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MOSCOW'S GRIP ON GEORGIA – WHAT'S NEXT?

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MARTINS ZVANERS: Good afternoon everyone and welcome to Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. I'd like to welcome our audience here in the conference room, as well as our audience watching this event on C-SPAN. At this point, I'd like to introduce our president, Jeffrey Gedmin, who will be moderating the opening session. Mr. Gedmin, please, we look forward to this.

JEFFREY GEDMIN: Martins, thank you, welcome to everybody. I'm Jeff Gedmin, president of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty is an independent media organization funded by the United States Congress. It is part of the international family of U.S. broadcasting overseen by the broadcast board of governors, and its mission is the same as it was during the Cold War. Its mission is to promote freedom and democracy through the broadcast of accurate news information, responsible commentary and discussion, and we do so today in 28 languages in 21 countries, from Russia, Belarus, throughout Central Asia, right through the Middle East to Iran. And today our subject is Moscow's grip on Georgia – what next? Joining me here in Prague is the head of our Georgian language service, David Kakabadze. David, welcome.

DAVID KAKABADZE: Hello.

MR. GEDMIN: In Washington, senior analyst and correspondent Daniel Kimmage; Daniel, welcome to you. And we will have at some point in the conversation our bureau chief in Tbilisi, Marina Vashakmadze. Marina, if you can hear me, welcome to you also.

David, may I begin with you? We got off the phone two minutes ago with your correspondent Koba in Gori, or on the outskirts of Gori, in the middle of a row of Russian tanks. Can you tell us the latest from Gori according to our correspondent Koba?

MR. KAKABADZE: Yes, hello everybody. We, as Jeff already mentioned, spoke to our correspondent in Georgia, who told us that the Russian tanks starting moving away from Gori, and not to the north where they are supposed to go according to the ceasefire agreement, but to the west – to the east, I'm sorry, in the direction of Tbilisi. So they moved away from Gori and stopped some 12 kilometers from Gori, which means that from that point, there are 50, 45 to 50 more kilometers to go to the capital of Georgia.

Koba, our correspondent, spoke to some Russian soldiers, officers, who claimed that this was part of an operation to secure the withdrawal of Russian forces, which they indeed plan to do, as they say. So this was just a military action kind of to make sure that these tanks, armored vehicles, will not be attacked by any forces from the back while they are withdrawing. So this is one explanation, but in any way, this is obviously the breach of the agreement which was signed by the Russian president.

MR. GEDMIN: David, this initiative by Russian forces at least allegedly to secure the withdrawal of Russian troops, is it having any impact on the civilian population there in that area?

MR. KAKABADZE: Yes, and again I would cite, I would quote Koba, who told – Koba Liklikadze, our correspondent – who told us that he witnessed, as he speaking, he just was seeing people coming out of their houses, leaving their houses in panic, and moving towards Tbilisi by just walking or grabbing whatever transport, whatever means they could find. So there will be more refugees in the coming days.

MR. GEDMIN: David, Gori keeps coming up again and again in this conflict. Can you say a word about the city? Where is it inside Georgia and why is it playing a pivotal role?

MR. KAKABADZE: Well, first of all, it is an important city because it's the birthplace of Stalin as probably many of you know. And it's also maybe interesting to know that it is one, maybe the last sculpture, huge sculpture, Stalin is situated right in the middle of the town on the main square. So it's not important; it's not maybe relevant to our conversation today, but probably you have to know that some of the residents of Gori still admire Stalin as their great son. So, but it's really just as a side bar.

As for the importance of the town for this conflict, it is the largest town and the closest Georgian town, city, to the South Ossetian breakaway region. It's just 30 kilometers from Gori to Tskhinvali, which is the administrative center of South Ossetia, just 30 kilometers, and even less to the border of South Ossetia with Georgia proper. Therefore, it's a strategic town, and a lot of Georgian villagers who were fleeing in the recent days, their homes, from South Ossetia, came to Gori and they spent some days and nights there, but then it became a very dangerous place and they had to leave Gori as well. And as our correspondent reported to us, from 50,000 residents of Gori, 80 to 85 percent have left the town in the recent days. But today, they started coming back.

MR. GEDMIN: David, thank you. I think as we all can appreciate, on the ground when things happen, it can feel a little bit chaotic and people don't know precisely what's happening, as Koba told us as tanks were moving through their neighborhoods, perhaps to secure the withdrawal of Russian troops. People don't know, so they move. They leave their homes.

