

**PRESIDENTIAL
VISIT**

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NATO Parliamentary Assembly

PRESIDENTIAL VISIT REPORT

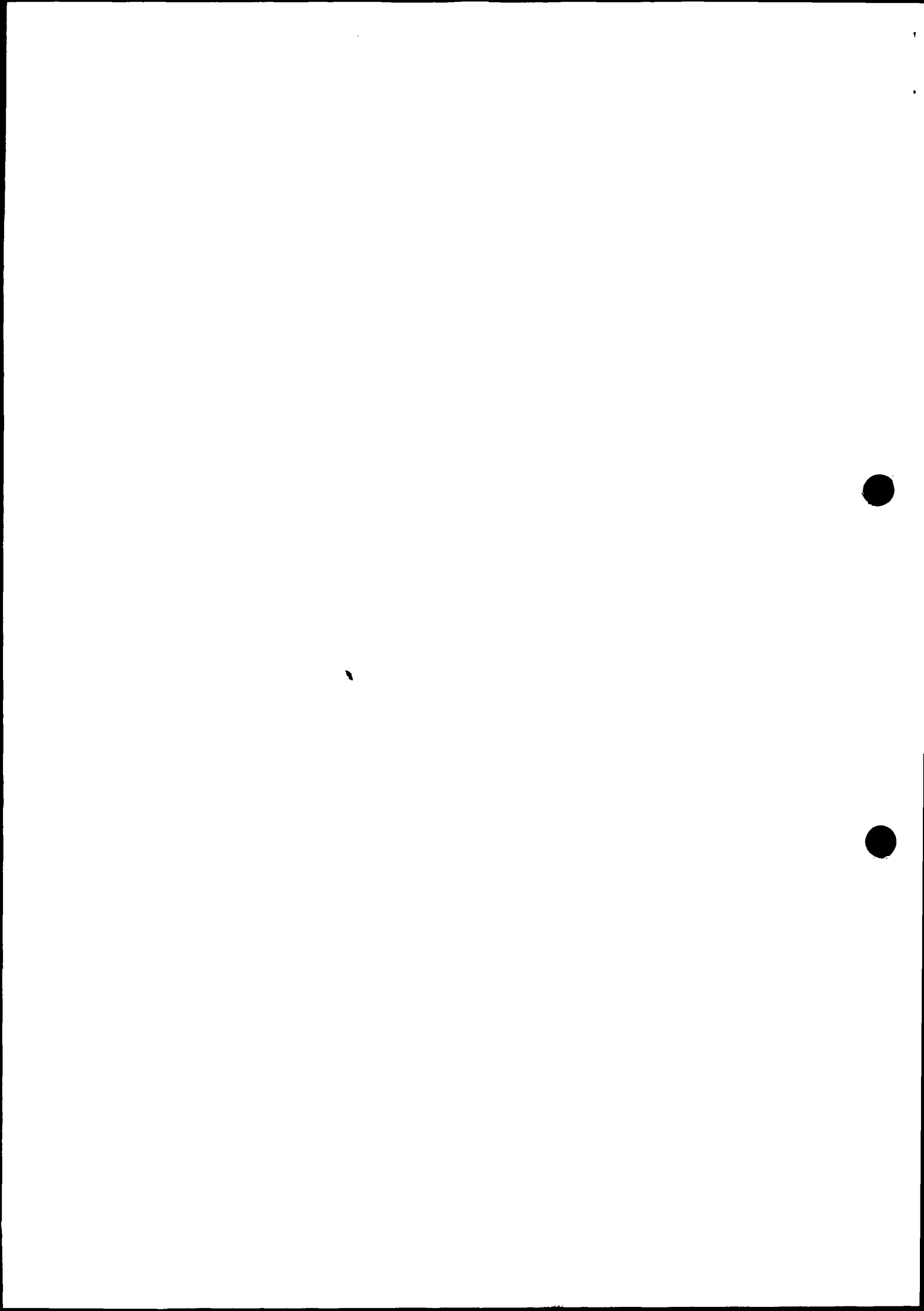
**VISIT OF THE PRESIDENT & BUREAU OF THE
NATO PARLIAMENTARY ASSEMBLY
TO GEORGIA**

