



## Press Briefing on Turnover of Russians to OSCE

**Daniel Fried, Assistant Secretary of State for European and Eurasian Affairs**

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**Assistant Secretary Fried:** Hi. Thank you for coming here. I wanted to speak to you after the successful diplomacy led by the OSCE which resulted in the return of the four Russians arrested last week to Russia. They have now landed in Russia. We welcome the decision by Georgia to return them, and we greatly appreciate the leadership shown by Belgian Foreign Minister Karel De Gucht, who is the OSCE Chairman-in-Office, who did a lot of the work on the ground to set up this arrangement and see it was carried out. And, by the way, I should mention that it shows again the strength of the OSCE -- flexible, action-oriented, got something done. So it is a good thing that the OSCE was there.

Now, this is a moment, we hope -- that the Russians have been returned to Russia -- for Russia and Georgia to step back, lower the rhetoric, and hopefully work together. We want to help our friends solve the problems that keep rattling around the Southern Caucasus and Georgia, and this episode shows how easy it is for media rhetoric just to get spun up by an incident. There have been arrests for espionage before in the world. These things happen. They will probably happen in the future. It's important not to let these incidents get out of control.

I'm not here to discuss the particular case. I'm not here to assess the merits of the Georgian claims, but to express the interest of the United States in working with both countries and the OSCE and the European Union and certainly our Russian and Georgian friends, to work together to help find peaceful and diplomatic solutions to some of the underlying problems, particularly the so-called "frozen conflicts" of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Those conflicts we have seen are not stable; they threaten at any time to lead to violence. They have in the past. And my government is certainly ready to increase efforts and work with the international community and with Georgia, with Russia, with the OSCE, with the United Nations, all as appropriate, to try to resolve these problems.

We have been talking to the Georgians, talking to the Russians about some ideas, and we look forward to continued concrete discussions.

American diplomacy, I should say, ever since the arrests of the four Russians, it's been very active. Secretary Rice has spoken to President Saakashvili and Foreign Minister Lavrov, and others in the department have been very active. So in short, we're glad that this immediate problem has been resolved with the return of the four Russians, and we stand ready to work with our friends on a positive agenda moving forward.

As I said, we have particular specific ideas and we look forward to working with our friends on them. I'll take any questions you have.

**Reuters:** What are your specific ideas? Maybe if you could illuminate a few of them. Are you planning to have some sort of joint conference between both sides?

**Assistant Secretary Fried:** The two conflicts are Abkhazia and South Ossetia. We have supported the diplomatic process in both cases. The Georgians came up about a year and a half ago with a diplomatic plan, and the OSCE has supported it.

We have also suggested to the OSCE some steps that might reduce the risk of violent incidents. And, by the way, we condemn all the violent incidents, and we've been very critical of those who start shooting. That is no good. That doesn't lead to any good. We have some ideas about monitoring of the Roki Tunnel or expansion of the OSCE monitoring mandate, establishment of checkpoints. We want to stem the flow of illegal goods in the region. We want to do so in a way that the people of South Ossetia have more rather than less security. All of our steps are intended to support Georgia's territorial integrity -- a very important principle, Georgia's territorial integrity -- but also to recognize the interests of the people of South Ossetia, or peoples of South Ossetia, because they are hardly monolithic places, and peoples of Abkhazia. In all cases we have stressed that military solutions will lead nowhere and diplomatic solutions, confidence building measures of various kinds, efforts in South Ossetia to help the people there with various projects to improve their lives, all of these are things we're ready to support.

**ITAR-TASS:** My President spoke to your President this morning and suggested that, he warned against any action from third parties that could be construed by the Georgians as encouraging their destructive policies.

**Assistant Secretary Fried:** No one wants to encourage destructive policies at all, and we discourage all destructive policies and encourage all constructive policies.

**ITAR-TASS:** Why would President Putin be saying that to his friend, President Bush?

**Assistant Secretary Fried:** I certainly don't want to characterize President Putin's motives. I will say that we certainly welcome the efforts of the OSCE, a third party, which was very constructive. In no case would we support destructive tendencies, so I have no idea what was meant, but it is important to make clear our view that hot rhetoric, sanctions, threats -- all kinds of provocative behavior -- don't help, and we make this case clear.

I have had, by the way, some very constructive conversations, including today, with Russian and Georgian officials, congratulated the Georgians on this success and made clear with my Russian colleagues that we want to work with the Russians on a constructive agenda.

**ITAR-TASS:** It's hardly a success, with all due respect. The situation was created out of nowhere, basically, and President Putin called it an act of state terrorism, which was even quoted [inaudible]. So I guess it's no secret that in Russia many people view this as actions by the Georgians, obviously, by the sovereign government of Georgia, for their [inaudible], but with the obvious expectation of support from the other side, specifically from the American side.