Let's go to Washington for a moment and step back. I want to mix the eyewitness account and the work that you and your colleagues are doing, David, with colleagues of ours like Daniel, who are involved in the analysis of this on a strategic basis. Daniel, when you're looking at this today and you step back just a little bit, do we have a fragile peace that is moving to something stable, and something from a Georgian and Western perspective that will be acceptable, or do we have something that's fragile that could lead back into war? Or into a situation which is peaceful, but something that is diplomatically unacceptable to Georgians and the West?

DANIEL KIMMAGE: Thanks, Jeff. I think that, of all of those choices right now, I would simply stress the theme of fragility because if you look at the terms of the agreement, what I think Sarkozy called the provisional cessation of hostilities, it's really not terribly precise in terms of where Georgian and Russian forces have to be. So give the fluidity of the situation on the ground and the sort of lack of clarity in that document, I would have to say this is extremely fragile at this point.

MR. GEDMIN: Well, Daniel, on that point a question to you and a question to David, do you, Daniel – I heard the Russian foreign minister on television say this morning that he could not imagine that the citizens of Abkhazia or South Ossetia would ever want to return to Georgia. Is that an acceptable proposition to the United States? And David, to you, imagine you're sitting in President Saakashvili's shoes. Do you think the Georgian government would accept such an outcome? Daniel, you first?

MR. KIMMAGE: Sure, I mean, it's – I can't speak for the official U.S. reaction to this, but what I can say is that this is a very strong and clear statement of the Russian position, which is to say that Georgia has lost these regions and we will stand by and ensure that loss. So they are setting the stage for what appears to be quite a diplomatic confrontation because I think today we saw statements, including something from the German chancellor, affirming the territorial integrity of Georgia, and the fact that any status for these regions has to be negotiated within a framework. And I believe Lobarov said yesterday that you can forget about the territorial integrity of Georgia. So we have here two very different frameworks for viewing this. And they're very much in contradiction with each other.

MR. GEDMIN: David?

MR. KAKABADZE: May I add something to what Daniel has said? Today, President Medvedev said that he has nothing against the territorial integrity of Georgia. And Chancellor Merkel, by the way, also noted that, stated that it is important to solve this issue in the framework of the territorial integrity of Georgia. This was an important statement. As we know, Germany is not among the strongest supporters of Georgia's Western aspiration, let's say, of Georgia joining NATO and so on and so forth.

What is very important here, I would say that Russia tries to do everything to stop Georgia's Western – to stop Georgia's Western aspiration in saying that Abkhazia and Ossetia will never accept to be part of Georgia. We have – when we are saying this, when we are hearing this, we have to remember that 250,000 refugees had to leave their homes from Abkhazia. And the first thing to do is to make sure that these refugees go back. And the second thing which would be very important to do is that a referendum is organized under the – by the international community, not under Russian auspices, not as it was with the peacekeepers when Russian forces were called peacekeepers, but as they were a party in the conflict. So it has to be really – it's a really long process; it's not an easy process, but accepting Abkhazia's secession would mean legalizing the ethnic cleansing which took place in the war of 1993.

MR. GEDMIN: David, thank you. We are broadcasting from the operational headquarters of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, Prague, but joined in Washington by Daniel Kimmage, our senior correspondent and analysis and a distinguished audience. Daniel, I wonder if we could take a question from the audience at this time.

MR. KIMMAGE: Okay.

MR. GEDMIN: Washington, go ahead.

MR. ZVANERS: Please raise your hand if you'd like to ask a question. Allow me to – and also state your name and affiliation.

Q: Dan Kazmer, George Washington University. When the Abkhazs and – South Ossetian refugees fled the area, where did they flee to? Did they flee into other parts of Georgia or did they go into Russia?

MR. KAKABADZE: You mean during this one week or you mean the war of 1990s.

Q: Now.

MR. KAKABADZE: So there were no armed confrontations of big scale in Abkhazia, as you know. There were some bombings reported in upper Abkhazia, which was the only part of Abkhazia controlled by Tblisi. And the villagers from there fled to Svaneti, which is the mountainous region of Georgia and the arrived in Kutaisi. So this is – concerning Abkhazia. As for Ossetia, most of Ossetians went to Northern Ossetia and Georgians fled to Georgia proper. And some of Ossetians also are now in Georgia in different camps, refugee camps which have been set up in different parts of Georgia in Tblisi, around Tblisi. There are a lot of Ossetians among them, but I have to add here that these Ossetians are mostly supporters of the pro-Georgia, pro-Tblisi provisional government. So it would be dangerous for them, for their lives to go to Northern Ossetia – to North Ossetia, yes; to the Russian Federation.

MR. GEDMIN: Should we take another question from Washington, please?

MR. ZVANERS: It sounds like a very good idea. Here we go.