4 to 7 May 2006

International Secretariat

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1. Democracy and prosperity represents the best long-term hope for the future of Georgia and the stability of the South Caucasus region. The development of effective democratic institutions in all their forms is essential for economic and social progress within Georgia but also for its aspirations for NATO membership and for the eventual resolution of the so-called "frozen conflicts" in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The NATO PA will continue to lend all possible support to Georgia in reaching its aspirations, including its wish to achieve in the near future Intensified Dialogue with NATO as the next stage on the route to membership of the Alliance.

2. This was the message delivered by the President of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, Pierre Lellouche (France), during an official visit to Georgia accompanied by four of the Assembly's Vice-Presidents. The group met senior Georgian representatives of the government and parliament, including President Mikheil Saakashvili and Speaker Nino Burjanadze and visited both South Ossetia and Abkhazia. Despite initial indications to the contrary, the Group was unable to visit Russian military bases.

3. The Presidential group was impressed by the determination of President Saakashvili's young and energetic team to move Georgia along the road to democracy and by the progress achieved thus far. This progress has been achieved despite formidable obstacles. The legacy of Communist rule has imposed an enormous burden in the form of extremely poor socio-economic conditions, weak or non-existent democratic institutions and the collective inertia associated with Communist systems. Moreover, they have faced additional complications in the form of a civil war, two unresolved conflicts on their territory and the close proximity of a Russia that is at best unhelpful and at worst, hostile.

4. Much remains to be done in developing and implementing the necessary reforms. There was good news on the defence front where the reform of the armed forces was now said to be going well. Georgia's contribution to international operations, representing 8% of her armed forces was greatly appreciated as was the professionalism of its armed forces. However, the Group heard criticism from opposition politicians and western diplomats over a wide range of issues related to the development of civil society; flawed electoral reforms, the absence of an independent judiciary, a weak and ineffective opposition, reports of harassment, a lack of accountability of the Interior Ministry, and a deterioration in the freedom of the press and mass media. The trends, it was said, were not good. Despite the official rhetoric, the President was losing popularity, particularly in the regions where living standards remained particularly low. There was also concern over what was seen as an increasing remoteness on the part of the Executive, and what some described as a tendency to authoritarianism – an unfortunate reminder of the not so distant past. While acknowledging progress in the defence field, these shortcomings in the development of democratic institutions and civil society will concern NATO members as they assess the next stages in Georgia's relationship with the Alliance.

5. The existence of these shortcomings and their significance for NATO membership were acknowledged by Georgian officials and parliamentarians who, nevertheless, pointed to the exceptional situation in which Georgia finds itself. Work, they stressed, is very much in progress. However, the sheer scale of the problems means that reforms are being developed and implemented simultaneously in many areas. Given the low point of departure, this is in itself difficult enough. But it is made more difficult by the existence of the unresolved conflicts and a pervasive and disruptive Russian influence, both of which constitute a serious brake to Georgia's aspirations. For the Georgians the convergence of these problems points to only one conclusion - that integration into NATO through the various phases should happen as quickly as possible. To delay, in their view, is to invite more problems. The prospect of membership would bolster confidence and over time facilitate a more constructive relationship with Russia.

6. The Presidential group were able to assess at first hand the impact of these negative influences.

7. The conflicts with both South Ossetia and Abkhazia challenge the same principle, the territorial integrity of Georgia. However, the two conflicts are very different in nature.

8. The authorities in South Ossetia resemble no less than a Russian-led clique of very dubious credibility and legality. Accusing the Georgians of aggression and "cultural genocide" they confirmed that their aim was unification with their brothers in North Ossetia - to preserve the nation - and with the Russian Federation. A good demonstration of the latter was to be seen in a poster in the capital, Tskhinvali, of President Putin described as "our President". Most of the inhabitants have Russian passports, and it is a ruble economy. While smuggling has been reduced, criminality remains a serious problem. In this sense, political aspirations would appear to be little more than a cover for criminal activities. The South Ossetians continue to insist that Georgia is planning more aggression, pointing to the construction of military facilities, specifically a military hospital, close to the border. They argued that Georgia's prospective membership of NATO and NATO's assistance to Georgia's armed forces made Georgian aggression more likely.

