation. Support for civil society is critical to ensuring citizens are informed, can advocate effectively for positive change, and can maintain momentum on reforms. U.S. assistance in the media space similarly improves access to independent and reliable information, offers a diversity of voices, and helps counter Russian disinformation.

Another focus area for U.S. programs is better governance, to include support for government civil service reforms, local government decentralization, and transparency. Improved access to quality public services is one of the most convincing ways to show individual Georgians that democracy is working for them.

With U.S. assistance to bolster its efforts, Georgia has made significant democratic gains since independence, since the 2003 Rose Revolution, and since the 2012 election cycle brought the current Georgia Dream ruling party to power. However, the aspirations of the Georgian people require continuous efforts to move forward in strengthening institutional integrity and embedding democratic, EuroAtlantic norms in the political rules of the game.

Georgia's current political crisis is thus concerning in terms of the country's democratic development and the potential for increased vulnerability to Russian malign influence. While the current political impasse began after competitive but procedurally imperfect parliamentary elections in 2020, the roots of the crisis preceded the elections.

The Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) assessed the first round of parliamentary elections as “competitive, with fundamental freedoms respected.” At the same time, the OSCE noted “the blurring of the line between the ruling party and the state reduced public confidence in some aspects of the process.” Unfortunately, most of the opposition members boycotted the new parliament, even though polls, including those conducted by the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute, indicate a majority of Georgians who voted for the opposition want the elected MPs to take their seats and represent their constituents.

The February 23 arrest of opposition leader Nika Melia—for failure to pay bail associated with his June 2019 arrest for allegedly organizing protest violence—intensified the crisis. Both the ruling Georgian Dream party and the opposition have failed to act on opportunities to deescalate. Former Prime Minister Giorgi Gakharia resigned February 18 in protest over the government’s plan to arrest Melia. Melia’s arrest presented a perilous moment for Georgia’s Euro-Atlantic aspirations and a step backward for Georgian democracy.

My colleague Kara McDonald will have more to say on this issue, but we assess that the current impasse in Tbilisi stems from decades-long realities in the electoral and judicial systems, including a lack of trust in the judiciary to provide due process. The impasse demonstrates the need for more reforms to strengthen the rule of law, judicial independence, adherence to democratic norms, and electoral processes.

We are urging Georgian parties to make difficult compromises to end the political crisis, and our Ambassador Kelly Degnan has worked tirelessly over the past year in this regard. We are working closely with our EU partners to help the sides find a way forward.

Progress will guide Georgia onto a path toward consolidation of democratic institutions, processes, and norms, integral to its aspiration to join the Euro-Atlantic community. Failure by the ruling party and opposition to reach agreement and address the causes of the standoff, in contrast, would imperil those aspirations.

The Administration looks forward to working with Congress and European allies to help identify further opportunities to support Georgia’s democratic development, including reforms to foster judicial independence and a level electoral playing field, as well as anti-corruption and pro-business reforms.

We will continue to support the Georgian people's choice to pursue closer ties with the EU and NATO and, as Congress has done, voice strong U.S. support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders.

I look forward to answering your questions. Thank you.