Q: Elena Postnikova, Freedom House, and my question is to David. David, how would you evaluate current attitude of Georgian people to Mikheil Saakashvili. Do they support him or they blame him for the move, for the invasion into South Ossetia? And how do you envision the developments in this field?

MR. KAKABADZE: Yes, this is the question which I've been asked many times already in these recent days. At this moment, the society in Georgia is united as it has not been since many, many years. And this is to say of the political spectrum as well. Just an hour or two ago, Saakashvili's main opponent during the presidential campaign in

January, Levan Gachechiladze – he was the leader of the unified opposition – made another statement on the Georgia public TV saying that he’s – it’s not a time to speak about differences between the opposition and the government; it is the time now to oppose the Russian invasion and to be unified in order to avert possible overthrowing of the government or some kind of actions which would be imposed from outside.

So this is the general mood in the public at the moment. But of course I think that in a couple of months, this may change. This may change. A lot of people might start questioning the military operation which was – which started – which was – which Saakashvili started on August the 7th and many, many people may say that Saakashvili shouldn’t have started the war which he couldn’t have won.

MR. GEDMIN: David, can I follow up on that – the question from the colleague from Freedom House. Your hour and your primary mission is to broadcast to our broadcast region, and you are broadcasting to Georgia every day. You have Marina, our bureau chief in Tbilisi. You have colleagues on the ground working around the country, and you are giving them news and information analysis in Georgian language. What are they hearing? What you telling them? What are you explaining to them? When you hear it from them, what do they want to know?

MR. KAKABADZE: They want to know what is really happening on the ground because the information which they get from Georgian state media or Russian state media, because it is also possible to have Russian television in Georgia. And they just try to get as much information as possible. They are coming to us to get unbiased information and as much information as possible. We are trying to get reports from our regional correspondents. From our special correspondents we are sending to different regions, among them Gori, Senaki, Poti, Batumi, places which have been targeted by Russian planes during the – during last week.

So we are also trying to get voices from residents of those towns and villages which have been targeted by Russian artillery or planes. So we are trying to get the phone numbers of those people, and were just calling them and asking what they have seen, what they have experienced. Yesterday, for instance, we got a phone number from our Zugdidi correspondent, which is a town the closest town to Abkhazia. And he gave us the number of an old gentlemen of a resident of a village which is located just two kilometers from Abkhazia’s border, and we rang him up and said, so how is the situation there, and he said, you know, I had to flee this morning because Abkhaz paramilitary – (inaudible) – he thought – he didn’t know who these people were but these were Abkhaz armed people. They forced me to leave the house and I had to leave but I hope that in the evening I’ll be back so call me again. So we could never contact him after that.

MR. GEDMIN: I have another question for you, David, and then I want to go back to you Daniel Kimmage in Washington. David, we also broadcast to Russia in the Russian language. Can you tell us a little bit about cooperation with your Russian colleagues and are they appearing on your programs? Are you appearing on your programs?

MR. KAKABADZE: We have a very good cooperation with the Russian service. I am quite often a guest in their talk shows. We invite them to be guests in our talk shows, and we also use a lot of coverage by their correspondents who, unlike our correspondents, are now able to visit places in South Ossetia, which are just closed. The Russian service has sent a correspondent to North Ossetia where most of the refugees from South Ossetia are there at the moment. And he went into Tskhinvali from the North accompanied by the Russian soldiers, Russian troops. And so his reports are very valuable to us because otherwise wouldn't have had this information.

MR. GEDMIN: David, what is it like when you are these days – in these days on a Russian talk show. What's the mood? What kind of questions do you get?

MR. KAKABADZE: You know, I was just two or three days ago a guest on talk show which is a very popular one, which is called "Time of Guests."

(Background noise.)

So I was guest – "Time of Guest." It is the show – one hour call-in show of the Russian service. And we were – I was sitting in the studio with Jefim Fistein, the moderator of the show. We had their correspondent, the correspondent of the Russian service Vitaly Portnikov from Kiev, and we had a lot of calls during the show. And what I experience there was absolutely amazing to me. I didn't expect to get so many calls from listeners criticizing Putin's policy, criticizing the invasion, criticizing the move which absolutely damaged the relations between the two countries, not just on government level but also in to some extent on the human level because the propaganda, the state propaganda in Russia is so strong and there is nothing to be used as a balance or, you know, to have another – the other side. It was completely unexpected to me that so many people are criticizing Putin, even in spite of this heavy propaganda they are exposed to.

