

Remarks Following a Meeting With President Mikheil Saakashvili of Georgia January 30, 2012

President Obama. Well, I want to welcome President Saakashvili and his delegation here. And it's a wonderful occasion to have him here as we'll be celebrating this year 20 years of independence for Georgia and the eighth anniversary of the Rose Revolution.

I think Georgia should be extraordinarily proud of the progress that it has made in building a sovereign and democratic country. And one of the first things that I did was express my appreciation for the institution-building that's been taking place in Russia—in Georgia, the importance of making sure that minorities are respected, the importance of a police—and a system of rule of law that is being observed, the kinds of institution-building that is going to make an enormous difference in the future of not just this generation of Georgians, but future generations of Georgians.

And so I want to express my appreciation for the work that's been done in the past, but also anticipating fair and free elections here, the formal transfer of power that will be taking place in Georgia, which I think will solidify many of these reforms that have already taken place.

We discussed how we can continue to strengthen the strong bilateral relationship between our two countries. Part of this is economic. Obviously, Georgia has made strides in creating a effective free market system, and more progress needs to be made. The United States wants to help in that progress.

And so one of the most important things that we're doing in addition to things like the MCC and OPIC loans is also what we've agreed to is a high-level dialogue between our two countries about how we can continue to strengthen trade relations between our two countries, including the possibility of a free trade agreement. Obviously, there's a lot of work to be done and there are going to be a lot of options that are going to be explored. The key point though is we think it's a win-win for the United States and for Georgia as we continue to find opportunities for businesses to in-

vest in Georgia, for us to be able to sell Georgia our goods and services, and Georgia to be able to sell theirs as well.

On defense and security, I expressed my gratitude to the President for the extraordinary contributions that have been made by the Georgian military in Afghanistan. They have been one of the most dedicated contributors outside of NATO to the ISAF effort, and in fact have taken on some significant casualties as a consequence of those efforts.

We have talked about how we will continue to strengthen our defense cooperation, and there are a wide range of areas where we are working together. And I reaffirmed to the President and assured him that the United States will continue to support Georgia's aspirations to ultimately become a member of NATO.

Finally, I wanted to say to the President that we appreciate the model of democracy and transparency that they've been setting not just for their own country, but also for the region as a whole. And we think that with continued progress over the next several years that a lot of countries will say to themselves that if Georgia can perform these transformations, then we can as well. They've been a responsible player on the world scene and in multilateral fora.

And so under the President's leadership, I think that they've made enormous strides. And we will continue to look for opportunities to strengthen what is already a very strong bilateral relationship.

So welcome, Mr. President. Thank you so much for being here.

President Saakashvili. Thank you so much. Thank you.

Well, Mr. President, I'm incredibly honored to be back in the Oval Office. And I can tell you we are incredibly grateful as a nation for continued support and strong basically cooperation that we'll be getting from your administration and from the United States of America at every level. And for my country's independence, for its future, for the future of our de-

mocracy, for the future of our region, that has been absolutely decisive and key in all different directions.

Obviously, there's a very good understanding at a number of levels. We are grateful for your support for our NATO aspirations. We are very grateful for elevating our defense cooperation further and talking about Georgia's self-defense capabilities and developing it, because that's also, of course, an important message back to my nation.

It's very important that you mentioned, obviously, the prospect of a free trade agreement with Georgia, because that's going to attract lots of additional activity to my country and basically helping our nation-building process.

Thank you again for complimenting us on our reforms. Obviously, the reform process is never over, but these reforms would not have happened without strong commitment and support and advice from your administration and from the United States and your people on the ground. We deeply appreciate all this.

Obviously, next—this year we have parliamentary elections which will mark also bring-

ing in another political system, constitution system, with more parliamentary government. And as you rightly mentioned, there is—well, there will be—next year a new President will be elected in Georgia. And that's also important because that's also—will move our democracy forward and will generally get much more to a diversified and pluralistic political scene.

And obviously, I will continue to cooperate with you in all these directions that these gains get solidified, irreversible. And nothing can take Georgia away from this track of progress. Nothing can bring us back to a less democratic, corrupt, retrograde political system or political actors.

And obviously, this was very, very—from my point of view, I'll be—again, my personal gratitude. I'll be leaving this office very happy because we basically got what we wanted to get. Thanks so much.

President Obama. Thank you.

President Saakashvili. Thank you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:59 p.m. in the Oval Office at the White House.

Remarks Prior to a Cabinet Meeting and an Exchange With Reporters *January 31, 2012*

The President. Hello, everybody. This is our first Cabinet meeting after my State of the Union Address, and it gives me an opportunity to share my ideas and initiatives with my Cabinet, but also to get some feedback from them.

One of the top priorities that I mentioned during the State of the Union was the need for us to small—promote small business. And I'm very pleased that we've got Karen Mills here, who has participated in our meetings before, but is now an official member of the Cabinet. It is a symbol of how important it is for us to spur entrepreneurship, to help startups, to move aggressively so that we can assure more companies that create the most jobs in our economy are getting a leg up from the various programs that we have in our Government.

I mentioned at the State of the Union that there have been discussions, bipartisan discussions between Republicans and Democrats,

about a whole set of measures that can accelerate financing to startup companies, can provide tax breaks to startups and small businesses that are interested in either hiring more workers or increasing their wages, that looks at innovative ways for them to raise capital. And my expectation and hope is, is that they will get a bill together quickly, that they will pass it and get it on my desk. I will sign it right away, and I would like to see that bill signed this year.

In addition, we've got all the Cabinet agencies who are here represented; they are putting forward their own initiatives to enhance the ability of entrepreneurs to get up and running. So, for example, the Department of Homeland Security, my understanding is we're going to be talking about how we can improve the visa process for those who are interested in investing in the United States and starting businesses here in the United States.