



Statement by H.E. Mr. Irakli Garibashvili
Prime Minister of Georgia
General Debate of the 76th session of the UN General Assembly
New York, September 24, 2021

Mr. President,
Mr. Secretary-General,
Dear Colleagues,
Ladies and Gentlemen,

On behalf of the Georgian people, it is an honor to speak here at the United Nations General Assembly. The UN provides each member state a platform to voice concerns and share its views about the most pressing challenges and opportunities of our time.

Today, I bring the same Georgian spirit of cooperation and global engagement that motivated our country to join the UN after restoring independence thirty years ago.

While our democratic nation may be young, our values and traditions are deeply rooted. We have survived and thrived through many cycles of history over thousands of years.

Our history has helped forge a tough, proud, and resilient people, open to the world and finding our own way forward. Georgia is a diamond in the rough, still seeking to sharpen our edges to reveal the full potential of the nation.

Situated at the crossroads of civilizations - where East meets West, North meets South - Georgia has always adjusted to meet new challenges at every turn in our past.

I applaud the UN for going ahead with this General Assembly during a global pandemic. Rather than not meeting, we have acknowledged that a safe and responsible gathering is more important now than ever.

The importance of this meeting cannot be understated. The world is still in a vicious fight against COVID-19, which has ravaged the globe and affected economies and livelihoods.

As we continue our effort to build back better from the pandemic with a sense of unity, we have to come together to meet the needs of the world.

Georgia is grateful to the United States, the EU, and China, as well as the vaccine producers - who provided vaccines to safeguard the health of the Georgian people.

Working in common purpose, we will put an end to the pandemic and get back to forging a better, brighter future for the entire world.

I stand in front of you representing a country that is full of determination and faith, a country which is optimistic but always looks at its future through a pragmatic lens.

I am proud of our membership in the UN and the work the UN does for humankind.

I am also proud of my country and the work of the governing Georgian Dream party to deliver a stronger democracy, a stronger economy, and a brighter future for our people.

In bringing about the changes needed to keep pushing ahead, my government has a plan for 2030 that aligns perfectly with the UN's 2030 Agenda.

We stand for a more sustainable environment; protecting the rights of all people; greater economic fairness and resilience; and a revitalized UN, among many other aspirations shared between Georgia and the UN.

This sentiment of cooperation echoes the Report of the Secretary General on Our Common Agenda that outlines an ambitious plan for reinvigorated international cooperation and multilateralism.

I believe this General Assembly should work on these recommendations in a determined and substantive way.

Closer to home, Georgian Dreams are becoming a reality. We have more than aspirations for the future, we aim to get the results our people demand today.

Even with the deep setbacks from Covid-19, our economy is on the mend, growth is surging, jobs are being created, and we are once again one of the leading tourist destinations in the world.

The world continues to recognize our economic, financial, and legal reforms.

Some notable rankings demonstrate the spectacular strides Georgia has made to become one of the leading countries in the region and in promoting robust economic development.

According to the World Bank, Georgia takes 7th position amongst 190 countries for Ease of Doing Business;

The Heritage Foundation's Index of Economic Freedom ranks us 12th amongst 184 countries;

And according to the Fraser Institute's World Economic Freedom ranking, Georgia ranks 5th out of 165 countries, an improvement of 3 steps in the last year.

It is also important to note that great strides have also been made to advance anticorruption measures, freedom of the press, and human rights.

Earlier this week, we heard U.S. President Joseph Biden call for increased global cooperation to meet our largest challenges. In Georgia, we not only share this sentiment, but we have - and always will - step up to answer the call.

We may be a small nation, but we have made outsized contributions to international security, fighting alongside our allies against terrorism and organized crime around the globe.

We did so in Afghanistan where 32 brave soldiers gave their lives, and numerous others were injured, for the cause of peace and freedom.

Recently, we provided a transportation and logistics hub for thousands of evacuees from Afghanistan, and facilitated over 60 flights, while also accepting workers from many global NGOs and IFIs to temporarily work out of Georgia.

These actions underscore our response to the call for cooperation with our partners and the results that can be achieved when we work together.

This summer, Georgia, alongside our United States partners, laid the groundwork for the release of 15 Armenian detainees by Azerbaijan. At the same time, Armenia provided maps of mined territories.

Our goal has always been to do what we can to support common action to advance the common good.

All our advances have one simple goal in mind: European and Euro-Atlantic integration. We will not rest until we achieve EU and NATO membership.

This means we will continue to reform and modernize every aspect of our democracy and economy to align with the highest global standards.

Our path to European and Euro-Atlantic structures is a homecoming, a civilizational choice. An absolute majority of our population strongly supports this destiny for our country.

Our historic decision to join the European and Euro-Atlantic family is the core principle that guides our Foreign Policy.

Especially since 2012, Georgia has made great strides in advancing democracy, human rights and the rule of law. All are fundamental values we share with European institutions.