MR. GEDMIN: David, thank you. Daniel Kimmage, if I could go back to you before turning to the audience again. Daniel, you have written a piece, which is available on the Radio Free Europe / Radio Liberty website where you have put this in greater context. And in a word, you've suggested that this is about a lot more than just Georgia. Can you tell us a little bit about how we should think about Russian action in Georgia today?

MR. KIMMAGE: Sure, the first thing I would say is that in a follow-up to what David was saying about the domestic situation in Georgia, we also have to look at the domestic repercussions in the other former Soviet countries, because the message that Moscow is sending with this operation is really not directed primarily at Washington or at Brussels but at the capitals of the other states in the former Soviet Union. And what they're supposed to see is the Russian – is Russia using military force to defend and advance its interests, as it defines them. And they're also supposed to see the West being powerless to respond. So I think that's one important thing.

Secondly, I think the most interesting thing right now, we're seeing some contradictory statements coming out of Moscow. And to me, this suggests that I don't think that Moscow has thought through the endgame and exit strategy completely here. And this is often something that happens when you have a large-scale military operation intended to make a broad point. The broad point here is that we can and will intervene militarily in our backyard. That doesn't mean that they have thought through precisely what they want to achieve. And I think this opens up a lot of opportunities for skillful diplomacy in something we should watch in the next few days.

And the final point I'll make since we were talking about propaganda in Russia at home is that first of all, we need to pay much more attention to how this is covered in Russia, because I think we're reaching a tipping point where some of the domestic propaganda is actually forcing action abroad. In state-controlled television in Russia, Kremlin-funded youth groups, propagandists, they've really whipped up a storm of sort of anti-Western paranoia and anti-Georgian sentiment, particularly directed against Saakashvili who is routinely depicted as a fascist.

And I think this is starting to play a role in the current crisis, because when a regime bombards the population with very aggressive propaganda, it eventually is going to feel obligated to match words with deeds so that it can maintain its domestic credibility. And I think this is why we really have to pay attention to the message being broadcast domestically in Russia, not simply to contrast it with Western coverage but to understand how it could potentially affect Russian foreign policy as well.

MR. GEDMIN: Daniel, is it possible in your view that we could be reaching a new phase in a frozen conflict where Russia and its allies insist that these provinces break away, the Georgians, backed by Western powers, the United States, insist that that not happen, and Georgia becomes occupied de facto for the foreseeable future?

MR. KIMMAGE: Well, I certainly hope it won't come to that. But we are seeing Moscow using- unfreezing and using these conflicts. And it's a very unpredictable process. And perhaps the most disturbing element in this is that what we are seeing is the borders that were established when the Soviet Union fell apart being called into question now. And as I said, I hope it doesn't lead to a reemergence of hot conflicts or occupation. But I think this does have the potential to destabilize much more than just Georgia. There are other frozen conflicts and certainly other territorial disputes and ambiguities in the region. And this could potentially be opening a Pandora's box.

MR. GEDMIN: Daniel, I admire you because you're always a very disciplined analyst who sometimes shies away from prescription. But I have to ask you a prescriptive question anyway. What does the United States or the United States/Europe do to defuse the tension and crisis but at the same time not validate the Russian invasion and aggression?

MR. KIMMAGE: Well, I think that right now, broadly, it's simply trying to internationalize the conflict, so to speak, to bring in European outside observers, hopefully peacekeepers. I think that keeping this at the center of attention and involving international bodies and other parties will certainly help.

The other thing I would add is that many people have brought up the fact that the West doesn't have any leverage here. I would say that there is sometimes more leverage than might appear at first glance. And this comes from the fact that the Russian elite is deeply enmeshed in the Western financial system and has extremely wide-ranging business interests in Western Europe, in England. And I think that this is also something that can come into play as we move toward a solution and try to establish a rules-based framework that is internationally viable for making sure that these conflicts don't go from frozen to hot.

MR. GEDMIN: Daniel, thank you. Martins, can we take another question from our Washington audience?

Q: I'm Margaret Ryan. I'm with Clean Skies TV news. And I wondered if you'd go a little further on an issue you raised a few minutes ago. And that is, just why the president of Georgia chose the timing he did and the method he did that set off this – that sparked this conflict.

MR. GEDMIN: David, you want to try that?

MR. KAKABADZE: So let us recall the events of the last months. April the 3rd, the NATO summit in Bucharest, Georgia and Ukraine are denied the membership action plan and given promise to become members of NATO one day. So April the 16th, Russian President Putin orders to establish direct links with the breakaway regions Abkhazia and South Ossetia. A couple of days later, a Russian MG-29 fighter jet shoots down a spy drone in the Georgian airspace. Then again, a couple of more days later, three – 1500 troops are being sent to Abkhazia, so-called peacekeepers. They are sent there without Georgia's consent.