Are you telling me now that you are not supporting anything reckless? And if so, then why would you block the statement in the Security Council of the UN that was --

**Assistant Secretary Fried:** You've thrown a lot of things at me. Let me try to unpack this for clarity.

First of all, the statement in the Security Council over the weekend I believe didn't have to do with this incident at all; it had to do with Abkhazia, so it's not really relevant, is it? Although we're certainly willing to consider anything, it had nothing to do with this. It was a different issue.

Secondly, I'm not here to discuss the merits of Georgian claims that the four arrested Russians were engaged in espionage. I will say that these charges have come up before; sometimes Russia arrests foreigners or accuses them of espionage; sometimes the Americans have. There's a long history of this sort of thing.

Again, I'm not here to assess the merits of those claims. Georgia says it has evidence; I'm not here to assess it. I am here to say it is important not to let the media spin

up and inflame what is obviously a very difficult situation. No one's changing geography any time soon. Russia and Georgia have to live together. Russia's a very large country. Georgia is a very small country.

We certainly support, and we've made it very clear to Georgia, that we think its future, its territorial integrity will be greatly strengthened through its internal reforms, through making Georgia a more prosperous, more modern, more democratic state; more effective, better governance. It is true that the Georgians have done quite a bit in this direction. There's quite a bit more to do.

In any event, I am well aware that emotions in Moscow and in Tbilisi are both high, and it's important that all parties learn to work together. We certainly support that.

**ITAR-TASS:** For clarification, sir. I am sorry, but about the Security Council statement, [inaudible] that the Russians drafted this statement for the Chairman of the Security Council, when was it? I think they rejected it on Friday or Saturday or whatever. That had nothing to do with the situation?

**Assistant Secretary Fried:** My understanding is that there was a draft which had to do with Abkhazia. That's my understanding.

Now again, I was traveling and I only got back after midnight Friday night, but certainly we want to see drafts like this and statements like this contribute to a constructive resolution of the problem.

**ITAR-TASS:** I haven't seen the draft myself so I am just --

**Assistant Secretary Fried:** I was told it was about Abkhazia, but there certainly is a role for the United Nations and a role for the OSCE in the resolution of these conflicts. I don't want to say precisely what that role might be, but there certainly is a role, and we stand ready to work with Russia and Georgia both in looking for the most constructive way forward.

**VOA:** Is it your understanding that with the return of the spies that the Russians are going to drop these rather wide-ranging sealing off of travel and restrictions against Georgia?

**Assistant Secretary Fried:** I don't know. I can't say. I certainly hope so. There have been a series of restrictions for some time. Russia, I believe, banned exports of Georgian wine and water, citing health concerns. The only land border crossing between Russia and Georgia proper has been closed for repair for some months. We regard all of this as unfortunate, and we hope that the return to Russia of the four arrested Russians will give everyone an opportunity stand back and look at ways to make progress.

Now look, emotions are high, but there is a way, and the international community certainly supports peaceful negotiated solutions to the frozen conflicts consistent with Georgia's territorial integrity. We have long encouraged Georgia to work with Russia because that's important to Georgia's future, and we will continue to do what we can.

**Kommersant:** I wonder if during your conversations with the Russians or maybe during Secretary Rice's conversations with the Russians, they informed you or Secretary Rice that they are planning to impose a blockade on Georgia. This is the first question.

The second question is, some Russian analysts, I was reading the Russian Net Press this morning, and they are pretty positive that due to the U.S. diplomatic effort, Georgians decided to give back Russia four spies. Will you comment on that?

**Assistant Secretary Fried:** Well, let me see if I can unpack that a little bit.

I did not call them four spies. I said they were four arrested Russians, and I'm not making the characterization.

It is certainly true, and I am very pleased, that we were able to contribute to the return of the Russians, but the credit really should go to Karel De Gucht of the OSCE. He's on the scene. He was working this issue very hard, a very effective diplomat, but of course we thought that the four should be given back. It didn't do anybody any good to have them continue to be held.

I see early press reports from Moscow that they are in good health. There were no charges of mistreatment. All of which is a good thing.

**Kommersant:** And the first question, if Russia told you or Secretary Rice, maybe --

**Assistant Secretary Fried:** No, I have not heard the word blockade. In my conversations with the Russians that didn't come up. I have heard, of course, the press reports from this morning of additional sanctions against Georgia, and I can only hope that that's not true, or that now with the return of the four this won't be necessary. After all, the immediate cause of the latest round of concern has been taken care of. Again, it's an opportunity for both sides to step back and say there has got to be a better way to live than repeated crises and clashes. There has to be a way to move forward, and we certainly support that.

**Kommersant:** A quick third question, I'm sorry. Do you know the volume, you mentioned about the goods which flowed illegally in South Ossetia. Do you know the volume? Will you give me the number or a dollar number for the amount of --

**Assistant Secretary Fried:** No, it is the nature of illegal trade that it is not usually registered.

**Kommersant:** How do they know then that they're illegal?

**Assistant Secretary Fried:** Well, there is a good deal of evidence of various kinds of smuggling and counterfeiting and other problems.