9. The visiting group were well briefed by the excellent OSCE team. The situation on the ground and between the communities, scattered as on a chess board, was peaceful but tense. The Joint Peacekeeping Force (JPKF), the peacekeeping force tasked with preventing further conflict consists of three elements: armed forces of Georgia, the Russian republic of North Ossetia (in fact, South Ossetians recruited locally) and Russia, each no more than 500 personnel. The Joint Control Commission (JCC) is the negotiating forum for all the parties and oversees the JPKF. The JCC functions, but only just. OSCE officials noted that the "j" in Joint was in effect a very small "j". The minimal degree of cooperation was confirmed in a meeting with the Russian commander. The major problem was said to be criminality, and in that sense local militia rather than armed forces were the answer. The OSCE monitors reported that obstructions to their work in the form of illegal checkpoints were increasing and the quality of access diminishing. Crucial supply routes were controlled by the South Ossetians and Russians. Meanwhile, the South Ossetian armed forces, it was said, have substantially increased their strength. However, despite the suspicions of the South Ossetians and occasional flashes of frustration by Georgian officials, the point was made repeatedly by the Georgian leadership that a resolution to the conflict could only be achieved through peaceful means.

10. Little progress was reported on the negotiations front. President Saakashvili's peace plan had stalled. The best hope for the moment lay in improving cooperation between the local militias to reduce criminal activity, but above all in the economic and social rehabilitation of the region and through international assistance improving the living conditions of the communities. Ten million US dollars had been promised and there would be a donor's conference in Brussels in June. Further internationalization of the negotiations and of the military presence was seen as desirable, but not likely.

11. While the principle of territorial integrity is the same as South Ossetia, the Abkhaz situation is very different. The roots of the conflict lie much deeper in the longstanding relationship between Georgians and Abkhazians and their respective places in first the Russian Empire and then the Soviet Union. Abkhaz officials argue that they were victims in both periods resulting in a reduction of the Abkhaz population and artificial union with Georgia. Following the short but savage war in 1992-1993, they were now adamant that Abkhazia had gained its independence. Despite having been ready during the early 1990's to discuss with Georgia a confederal system Abkhaz officials strongly resisted suggestions that they could be tempted back into any form of union. Georgia is regarded as a hostile state. As with the South Ossetians, they argued that the growing relationship between Georgia and NATO and the consequent improvement in Georgia's armed forces made it more likely that Georgia would resort again to military action. They were unable to address the questions of the viability of their state nor the fact that Abkhazians now only constituted 17% of the population. They acknowledged their dependence on Russia as being their only friend when they were in dire circumstances. Nevertheless, they stressed that they did not want integration into the Russian Federation.

12. Russia deploys 2,200 peacekeepers in Abkhazia under a CIS mandate adopted in 1994 at a time when the UN had been unable to get other countries to volunteer. While it was now all Russian, it had had contingents from other CIS countries. The Russian force works alongside UN observers in preventing a further outbreak of hostilities. As in South Ossetia it was said that a withdrawal of the force would lead to a resumption of fighting.

13. Asked about the status of the base at Gudauta, the Commander stated that it had been a Russian base but had been closed in the context of commitments made at the 1990 Istanbul OSCE Summit. It was now used by the CIS force to house a small logistic unit and four helicopters. As a CIS Commander, he did not have the authority to permit the Group to visit the base.

14. The two conflicts while very different share several common themes: the influence of Russia, the acceptance that resolution could only come through peaceful means, the urgent need for dialogue between the parties and the development of a negotiating framework including a formal and mutual renunciation of the use of force; the need for economic rehabilitation and finally the issue of Georgia's partnership with NATO.