Then – so I don't want to go into too much detail. It all started long ago, even long before April 2008. Russia was trying very, very hard to provoke Georgian leadership. And Georgian leadership was kind of trying to show restraint. And on the eve of the day when the conflict broke out, President Saakashvili sent his envoy to Tskhinvali to talk to the leaders of the separatist South Ossetian Republic. He went back to Tbilisi with nothing, with no results. The South Ossetian leaders rejected the proposal of talks. It was August the 7th, a week ago, and on the very same evening, President Saakashvili announced that he took the decision to declare a ceasefire, unilaterally declare a ceasefire, and so he's ordered his troops not to fire anymore.

And this was probably taken by the other side as the weakness of the Georgian leadership, and the shelling and bombing of Georgian villages of South Ossetia intensified on that very evening. And as the Georgian leadership claims, there were tanks

seen on the border to Georgia entering the Georgian territory from North Ossetia. And this was the moment when President Saakashvili had to take the decision and somehow to defend the residents of the Georgian villages there. This is how the conflict has started.

MR. GEDMIN: David, thank you. I will make a quick advertisement that a colleague of ours, Brian Whitmore from our central news room, is working on a piece as we speak, which will be available in about three hours on the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty website, where Brian has gone back and tried to document. And he makes an argument. The argument, as I understand, is that minimally in the months before, since the Bucharest summit, David, and certainly the three weeks before the outbreak of hostilities, minimally it appears to be the case that the Russian side was preparing for a very robust provocation, to which Saakashvili responded.

Maximally even, and you'll have to read the piece when it's done, there may be some circumstantial evidence that the Russians were actually planning an invasion without a provocation. But I'll let that piece speak for itself. Martins, I'm told by our tech people here in Prague that Marina, our colleague and bureau chief in Tbilisi, is with us now and online. Marina, can you hear me.

MARINA VASHAKMADZE: Yes, yes. I'm here.

MR. GEDMIN: Marina, thank you for joining us. We had Koba on the line earlier right outside of Gori reporting on the deployment of Russian tanks and troops, we hope, as they say, to prepare and protect their withdrawal from the region. Marina, could you tell us if there's anything new in Tbilisi or from your correspondents in the field as we speak right now?

MS. VASHAKMADZE: Yeah, just a few words, actually nothing new. Everything is repeating every day; for example, you know already about Gori from Koba. I can tell you about Poti and Zugdidi, other cities. And right – I just spoke to them 20 minutes ago, and they told me that, you know, right now the situation is calm, but you never know.

For example, in Poti, the local correspondent told me that the tanks leave Poti tonight. But all day, the tanks and big trucks robbing some offices and someone burning the town. And right now, they leave the city.

But she told me, Marina, we don't know. They did the same yesterday. I mean, the whole day yesterday, they went there and then in the evening, they leave there. So we thought that's fine. So then they returned this morning. So the situation is like, you know, back and forth, back and forth, and the same in every city. So, actually, right now, I can tell you the situation is more or less okay in that city, but we don't know what may happen next minute.

MR. GEDMIN: Marina, thank you. Let's take, Martins, another question from Washington that can be directed to Daniel there in Washington, David here in Prague, or Marina in Tbilisi. Please, go ahead.

Q: Yes, question for Prague. Mitchell Polman, independent TV and radio producer. Russian reports are claiming that Georgian forces killed roughly 2,000 civilians in South Ossetia and I've also seen other reports that – of Russian militias massacring Georgian civilians or militias that may or may not be under the control of Russia. Has anybody been able to independently verify any of these claims?

MR. KAKBADZE: Unfortunately not. Unfortunately not yet, at least. For several days, the Russian forces were not allowing anybody to enter Tskhinvali. This is the main town of the South Ossetian self-proclaimed republic. Yesterday, we have interviewed the Human Rights Watch representative who was at the time of our call in the town of Tskhinvali and she told us that she has no evidence that this figure of 2,000 is exaggerated by multiple times. So she said that there were atrocities committed by both sides there and there are evidence of – they found evidence of that.

But 2,000 – she couldn't say. She couldn't give us exact figures, but she said that both parties, the figures which are released by both parties, are exaggerated in one direction or in the other. Georgians claim that only less than 100 people were killed in Tskhinvali. Russians claim, as you said, that there have been 2,000 victims to the conflict.

MR. GEDMIN: Daniel Kimmage in Washington, can I ask you a question? It seems to me that there's a pretty fierce debate right now between Russia and Georgia that is not on the ground in military, but it's about narratives; it's about who started it and who committed what atrocities. How important is it in winning the debate over the narratives, how important is that to shape the policy and Western perceptions in terms of what comes next?

