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President and President Saakashvili Discuss NATO, Democracy

Parliament Building
Tbilisi, Georgia

10:27 A.M. (Local)

PRESIDENT SAAKASHVILI: I'll say a few words in English. I want to welcome you, Mr. President, for this historic occasion. You know, right now we have in the streets of Tbilisi, as they are telling me, more than 150,000 people assembled, and I can tell you, no event in the history of this country has ever assembled anything close to these numbers. It shows the importance of this visit.



I can tell you, and you were seeing, yesterday crowds -- unfortunately, I didn't see them on the networks -- I mean, there were CNN and the others -- but they were there and we could see them, the crowds along the airport. And of course, it was very genuine. This is not North Korea here; you cannot tell people to go out unless -- if they don't feel like it. (Laughter.) And it was a very -- I mean, for me, it was something very emotional. The posters they made were very emotional.

You know, outside this building, 18 months ago, also 100,000 Georgians came in defense of democracy with a dream of living free. And in the weeks and months after the Rose Revolution, no country stood closer to Georgia than the United States, whether it was diplomatic support, economic aid, security assistance, or --, the United States was there. For this support, the Georgian people will be eternally grateful.

So I once again, want to welcome Mr. President to Georgia. The partnership between the U.S. and Georgia is about more, and we should make it very clear the strategic interests -- more than oil pipelines, more than any kind of economic or military cooperation; it's about shared values and our shared belief in freedom and in democracy.

And President Bush is a man of vision who believes in the triumph of liberty over forces of tyranny. I know he was also inspired by our journey toward democracy. President Bush is in Georgia because we agree that free people cannot rest while tyranny exists. We know that our liberty must be defended from those who seek to extinguish it. And of course, when we are together, that's much more hopeful and much more efficient.

That's why over 800 troops are in Iraq -- Georgian troops side-by-side with the Americans, and Iraqis and many others, to defeat those who live only to kill, to enslave, to frighten people. That is why Georgians are in Afghanistan, and NATO-led missions, and that is why we appreciate the U.S. support for our NATO aspirations, just like the U.S. supported Ukraine on its NATO aspirations.

The United States supports the total integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognized borders. We appreciate this support and recognize our responsibilities. We will peacefully resolve our disputes with our long-suffering South Ossetian and Abkhaz citizens and the territories. We will widen and deepen our democratic reforms to better the lives of Georgians. And we seek friendly relations with all our neighbors. And we know we can count on the support of the United States in all these vital tasks.



Mr. President, you are a decisive and visionary leader. Georgia is humbled and honored that you have come to visit our small country, but great land. We Georgians have a belief that guests are a gift from God, and you are a most treasured guest. Mr. President, welcome.

PRESIDENT BUSH: Thank you, Mr. President. I'm -- first, I'm so grateful for your hospitality. Laura and I really enjoyed our time last night. I learned firsthand what it means to be fed by a Georgian. I'm really full. (Laughter.) And the food was great. I should have eaten my meal first, and then danced. (Laughter.)

The cultural dancing and singing was spectacular. It was really impressive. And I want to thank those who put on the performance last night.

I also appreciate our visit today. We had a very frank discussion. That's what I like about the President. He speaks his mind. If he's got something on his mind, he'll tell you. What I find on his mind is very refreshing; he loves democracy and loves freedom, and he loves the people of Georgia.

The Rose Revolution was a powerful moment in modern history. It not only inspired the people of Georgia, it inspired others around the world that want to live in a free society. I think people will look back at this moment in history and be -- and marvel at the courage of people who have said, I want generations to grow up in a hopeful world.

And so, Mr. President, thank you for setting such a good example, you and your people. I appreciate the reforms you have put in place here. Georgia has come a long way very quickly. The President recognizes there's a lot of work to be done to leave the foundations, institutional foundations in place, so that no one will ever be able to overturn democracy. That's an independent judiciary, rule of law, free media. He was complaining about the media, which is a good sign. (Laughter.) It means you're free. I sometimes complain about ours, but not too publicly, of course.

I'm looking forward to the meeting with members of the civil society. The President kindly set up a meeting where I will remind people that a truly democratic society is one that honors and respects minorities. This is a very diverse country. You've had a great tradition of honoring minorities in this country, and your democracy will continue to do so.



We talked about NATO. The President is very clear about his intentions to meet the obligations to join NATO. And, Mr. President, we look forward to working with you to meet those obligations. NATO is a very important alliance for the United States of America. It's a place where we have our strategic conversations with our transatlantic friends, and we want to help you achieve your objective there.

I thank the President again; I want to thank the people of Georgia for contributing troops to Iraq and Afghanistan. You've got a fine group of people that are helping serve the cause of freedom. We discussed the way forward in Iraq, discussed the importance of a democracy in the greater Middle East in order to leave behind a peaceful tomorrow. We talked about the peaceful resolution of regional issues. And I look forward to working with the President on his request, if he so chooses, to help deal with some of these issues, like stuff he says here --*. But one of the things that I was most appreciative of is his full understanding of the need and the desire to settle these issues peacefully. And I'm confident, with good work and cooperation, we can solve them peacefully. He can solve them peacefully, with our help.

This has been a visit I've really been looking forward to. I look forward to going into Freedom Square -- think about that -- Freedom Square -- to represent my country and to give our thanks to the Georgian people for the example they've set, and the pledge to the Georgian people that you've got a solid friend in America.

Thank you, Mr. President.

PRESIDENT SAKASHVILI: Thank you, Mr. President. So we'll have, like, two questions each. First, I guess, Georgian journalists, and then whoever.

Q Shall I ask the question in Georgian?