Russia has made a point that an uncontrolled border is not very good for their security, considering the presence of terrorism in the North Caucasus, and Russia made that point some time ago about the lack of control on the Georgia-Russian border, and I must say the Russians did have a point. That is, that border needs to be secure, and if that is the case then it's important that the part of the Russian-Georgia border not controlled by the Georgian authorities needs to be effectively monitored as well.

So we acknowledge that the Russians had a point, and the way to do it, we have some ideas on a way to do it in a way that would be cooperative with Russia.

**AFP:** I wanted to ask about how effective the U.S. mediating role can be given the obvious frustration if not anger expressed by the Russians including Putin's reported comments today?

**Assistant Secretary Fried:** Well, we have very good relations with the Georgians, obviously, and I find my Russian colleagues to be extremely professional, serious, well-informed. They have always encouraged us to play a part with the Georgians, and we intend to do our best.

Again, it's good that the Russians are back, and we hope that this outcome lowers tensions.

**AP:** Can I ask an OSCE question? Not directly related to this conflict that you're talking about. Has the U.S. taken a position of whether Kazakhstan would be a good chair for the OSCE in 2009?

**Assistant Secretary Fried:** We're looking at this, and Kazakhstan is clearly interested. We're consulting with Kazakhstan and other OSCE partners. We're thinking this through.

**ITAR-TASS:** About the internal Georgian conflicts, their [inaudible] Abkhazia and South Ossetia. How do you see that moving forward now that they basically are not even talking to each other? I think they cut off [inaudible].

**Assistant Secretary Fried:** We certainly hope that working with our partners and with Russia and with other interested members of the international community we can encourage all sides to resume dialogue and confidence building measures, that we can increase the international community's assistance, increase the effectiveness of some of the new assistance programs for South Ossetia.

Look, Russia can speak to its own interests, but given Russian legitimate concerns about security in the North Caucasus and its interest in stability in the South Caucasus, it seems natural that Russia would want to work, completely logical that Russia would want to work to build confidence in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. So we do want, we think both sides in Abkhazia need to observe the terms of the ceasefire and all the other agreements. Confidence building measures might help people stop thinking about conflict and war and start thinking about longer term solutions.

**Kommersant:** For quite a period of time there was information that a lot of people in the Kremlin they were discussing the military option against Georgia. I don't know whether it's true or not. But do you exclude the possibility of Russia's taking military action against Georgia?

**Assistant Secretary Fried:** I certainly think that military solutions, any military solutions don't bring any good. Whether it is in South Ossetia or Abkhazia or anywhere else, military solutions won't help. Georgian territorial integrity must be respected. The solutions have to recognize that. But the best way to get there is through a diplomatic process, negotiated process, that also recognizes the Abkhaz interests and South Ossetia, recognizes where we are and how we got here, and all sides need to look at this.

I think the Georgian plan presented to the OSCE was a good starting point, and certainly Russia is going to be part of the solution. It's got enormous influence and we all are certainly ready to work with our Russian colleagues.

**ITAR-TASS:** So you have just returned from a trip to the Balkans.

**Assistant Secretary Fried:** Yes.

**ITAR-TASS:** Are you now more confident or less confident that the Kosovo problem can be resolved by the end of this year?

**Assistant Secretary Fried:** Well, I certainly believe that the people of Kosovo need greater clarity about their future. The Contact Group agreed in New York at its ministerial meeting that we would try to achieve a negotiated solution by the end of the year. The Contact Group also agreed that no one party could unilaterally block a settlement.

The Contact Group is important, it is useful, we are working well within it, and I think that the people in Kosovo -- and I met also with the Serbian community, the Bosnian community, the Turkish community as well as the majority Albanian Kosovar community -- they want clarity about their future. I think in Serbia people, and I was also there, met with the leadership but I also met with students and civil society leaders, they also want clarity about the future.

**ITAR-TASS:** Why is the Serbian territorial integrity less important than the Georgian territorial integrity?

**Assistant Secretary Fried:** I think that Kosovo is a unique case. There was a war fought. The UN Security Council in 1244 said that Kosovo's future status would be decided at a later date, and the territory's been administered by the United Nations for seven years. It is wrong to make straight line analogies. Each situation is unique. We are certainly working with Russia in the Contact Group on a solution in Kosovo, and we need one.

**AP:** You haven't mentioned the Istanbul Agreement in 1999. Is this a point of departure for any discussions?

**Assistant Secretary Fried:** Well, let me say that one of the successes in Russian-Georgian relations has been progress on the withdrawal of Russian forces from the bases in Georgia. This is on track, it's doing well. And we hope this continues. I didn't raise it because it's a problem well on its -- it is actually a piece of good news. It's a former problem on its way to a satisfactory solution.

**Reporters:** Thank you.

**Assistant Secretary Fried:** Thanks.

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