MR. KIMMAGE: I think the question of narrative is key in the specific case of Russia and Georgia. My sense is that that will probably never be resolved domestically. Normally, in a conflict situation, people stick to their guns. In Washington, one thing I can say is that there's a slightly different narrative evolving that I think is probably more relevant for policy.

And that narrative is, right now, if you look at the op-eds and you go to the think-tank briefings, you see that Georgia mounted a perhaps ill-conceived strike to take over a Russian-supported separatist region. Number two, Moscow flush with oil money decided to show that it's back with a crushing military response. And element three in this narrative is that while this is all terribly worrisome and important, there's not much the West can do about it.

So that three-part narrative is what I have seen in Washington, the sort of Georgian escalation followed by a massive Russian response and then, this is worrisome, but there's not much the West can do about it.

I think that is the narrative that is right now shaping Western policy, whether or not people agree with it. You know, people can push back from it, but that seems to be the narrative that is shaping policy here.

MR. GEDMIN: Daniel, why should Americans care about this? Russia is a big state. It has energy. It has fairly cordial if not warm relations with a number of European Union countries. It's terrible that it's picking on a small country, but the United States has so many other issues at home and abroad. What is the argument? Why should the United States care so much about this?

MR. KIMMAGE: Well, you know, I would just start by turning the argument, turning the question around and say, because it's a big state with vast energy resources and a still-formidable military that is very deeply involved in regions that everyone agrees are key to Europe's energy security, that border on some of the major security hotspots to the south of Eurasia that, for this reason alone, Russia is a key player.

And Russia's foreign policy orientation, both in what it sees as its backyard and in the world at large is enormously important. And whether or not that is broadly aligned with Western interests in the framework of a developing partnership or whether that is counterpoised to Western interest in the framework of a developing confrontation I think is vitally important no matter how distant and unpronounceable the scene of the current conflict may seem.

MR. GEDMIN: Thank you. Marina, could I go to you in Tbilisi again? Are you still with us?

MS. VASHAKMADZE: Yes, yes, yes. I am here.

MR. GEDMIN: Marina, how – what is your read of the mood of people, including Radio Liberty listeners in the last days? Has it shifted? What is the mood and attitude right now towards the United States and the European Union? Do people feel that they're getting the proper kind of support? Do they feel neglected? Do they feel let down?

Or maybe they're not thinking about the United States and external powers. Maybe they're thinking about that their house and their personal security and property. Could you tell us a little bit about the mood that you experience when you're interacting with family and friends, but also Radio Liberty listeners.

MS. VASHAKMADZE: Yeah, absolutely. You know, yeah, first of all, of course people care about their life and they are depressed, they are terrified. But thank you for this question because, you know, I would say to you, there is no person in

Georgia, no – you know, we are doing all of the time vox pops, we are talking to people. Everybody understands in Georgia, from very beginning, you know, from very first day, very beginning, that the only hope is international support.

The only hope is – I mean, that's who will help us. And so, who was the first? This was the United States. I remember that evening, you know, this was the very day when even Tbilisi was awaiting attack. And every single moment, our reporters were calling, we are moving to Tbilisi and the tanks are here, the tanks are there.

And I remember this was the very evening when Matthew Bryza came and he made a statement right in the airport. And this was the moment when things changed. You know, this was the hope and then, you know, this statement of President Bush and so on and on. Starting from that moment, people – this is the only hope now in Georgia. I just wanted to tell you, you know. This is not only the mood of my friends and people around and my personnel and everybody, but, you know, I am based on this work staff, talking to people and everybody understood from very beginning, as I told you, and even right now.

You know, and people are thankful. And plus then, I mean, this was just support, hope, and now, you know, the help, the real help because from this moment, we have 40,000 refugees, I mean, registered because we don't know how many people, as you understand, have relatives in Tbilisi and Kutaisi and other cities. But registered for the thousands and they are hungry and they are hopeless. And, you know, the only help, again, is humanitarian help, which comes from states and other countries, as well, of course. But in this situation, United States was the first.

And another thing I just wanted to add. We are talking about the state. You know, the people think that the wonderful thing and the other thing is that the United States was first here, the United States started. But, you know, this wonderful cooperation that Georgia observes now, you know, cooperation of United States and EU. I mean, this is exactly the hope. This is what people, how people can survive now because they are still in the hardest situation in Tbilisi and in the region.

MR. GEDMIN: Marina, thank you. Martins, let's take another question in Washington?