PRESIDENT BUSH: You can ask anybody you want. You can ask me --

Q I have a question to President Bush. Did you have a conversation with Putin regarding the military bases, with old military bases from Georgia? Do you think this question and this issue will be the decision of the OSCE Summit?

PRESIDENT BUSH: This question was about the presence of military troops -- Russian troops in Georgia. We discussed this at the meeting with President Putin at his house. He knew that I was coming to Georgia, of course. I said I was looking forward to talking to my friend, President Saakashvili, and was confident that the issue of military bases would come up. After all, we discussed this -- (inaudible) -- and I've discussed this issue with the Russians before, as well. So this isn't the first time I've had this conversation with President Putin on this issue. -- (inaudible) -- an agreement in place -- (inaudible) -- said to the Russians, we want to work with the government to fulfill -- (inaudible) -- and I think that is a commitment, an important commitment for the people of Georgia to hear, and it's a -- it shows there's grounds for work to get this issue resolved.

Jennifer.



Q Sir, how important is it for the United States to step into issues like that troop issue, to ensure democratic progress? And also, does your commitment to democracy mean that separatist regions deserve independence -- deserve independence if they want it?

PRESIDENT BUSH: Two points to that question. One, my commitment to democracy means that democracies can solve their problems in peaceful ways. And in terms of separatist movements within a -- within Georgia, that, one, the issue can be resolved peacefully; secondly, it will be resolved in a transparent way. The President has put a way forward that encourages autonomy and self-government, but does not encourage dividing up this great country. It would seem like to me to be a very reasonable proposition. But his commitment, and an important commitment, is one that this issue will be resolved peacefully.

And secondly, it's always important for the United States to stand strongly for democracy and freedom. That's what we believe in. And so standing with the President of Georgia should send a message that we embrace freedom movements and we stand with young democracies and we want to help where we can help build the institutions that outlast the moment, so that future generations of Georgians can grow up in a free society. And we've got a great partner in President Saakashvili. He is a strong believer in democracy. And I appreciate his leadership on the issue.

PRESIDENT SAAKASHVILI: Well, just to add one thing, that certainly I believe that -- I believe in strong self-government. I myself came to this -- to my office from self-government. I know what self-government means. I know how people can feel strongly about their identities. Georgia's strength is its diversity. It's not its weakness, it's our strength.

Now, the problem with those regions are, especially with Abkhazia, that they're throughout almost whole populations.* So we are talking about democratic choice. First, those people should be able to regain their property, to regain their right to there, to regain their right to be safe, and rules for their self-government, rules for autonomy, rules for all kind of arrangement that would materialize their rights. It's not like this, that you throw out the people and then you hold elections with ten percent of the population to decide, and you call it democracy. It's not democracy, it's something else. And that's why it's so important to speak about peace, about peaceful settlements, about democratic choices within the framework of peace, because when guns speak, then people cannot materialize their rights. That's obvious for us. And we suffered a lot, and this region suffered enough from the conflicts and we don't want any more of them. And this is our very strong position.

Q Question to Mr. Bush. You discussed the settlement -- in Georgia, and United States will play an active role in this process. In specific, what kind of help United States can offer to Georgia for conflict resolution? Because Georgian government has a position to settle this resolution peacefully and this conflict peaceful. Do you think that the main problem is outside force?

PRESIDENT BUSH: -- (inaudible) -- disputes. And first, I'm confident that the government of Georgia has got a good society go move forward to resolve the disputes. And obviously, if the President were to call and want me to make a phone call or two, I'd be more than happy to do so. But this is a dispute that is going to be resolved by the Georgian government and by the folks in the separatist regions.

The United States cannot impose a solution, nor would you want us to. But what we can do is we can help. We can work with international bodies and work with the U.N., for example. We can work with other groups, all aimed at helping resolve this issue peacefully. But this is an issue that will be resolved by the duly-elected government of Georgia in a peaceful way. And the President has, as just mentioned, reached out in a constructive way, suggested autonomy and self-government, but he doesn't want to -- he wants the country to remain intact. And we're more than willing. And, listen, we talk quite often. When he calls, if he's got some suggestions where I can -- where he thinks I can help and I think it makes sense, I will be glad to do so.

Q Did you get President Putin to see the importance of democracies on his border? And you've also complimented a recent speech he gave on democracy. But has he taken any concrete steps to satisfy your concerns?

PRESIDENT BUSH: Well, he gave the speech, I think, three days ago, and it was -- or maybe four or five days ago -- it was a very constructive speech, I thought, where he did talk about the benefits of democracy for his people. And democracies are peaceful countries. And when you have peaceful countries on your border, it -- you benefit. And Georgia is a peaceful country. Georgia is a democracy. The people here are trying to right the wrongs of the past and move forward. The President spends a lot of time talking to me about economic improvements, entrepreneurship and small businesses, and vitality of the economy so people can make a living. And when you have countries focused on the needs of the people, it tends to make them peaceful neighbors.

And so, over time, any country will recognize the benefits of democracy on her border. And I'm confident Russia will recognize the benefits of having democracies on her border. And Georgia is a great example of a peaceful democracy, that wants to resolve whatever lingering disputes there may be in a peaceful fashion.

And so I want to, one, again thank the President for his hospitality and for setting such a vivid example of what is possible when the people speak. And it's this democratic movement that took place here in Georgia that is going to help transform the greater Middle East. And that's important for people in Georgia and around the world to understand, that democracies in the greater Middle East will make the world a more peaceful place. A democracy in Iraq will send such a strong and vivid example to others about what is possible. And democracies are peaceful societies. And one of the things that we all long for -- at least I long for, I'm confident the President does, as well -- is to leave behind a more peaceful world for our children and grandchildren.

So, thank you, Mr. President. Thank you all for the press conference.

PRESIDENT SAAKASHVILI: Thank you.

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