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## PRESS RELEASE

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Today, on the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Georgia's Independence Day, the Georgian-American community and friends of Georgia gathered in front of the Russian Embassy in Washington DC to protest Russia's ongoing aggressive policies towards Georgia.

Bolshevik Russia ended Georgia's short-lived independence in 1921. Seventy years of Communist propaganda could not crush the desire of Georgia's people to restore Georgian independence. In 1991 Georgia seceded from the Soviet Union and declared its pro-Western orientation. The Russian authorities, in their attempts to preserve their control over Georgia, pursued divide and conquer tactics and inflamed civil and ethnic conflicts. This resulted in thousands of deaths and hundreds of thousands of internally displaced persons in Georgia. Russian aggression towards Georgia reached its climax in 2006, when the Russian government imposed a comprehensive economic and transportation blockade on Georgia. Despite these challenges, Georgia continues to make progress in its political and economic development, bringing Georgia closer to full membership in NATO and other Euro-Atlantic structures.

Russia's aggression towards Georgia continues to this day. On April 16th 2008, former President Putin, citing recognition of Kosovo's independence by western democracies, issued a decree which opened direct trade, transportation, and political relations with the secessionist territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia. This action is the latest in a long-standing campaign by the Russian Federation to, in effect, annex Abkhazia and South Ossetia. In its attempt to integrate Abkhazia and South Ossetia into the Russian Federation, the Putin administration has implemented direct military support for the separatist authorities, and extended Russian citizenship to the residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia without consultation with the Georgian government. Illegal violations of Georgian air space occur on a regular basis including bombings of Georgian territory. De facto, direct rule by Russia has been imposed in the South Ossetia region of Georgia through the appointment of Russian officials to senior executive posts. By recognizing the de facto Abkhazian government's legal authority, Russia has condoned the brutal and immoral action of

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ethnic cleansing of more than 250,000 Georgians from Abkhazia in 1993. President Putin's April 16<sup>th</sup> decree recognized Russia's role as a participant in the conflict, rather than as a mediator. This action poses a threat to Georgia, to stability in the Caucasus, and violates international law.

All attempts by the Georgian government to restore the peace process which includes offers of a maximum autonomy to Abkhazia and South Ossetia with the right of veto on Abkhazian issues, representation in central executive and legislative bodies, and development of free-trade zones, have been publicly rejected by the Russian Federation. Furthermore, Russia refuses to support constructive proposals aimed at reshaping the failed "peace-keeping" regimes in South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

The Georgian-American community and friends of Georgia ask the government of United States and the international community to stop Russia's unilateral aggression towards Georgia. We also urge Russia's newly elected president Medvedev to cease the historic opportunity to open a new and constructive page in Russian-Georgian relations.