Q: Thanks, Jeff. This is Bridgett Wagner from the Heritage Foundation. You may have covered this earlier; I arrived a little bit late so I apologize if this repeats. But I was wondering if, just to pick up on what Marina was just talking about, the internationalization. In addition to the United States and the EU, of course, a number of post-communist leaders showed up in Tbilisi for the rally.

And you've got the great video on the website, but we haven't seen it here in America and there's not much reports of the post-communist countries stepping up and standing alongside Georgia. I wonder if you can tell us a bit more about that. I received

an e-mail just yesterday that the Romanian Supreme Council of National Defense has voted to send aid to Georgia as well. What other measures are you hearing about?

MR. GEDMIN: Bridgett, thank you. And maybe, first – yeah, Marina. Go ahead, please.

MS. VASHAMADZE: No, no, no, no. Please. (Chuckles.)

MR. GEDMIN: Pardon me. I was going to ask perhaps, if you don't mind, Marina, to go to Daniel first.

Bridget, thank you. We thought that it was quite extraordinary, and displayed this video on our Internet site, the five presidents of Ukraine, Poland, the Baltic countries showing up so promptly in a sign of – gesture of solidarity in Tbilisi. But Daniel, in Europe and the United States, that seems to be a somewhat neglected image or perhaps, unappreciated. Is that possible?

MR. KIMMAGE: Well, I think if you look at, say, mainstream television coverage in the States, that most of it has predictably focused on Washington, Brussels, Moscow. There's a little bit less, simply, awareness of the fact that there are new players. You know, it takes the media a very long time to adjust to new narratives, to the fact that the Ukrainian president was there, that the Baltic nations were there. It hasn't filtered through quite to the same extent, but this is also – when I was talking about internationalization, I think it's very important that this be put at the center of an agenda; not simply to fly in and out, but to be a focus of ongoing concern and involvement that will certainly include the former Soviet countries, members of the so-called new Europe, who have responded very strongly to this and for whom it is clearly an issue of much greater visceral concern than the Western Europeans.

MR. GEDMIN: Daniel, there is solidarity, the leaders and representatives of Central and East European countries. When they ban together, does that serve as a kind of deterrent to Moscow, or does that provide or is seen as some kind of provocation to the Kremlin?

MR. KIMMAGE: You know, I think that actually remains to be seen. It's too early to say what will act as a deterrent and what will act like a red flag to a bull here. That's hard to say. But I think that in the context of formulating a coordinated European and Western response that the countries from Eastern Europe can really act as the conscience of Europe, and a very powerful voice for continued involvement and commitment. So one can hope, in terms of a deterrent, but for now they can simply be a very powerful voice and an engine.

MR. GEDMIN: Thank you. Martins, let's take another from Washington, please.

Q: Al Millikin, American Independent Writers. How are other parts of the world viewing the timing of how these events have transpired? Was there a deliberate attempt to make this invasion and crisis at a time when the world's eyes were focused on the Olympics and China?

MR. GEDMIN: Daniel, would you take that, please?

MR. KIMMAGE: Sure. You know, I will be honest and say that it is not entirely clear to me what the Georgian leadership was thinking when they began a large military operation, certainly in response to provocations. But it's not – Moscow's logic in responding was certainly clear. It's not clear to me why, in the face of buildup and some indications this was very dangerous, why the response took place – why that response was so forceful on the Georgian side. And I think the timing is obvious. I think that everyone was hoping to accomplish certain aims while the Olympics were opening, you know. It's going to take investigation and we'll only know later, maybe, if we know at all, who was hoping for what. But I think that the timing is certainly not accidental. I mean, that seems relatively clear to me.

MR. GEDMIN: Marina, can I go back to you in Tbilisi?

MS. VASHAKMADZE: Yes, please.

MR. GEDMIN: Marina, in the turmoil and the midst of this war, are people at all thinking about the Olympics? You know, international television coverage makes a lot anytime the Georgians are involved or the Georgians and Russians in judo the other day. Is that on people's minds? Do people have time for that sort of thing?

MS. VASHAKMADZE: Yes, that's a very interesting question. You know, of course not; in general not. And I mean not – I mean, Georgians love sports and especially during the – they really were preparing for that, but the war. But I would say, you know, everybody was all pity-pity; I mean, this time we have no possibility to watch TV, plus I would say that the interior regions, they have no, you know, information. I mean, the transmissions are damaged and so on.

But you know, David would tell you better about that, but when we have girls – I mean, first girls in Olympics. You know, this was like, oh, you know, like symbolic hope, because you know, when every day you are depressed, something really bad, bad, bad happens and you don't know what you're getting tomorrow, and then you're the victory, you are the winner in something. So that brings the hope. And of course, this was special in Georgia and yeah, everybody was sharing, you know, this happiness. But everybody was saying again that – how fortunately it's going to be a different time; everything will happen in a different way.