15. The question that preoccupied the Group was whether the prospect of NATO membership would contribute to the resolution of these conflicts or whether their existence would hinder Georgia's progress because of conventional thinking on the so-called principles of NATO on enlargement. Since the initial phase of enlargement, it has always been assumed that countries seeking NATO membership would resolve their internal problems before joining the Alliance¹. However, making Georgian membership of NATO dependent on the resolution of these two conflicts is, in fact, to hand Russia a veto.

16. Russian influence in the region is ubiquitous both as a reality and as a perception. Georgian representatives quote Russian officials as saying that Georgian membership of NATO represents the main threat to Russia and that Russia will do what it can to create difficulties. Russia's formal involvement in both conflicts in terms of the negotiations and also as a provider of peacekeepers provides it every opportunity to influence the situation. Its proximity obviously provides the opportunity to exert its influence in other, and normally unhelpful, ways. It is difficult to see the recent imposition of economic measures against Georgia – restrictions on energy supplies and sanctions on a wide range of agricultural products including wine and mineral water which will undoubtedly hurt Georgia's economy - as anything but a clear indication of malevolent intent.

17. During the meetings and discussions the motivation for Russian actions was frequently alluded to. Is the current tough line a repetition of the warning sounds made before the previous rounds of enlargement and which eventually subsided? Or does it indicate that for Russia the South Caucasus is a genuine red line to NATO and the United States? Is the approach the product of a more confident Russia emboldened by its economic levers of energy supplies and its new-found wealth of petro-dollars?

18. The one area where Russia has shown a more cooperative attitude, although long overdue, is the recent agreement to withdraw its forces from the bases of Alkhalkalaki and Batumi consistent with commitments made at the 1990 Istanbul OSCE Summit in the context of the adapted CFE Treaty. This cooperative attitude, however, did not extend to allowing the Presidential group access to the bases in question.

¹ In this respect it is worth noting that the NATO enlargement study adopted in 1994 and which provides a detailed assessment of the commitments and obligations expected of new members states that:

"States which have ethnic disputes or external territorial disputes, including irredentist claims, or internal jurisdictional disputes must settle those disputes by peaceful means in accordance with OSCE principles. Resolution of such disputes would be a factor in determining whether to invite a state to join the Alliance".

19. Whatever the motivation for Russian actions, the potential for direct interference produces a special dimension to Georgian aspirations for NATO membership. It is this special dimension that makes the Georgians point to the need for the Alliance to provide a tangible response in terms of moving Georgia forward. Currently, Georgia has an Individual Partnership Action Plan (IPAP) on which she has received a favourable reaction from the Alliance. Considerable progress has been achieved in establishing the required structural changes now implementation is required. The next stage in the membership process is Intensified Dialogue which involves staff level discussions as a way to prepare countries for the more rigorous requirements of a Membership Action Plan (MAP). Georgian officials would like to be offered Intensified Dialogue as early as possible, even by summer 2006. This would leave open the question of a MAP generally regarded as the precursor and the key to NATO membership.

20. Public opinion, it is said, runs strongly in favour of NATO membership and confidence within the country would be greatly helped by evidence of further progress towards this goal. The prospect of progress towards NATO membership takes on an added salience as EU membership is clearly not on the agenda for the foreseeable future.

21. Some NATO members remain nervous of moving too fast either for fear of an adverse Russian reaction or because they want more proof that the reforms are working and will be sustained. In brief, they want to be certain that Georgia is making the sort of progress consistent with joining an Alliance of democratic and "like minded" nations at some stage in the future. The issue comes down to a question of timing. To act too quickly risks creating expectations that cannot be realized and could lessen the incentive to continue the reforms. To delay could mean undermining current progress and giving Russia more room for mischief.

22. Bearing all these factors in mind, the Presidential Group consider that Georgia's efforts merit recognition and active encouragement. They, therefore, support granting Georgia Intensified Dialogue before the summer as a means of providing the signal Georgia needs. This would leave the more significant step of a MAP to be decided at a later date.
