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David Shahnazaryan: Russia has become the main destabilizing factor and the major threat in the region

Let me begin by expressing my gratitude to the organizers of this very impressive conference and congratulate Georgia for the recently signed Association Agreement with the European Union (EU).

Obviously, this is a historic achievement for Georgia, as well as for Ukraine and Moldova. Unfortunately, my country, Armenia, wasted this opportunity and sacrificed its future strategic investment in its future. On 3 September 2013, Armenia entered the most difficult period since its independence. This is the day when President Serzh Sargsyan announced a sudden political U-turn in Moscow: a refusal of the Association process with the EU after successfully completing a negotiation process that lasted for nearly four years and a willingness to join the so-called Customs Union led by Russia.

Undoubtedly, the “U-turn” became possible because of unprecedented pressure and blackmail/intimidation by Russia. However, it is clear that the political responsibility for this lies primarily on the authorities of Armenia as well as on all parliamentary factions. In fact, in the Armenian parliament, except for some deputies, there was no political faction, who would by its acts or acquiescence did not support what is happening - neither the ruling party, nor the power calling themselves "non-ruling" parties.

There is an impression that Armenia accepted its fatality, but it does not. The Armenian civil society, a number of non-parliamentary forces and non-governmental organizations, some political and public figures, experts and journalists made some strict public statements about their disagreement with the policy of subordination of the interests of the country and on the imperial ambitions of the Kremlin, as well as warning of the possibility of giving up from the country's international obligations in compliance with democratic norms. Among them I can list the Civil Society Platform of the Eastern Partnership, several parties and human rights organizations. Events

in Ukraine also displayed a resonance in Armenian society as well, and an Armenian Committee of solidarity with Maidan was established in February 2014.

To date, while Armenia is still not a member of the Customs Union and the Eurasian Union, and relations with the EU and NATO have not ceased, but are only tending to expand, which I fully support as an opposition politician. There is an understanding that such links cause nervousness of Moscow. Moscow does not hide its desire to completely stop these kinds of relations with the West. However, if Armenia becomes a member of the Eurasian Union, Armenia's relations with the EU and NATO, as well as the hope for expanding these relations would be seriously questioned, which would have a very negative impact on regional security.

On 2 December 2013, during his official visit to Armenia, Russian President Vladimir Putin stated that "We will strengthen our position in the South Caucasus." Russia has enough destabilizing resources in the region. The 102nd military base in Armenia, which has recently been strengthened and expanded both by its forces and capacity, cannot serve to enhance the security, for what it was initially created, but can become itself be a significant tool for destabilization.

Being a co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group on the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict with the United States and France, i.e. a mediator and a peacekeeper, Russia is the main arm supplier to Azerbaijan, including offensive arms, as well as equipping its military base located in Armenia. By combining the militarization process of the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict zone with a peacekeeping role, Moscow is trying to replace the function of the Minsk Group with its sole intermediary involvement. The purpose of Russia is to employ pressure on Azerbaijan to force it to get involved in Russia's neo-imperial projects. As a result, the so-called "frozen" conflict has assumed a serious new degree of "unfreezing." Given the large number of ceasefire violations and almost daily loss of lives on the frontline, now the conflict is difficult to consider frozen.

Against this background, the initiative of the American co-chair of the OSCE Minsk Group, Ambassador James Warlick, on 7 May was aimed at the preservation and enhancement of the Minsk Group as well as to intensify the negotiation process and to strengthen and expand national diplomacy by involving the societies of the conflict sides in the settlement process. The initiative of the American co-chair was jointly discussed and received the support of a significant segment of civil society in both Armenia and Azerbaijan.

Given the revisionist foreign policy of Russia to establish a "new world order" and undermining the fundamental foundations of the European security system after the annexation of Ukrainian Crimea, in the current explosive situation in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, even minor mistakes may be used by the third side to impose a new war on us. This will lead to tragic consequences for the entire region and can be used by other players to damage the regional communication infrastructure. Thus, today's Russia, possessed with delusional neo-imperial ideas and with an aim to reverse history and with an undisguised desire to put its troops in the region of Nagorno-Karabakh conflict under the facade of peacekeepers, has become both a major destabilizing factor and the main threat in the region.

In this context, Georgia has played and continues to play a stabilizing and balancing role in the region's policy with its close relations both with Azerbaijan and Armenia. Russia will not give up with the attempts to sow disagreement between our countries, and taking into account the possible regional trends, relations between Armenia and Georgia are becoming increasingly important in terms of regional stability. These relations are developing not only at the official level, but also on the level of civil society, and yet they develop outside of the control of Russia, in a positive way. In particular, this was confirmed by the recent visit of the Armenian president to Georgia. With the association agreement with the EU and the willingness to integrate with NATO, Georgia is a kind of "lifeline" for the entire region. And whether the Armenian-Georgian border would become another dividing line in the region, which intensifies the defragmentation of the South Caucasus, depends on the political leadership and civil societies of our countries. Therefore, the success of Georgia is our success, and I am sure that it will be successful, and that will only increase our chances. There is no doubt that Georgia will fulfill the commitments of the Association Agreement with the EU, i.e. will do the "homework" required. Also, I would like to be sure that the EU would fulfill its own "homework" as well, including by both Brussels and the EU Member States themselves, which will provide a green light to Georgia for the prospects of EU membership and integration into Euro-Atlantic structures.