We have prepared a comprehensive action plan packed with initiatives and reforms that will lead to our application for EU membership in 2024.

For that, I would like to thank our European and international partners that have shown strong and steadfast support to Georgia for all these years.

Since 2012, we have held 6 democratic elections and each one has been declared free and fair by international election observers. In fact, in a few days' time, we

will once again be holding a free, fair and democratic nationwide municipal election.

Since the last time we met in person here at the UN, democracies around the world have been under pressure, if not assault.

Irrational and dark forces have been at work, often aided and abetted by outside saboteurs.

Regardless of the source, we must hold to the democratic path. Elections are often passionate and hard fought, and feelings run high.

Yet when elections are free and fair, the winners must be gracious and those who lose must abide by the will of the people.

If we cannot believe in elections, then democracy itself is in peril.

So, I call on everyone here today who cares for democracy, for progress, for free and fair elections, to participate with passion in your political system.

And when the dust has settled and a winner is declared, respect the will of the people, close ranks and work to move your country forward.

The challenge to democracy is not the only challenge facing us. In Georgia, we have achieved much, but more remains to be done. First and foremost, we must create more jobs.

At the same time, we must remain dedicated to investing in education and infrastructure; eradicating poverty; strengthening our health system; and diversifying our industrial, service and agricultural sectors.

As I have outlined, Georgia is on the move. We are overcoming Covid, and have a long term plan in place to strengthen our democracy, economy and society.

Yet I am reaching out to you all today to put an end to the illegal occupation of Georgian sovereign lands by Russia.

Not only is Russia occupying 20% of Georgian territory, but is also actively seeking to undermine our aspirations to join the European and Euro-Atlantic family.

While our commitment to be a true global citizen is unstoppable and cannot be hindered by outside forces, the very freedom we have fought so hard for is being challenged every single day.

On our very own soil in the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions, we are observing a humanitarian crisis, and the responsibility resides only with the occupying power.

This year, the European Court for Human Rights ruled its verdict and found the Russian Federation guilty of occupying and exercising effective control over two Georgian regions, and responsible for human rights violations in Abkhazia and Tskhinvali.

Today, I call on the international community to act in concert to address the violations of fundamental principles of international law in the occupied territories. And with joint efforts, facilitate the implementation of the EU-mediated August 2008 Ceasefire Agreement.

Every day, Georgian land continues to be subject to creeping annexation and so-called borderization.

This includes kidnappings, illegal detentions, unlawful restrictions on freedom of movement, and deprivation of the right to education in the native tongue - particularly in the Gali region.

During COVID-19, this made the medical evacuations virtually impossible. All these actions carry an unbearable burden for those living on both sides of the razor-wired fences.

This must be seen for what it is: a pre-planned ethnic cleansing to drive ethnic Georgians out. This must be stopped.

In the occupied territories, we have a real humanitarian crisis.

While on other side we have land that is being cultivated, where the younger generation have access to world-class education, top level infrastructure, and thriving businesses.

We want to see the same opportunities and prospects for development and prosperity for the young generation in the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions as well.

For this very reason, we developed "A Step to a Better Future", a peace initiative to improve the livelihoods of people living in the Abkhazia and Tskhinvali regions.

We believe that only through sustainable peace and security will our fellow citizens have a better future.

It is through peace and stability that economies can start to thrive, and people prosper together.

That is why I want to address our Abkhaz and Ossetian brothers and sisters, and say that our true strength is in cooperation and unity, which is exactly why our foes want us divided and apart.

We have a common history and are part of a common homeland - SAKARTVELO.

We should jointly define our common future as well.

We should build our country together and peacefully turn it into a truly democratic, prosperous, and future-oriented European society.

From a geopolitical perspective, the Black Sea region is growing ever more important. The Black Sea is on the front lines of a dynamic regional chess match. It is a microcosm of conflict management; if we can maintain peace and stability here, we can do so elsewhere.

Therefore, our goal is to ensure peace and stability in the entire region. In the South Caucasus, I propose what I am calling the Peaceful Neighborhood Initiative to promote stability in our region.

This format will facilitate dialogue and confidence-building, and lead to the implementation of practical solutions to regional issues of common interest with our US and EU partners.

Georgia stands ready to host an international gathering in Tbilisi to discuss the prospects of our Peaceful Neighborhood Initiative, involving our South Caucasian neighbors and international partners.

Let us begin with small steps to build trust, then we can move toward resolving other regional and global issues together.

A sustainable peace and a common strategic outlook for the South Caucasus will benefit the wider Black Sea region and enhance broader European and global security.

Let me conclude where I began: we are here today as a testament to the power of collective action.

Whether it is the fight against the pandemic, financing development to advance quality of life, or the need of collective action to maintain peace, we must act together to live together.

There is no other alternative.

I remain confident that working together we will succeed.

I thank you.