

**Statement of Eka Gigauri and Giorgi Oniani
Transparency International - Georgia
before the**

**Subcommittee on Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related
Programs
of the Senate Committee on Appropriations**

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Honorable Ladies and Gentlemen,

We are grateful and humbled by this opportunity to testify for the US Senate, on the topic which is immensely critical for the last several hundred years of our country's history.

Russia is the biggest scourge our country has experienced throughout its history. Georgia is a county which has probably suffered most from Russia over the last hundreds of years. Russia has numerously brought war, destruction, continuous devastation and demolition to the country, as well as to our people and to the hopes for the better future of many generations of Georgians.

History of our relationship is history of fighting for independence from Russia, - starting from annexation of Georgia by Russian empire in 1801, we were fully or partially occupied for several times - in 1921, when we were dragged into the Soviet Union and in 2008 when Russian troops invaded and occupied parts of our territory and declared them to be independent states of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

But most notably, we have been in fight for independence of our hearts and minds, which has been constantly ongoing and has intensified in the recent years. So called Russian propaganda and disinformation is vividly felt and seen in Georgia, and unfortunately it is also increasingly effective. Less than 10 years have passed after Russia's last invasion, and Russian troops are still standing in the middle of the country, but this had neither prevented pro-Russian rallies in the capital of Georgia, nor an election of openly pro-Russian political party to the Parliament. This is very unfortunate and disappointing, but also proves how effective and sophisticated Russian soft power is in Georgia.

Moreover, Russia remains the main obstacle and hindrance to the process of Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration. It helps nurture anti-western sentiments in the hearts and

minds of Georgians portraying the process as if it aims at destroying the traditions and values of Georgians.

The channels of the propaganda machine are diverse and very sophisticated –

1. Russian media and primarily TV channels, (as television remains to be the primary source of information),
2. local, but Pro-Russian media,
3. local pro-Georgian media – which fosters pro-Georgian values and sentiments as if they are under threat by ‘looming’ Europeanization of the country.

They also distribute messages across the regions of Georgia, and also use diverse channels to transfer these messages (using opinion-makers, the church – as the most trusted institution in Georgia and representatives of cultural sphere).

Basically this is the format and toolkit widely used across our region against the countries and peoples who are trying to break with Russia and integrate to EU and NATO. They are very effective and sophisticated in the whole region and obviously, this needs to be stood against. But only peoples of Georgia, or Moldova or Ukraine cannot handle this. We need firm and continuous support of the international community, but primarily of the United States to be able to succeed in this.

For Georgia, integration in Euro-Atlantic institutions is not a mere foreign policy choice – it is an existential path. Please, be assured, that if Georgia does not integrate with the West we will be swallowed by Russia once – we know this menace and we do not want it to happen again.

Georgia’s success on this path is important and symbolic for Russia and it should be the same for the West. Through opposing Georgia Russia tries to combat and defeat the successful democratic transformational way of development which Georgia projects to the region and beyond. Georgia, with its recent past and Western future encapsulates an alternative way of development in this part of the world. We have tried to prove through our own example that it is possible to be not corrupt, democratic and to develop at the same time – something that seems unrealistic in this part of the world, where Russia tries to dominate the discourse, claiming that it is only possible to develop and move forward together with Russia, and being like Russia. Thus, defeating Georgia’s success case is also very symbolic to Russia, as we pose threat to Russia’s current way of development – that is why they are so aggressive and determined when it comes about Georgia. And please, be assured that Georgia’s successful integration with the West will have tremendous implications for the whole region. We are watched with hope

not only by our neighbors in South Caucasus, to the east in Central Asia, where Russia is even more powerful and integration with the West is something remote and almost unrealistic, but also from Russia itself. If Georgia – a country with the same past but different present succeeds on this path, it will pave the way to similar transformations in the whole region – including Russia. That is why, in Georgia's case, there is more at stake rather than a success of just another post-soviet country.

But unfortunately, we see that exactly this positive trend of transformation might be under threat in Georgia today, if US support to Georgia is not sustained and strengthened. Not only Russia tries to meddle with the internal developments of Georgia and tires to win the hearts and minds of our people, but also unfortunately, the quality of democracy has deteriorated in Georgia recently, not infrequently, our Government, deliberately or not, plays at hand to Russia and through undermining democratic institutions makes their job easier in Georgia.

On the one hand, over the last year there have been some positive tendencies, especially with regards to human rights, free and fair elections, independence of Judiciary and media pluralism, however, we have recently witnessed some problems with regards to the independence of the Judiciary and Media freedom. Informal governance of former governmental officials and party leaders is still a challenge for Georgian state, which creates obstacles for building independent institutions in Georgia and transparent political process that creates grounds for political corruption. This set of problems aggravate another and a very dangerous one which is lack of clarity and coherence in official position towards Russia: After 2008, diplomatic ties have been broken off and Russia has been legislatively granted a status of an occupant country. Nevertheless, it seems that current Government of Georgia is creeping towards changing the status-quo, without changing anything in the legislation or official policies. In addition to existed international multilateral formats the Government of Georgia has set up additional semi-formal relationship format with Russia through the special representative of the Prime Minister, (Mr. Abashidze) and more importantly avoiding any involvement of the main foreign policy implementation institution – Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The main problem with this format is again its non-transparent nature, which leads to the problems of accountability. It seems that without Western and primarily US support the Government of Georgia is unable to effectively withstand the pressure from the Russian side, and it is critically important that US remains Georgia's strong ally in this regard.

The Government is increasingly coming to recognition of the fact that anti-Western propaganda is a serious challenge for our country and recently strategic communication

strategy and action plan have been elaborated. However it is obviously not enough.

Therefore, continuous interest and desire to promote the positive changes in Georgia, from the West and particularly from the side of the United States of America is critically important. Development of democratic institutions and adherence to Western democratic values is the backbone which can keep Georgia on track, that will also retain the positive example of Georgia for the wider region. It is critically important for Georgia not to fail – it is existential for us, but it is also an important hope for the wider region, including to the North of us. And this is truly impossible without very important, vocal and strategic involvement of United States. Without US leadership, Europe, which is often preoccupied with redesigning and re-acknowledging its new role and place in current world will hardly be in a position to cope with these problems alone. At least this has not been the case so far.

That is why the focus of the US influence in Georgia should be the emphasis on more democracy, institution-building and true adherence to Western democratic values from Georgia's ruling elite. And this is most easily done through supporting our Euro-Atlantic path. Helping Georgia integrate more with NATO and EU, the continuous reform conditionality set thereof, would greatly straightjacket any incumbent Georgian government from possible deviations from democratic institution-building. And this is what United States can do and help current and future generation of Georgians with. Obviously, it is the primary responsibility of Georgian citizens and Georgian government to maintain our achievements and to move the country forward, however US leadership and assistance in this regard is critically important as it has always been - please, be assured that your moral and financial contribution to Georgia's development has played a crucial role in Georgia's progress and we truly hope that you will continue to stand besides us in this endeavor.

We, the civil society representative of Georgia, call upon you, honorable ladies and gentlemen, to make sure the United States of America maintains its interest and involvement in this part of the world, through promoting values of democracy and human rights and helping our countries get closer with the West. Through this you would help the region stand against devastating and disrupting Russian influence. Georgia's success is key, exemplary and symbolic, which can positively impact the wider region, including inevitable positive changes in Russia itself.