MR. GEDMIN: Thank you. David?

MR. KAKABADZE: I would like to add something here. It was – it happened on August the 13th, just the day before yesterday, when Georgia won two gold medals, one after the other, on that very day. It was the first day of mourning in Georgia, by the way. And I just wanted to tell you about the interview which we recorded with the Olympic champion in judo, who we were tempted to ask – he defeated the semifinal the Russian guy, and we were tempted to ask, as journalists, you know, we just couldn't avoid that, whether he had some bad feelings to that guy when he was going out on the floor and if this played a role in – because he was really – in two minutes, he finished that guy. So I mean, it was really something very impressive.

So now I'm speaking as a former sports reporter. (Laughter.) So we just asked him this question and you know, he was so decent in his answer. He didn't touch upon this issue at all. He said I am happy, I want gold, and I, at least in these hard times of war, I made something to make my people happy. And this was – I was very happy about this answer.

MR. GEDMIN: David, thank you. Martins, back to Washington for the next question.

Q: My name is Nancy Cochran. I would like to hear any of you really kind of articulate what's the difference between the Kosovo situation and South Ossetia and Abkhazia. The U.S. policy in general is pretty supportive of Kosovo's independence. We generally seem to think it was the right thing. Yet, at the same time, we're talking almost unanimously about the need for territorial integrity in Georgia. What do you see as the difference?

MR. GEDMIN: Daniel, would you take that, please?

MR. KIMMAGE: This is a tough question, I'll be honest. And speaking as an analyst, I'll say here that you really have two almost diametrically opposed views. I mean, I was at a briefing yesterday where someone said that these are absolutely different situations because in Kosovo, you had a country that was occupying a territory where the international community felt that atrocities were being committed and moved in to put a stop to that. In here, you have a separatist region that is supported from the outside. I will be honest and come down neutrally on this. What I will say, though, is that the Russian side is absolutely convinced there is a parallel. They are acting on it and they are making that the fulcrum of their policy and domestically, that argument is not questioned in Russia. It is clearly supported.

So the only thing I will say is – and I was not as supportive of some of the West's moves on Kosovo as others – that I think this was predictable, that no matter what conclusion is reached in Europe or the United States, that it was predictable, that within Russia, number one, it would be viewed this way and number two, that it could be used as a pretext for taking action on some of these conflicts. So if my colleagues disagree, I pass it to them, but that's how I see that.

MR. GEDMIN: Martins, if it's very brief – we're running out of time, I fear – take one quick question from Washington, please.

Q: Margaret Ryan from Clean Skies TV News again. Georgia has become very important as a transit for pipelines and plans for pipelines coming in from the east, bringing oil and gas into the west. What do you see as the effects, if any, of this Russian invasion on the plans and operations there?

MR. GEDMIN: David, would you take that?

MR. KIMMAGE: Sure. I mean, this is very clearly calculated –

MR. KAKABADZE: I think that Daniel is the right person to answer this. (Chuckles.)

MR. GEDMIN: Sorry, I'll start with you Daniel, please.

MR. KIMMAGE: Sure. I mean, I think this is very clearly calculated as a part of Russia's policy to remain sort of the energy hegemon in Eurasia. I mean, to put it in as much of a nutshell as I can, a great deal of Russia's current wealth derives from exports of natural gas to Europe. And Russia's own gas deposits have been declining a bit recently and they have chosen – rather than investing billions in the development of new gas deposits they're trying to buy gas in Central Asia and ship it to Europe. So it's very important for them to control the export routes and this is a part of it. At the very least, instability in the Caucasus makes it very unlikely that any Western consortium is going to invest money in new projects; at the most, Russian territorial control simply puts them in control. So I would say that this may or may not be the primary motivation, but certainly maintaining Russia's role as an energy, 21st century energy superpower depends on their controlling the export routes in that region. So that's very clearly a part of this.

MR. GEDMIN: David, to add very briefly, please.

MR. KAKABADZE: Very briefly. You have to take into account that this is the only pipeline which bypasses Russia and pumps the Caspian oil to the world markets, and this is a very important point.

MR. GEDMIN: I would like to say thank you on behalf of all our colleagues, the C-SPAN audience and the Washington office. I'm Jeff Gedmin, president of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. Marina, thank you for the work you're doing in Tbilisi and best to your colleagues. David, here in Prague, and then Daniel Kimmage and Martins in Washington, thank you for being with us today.

MS. VASHAKMADZE: Thank you.

MR. GEDMIN: We're all done.

(END)