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VICE PRESIDENT MIKE PENCE'S VISIT WITH GOVERNMENT OF GEORGIA

July 31-August 1, 2017



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Transcript of the Press Conference of Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili and US Vice President Mike Pence

PM Kvirikashvili:

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to host in Georgia Mr. Mike Pence, who is not only the Vice President of our country's key strategic partner, the United States of America, but also a great friend whom Georgia has made in such a short period. It is especially exciting that he is visiting Georgia in the company of his spouse.

After our brief introductory meeting in Munich, I was honored to hold meetings in Washington, at the invitation of the Vice President, and today we continue our dialogue in Tbilisi.

Mr. Vice President, your visit very shortly after taking office bears witness to your and President Trump's great desire to deepen your strategic partnership and friendship with Georgia, for which I am very grateful to you.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of our diplomatic relations. Throughout this time, America has played a vital role on our country's path toward democratic and economic development, safeguarding Georgia's sovereignty, and NATO membership.

Thanks to your assistance, today Georgia is neither a Soviet nor post-Soviet country. Today we are an EU associated European democracy. Together with the Americans, we are proudly standing guard protecting global security and making our contribution to regional stability.

The Georgian nation deeply appreciates the American people's friendship, solidarity, and strong support.

Mr. Vice President, today we discussed our strategic partnership further in depth. First, I would like to single out and welcome our defense and security cooperation. Your meeting with Georgian and American service members participating in the Noble Partner exercises is an unmistakable demonstration of the strong US support for spurring our country's sovereignty and integration into NATO alike.

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This year, we adopted the Joint Action Plan that ensures enhancing Georgia's resilience, which is so crucially important for maintaining the stability and sustainability of Georgia and the region.

The United States of America has provided Georgia with significant financial assistance over these 25 years, and today we are happy to be an increasingly attractive country for American businesses. Today we offer one of the best business environments, extremely low corruption and red-tape rates, and equally low taxes, which is the best opportunity for American businesses to benefit.

Our goal is to put in place the best platform in the region suitable for American business interests. Notably, American companies are taking interest in engaging in large-scale regional infrastructural projects implemented in our country. Along with the Conti Group joining the Anaklia Deep Sea Port Consortium, we welcome the signing of the document on cooperation between the Anaklia Deep Sea Port Consortium and SSA Marine, one of the leading American port operators in the world. According to this document, the SSA Marine will operate the container terminal and invest in this most valuable project in the country today. The foregoing reaffirms the growing interest of American businesses and our country's immense potential for becoming the regional hub.

In the past 25 years, we have implemented numerous energy projects in cooperation with the United States. These projects ensure sustainable Euro-Atlantic energy security, and we are committed to continuing our cooperation in this direction as well.

We are a partner ready for high-level trade and investment relations with the USA based on mutual economic benefits.

Georgia is America's important partner in the region, which, among others, stems from our shared values, such as democracy and human rights. America has played an important role in the building of our democratic institutions. Our democratic development, for its part, is a precondition for developing Georgia as a sustainable and stable state that ensures the protection of the rights of every citizen and preserves our cultural uniqueness.

US support is vital in peaceful resolution of Georgia-Russia conflict. We deeply appreciate the US strong and unwavering stance on Georgia's territorial integrity. The decisions made by President Trump, you personally, Mr. Vice President, and the new Administration and the Congress on Georgia's occupied territories have proved unprecedented.

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Today we discussed the serious challenges facing our country as a result of occupation. The US plays a tremendous role in the Geneva International Discussions format. Importantly, through high-level engagement, particular decisions must be sought for ensuring the de-occupation of and security in Georgia's territories, and for political conflict resolution.

In conclusion, I would like to reaffirm that Georgia has always been and will always be by the US' side when it comes to any challenge or threat facing the world. Our strategic partnership focuses equally on strengthening security in Georgia, regionally, and worldwide, on promoting peaceful and democratic development.

Once again, I emphasize the importance of this visit and its outcomes. We appreciate the fact that, despite more than one challenge in different parts of the world, the Vice President is visiting Georgia as part of his first European trip.

I am also thankful to our American colleagues for visiting Georgia and their special contribution to deepening our bilateral cooperation.

I am convinced that our joint efforts will further deepen our strategic partnership. At the same time, we are eager to introduce the Vice President, his spouse, and the American guests to Georgia's culture and historical heritage as the pride and joy of the Georgian nation.

Thank you.

VP Pence:

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili thank you so much for those words and for the hospitality you shown me and my family. It was an honor to welcome you to the White House just a few short months ago. And now it is my honor to be welcomed by you to the beautiful and storied nation of Georgia.

The President of the United States of America, President Donald Trump sent me here with a simple message for you and for the people of Georgia: we are with you; we stand with you; we are proud of our friendship and strategic partnership with the nation and the people of Georgia. In a word, I am here to say: America first does not mean America alone. And America stands with Georgia.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the US diplomatic relationship with Georgia. Yet, this is a nation whose roots stretch back to the amiss of history. Sitting at the crossroads of

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empires and civilizations, where East meets West, where North meets South; Georgia has fostered your own language, your own traditions, your own identity over the millennia. Today the people of Georgia are renowned the world over for your vibrant culture, which, my wife and I enjoyed last night at our first super dinner featuring Georgian cuisine, and a lot of it and traditional song and dance from Abkhazia, South Ossetia and all across Georgia.

We have also been deeply inspired by the rich heritage of faith and my wife and I look forward to visiting the historic Sioni Cathedral and meeting the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church this afternoon. While this may be my first visit to this nation, the enduring courage and spirit of Georgian people have long inspired me. It was only a generation ago that Georgia was still imprisoned in then-Soviet Union. When that brutal regime collapsed, you reclaimed your independence and your freedom. You reached out our hand of friendship to Europe and United States of America and we were proud to reach back.

Today, I commended the Prime Minister for Georgia's democratic development, which has brought Georgia closer to unity with Europe and membership in North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Further progress on the goals that the Prime Minister has set will bring Georgia even closer and NATO even closer to your grasp and it will strengthen the bond between our nations.

Now, nowhere is the bond between our two nations stronger than in our shared effort to promote security and stability across the wider world. Georgia is the key strategic partner of the US. Since 2004, thousands of Georgians have served shoulder to shoulder with Americans in Kosovo, in Iraq and in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan alone, I say with grateful heart, Georgia has provided more troops on a per capita basis than any other country in the world. And 31 brave Georgian soldiers have given their lives for the cause of freedom. American people remember and mourn the sacrifice of your countrymen. They are heroes, all and they and their families will be enshrined in the hearts of American people forever. Later today I will meet with troops participating in the exercise Noble Partner. This initiative has brought together the armed forces of the US, Georgia and many other nations to train together and strengthen Georgia's ability to defend itself. It is only one of many examples of the US' commitment to Georgia's security.

President Trump and I stand by the 2008 NATO Bucharest statement, which made it clear that Georgia will one day become a member of NATO. As I expressed to the Prime Minister, it is heartening to see that Georgia already exceeds the NATO's goal of spending 2 % of its GDP on its national defense. But as we all know, Georgia's investment in defense is an

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From: Bethany Bassett
Sent: Thursday, August 03, 2017 3:49 PM
To: 'mark.iozzi@mail.house.gov'
Subject: Vice President trip to Georgia

Hi Mark-

Hope you are well. We do some work with the Government of Georgia and thought you might be interested in material covering Vice President Pence's recent trip to Georgia.

Let me know if you need anything else.

Thanks much-

Bethany

This material is distributed by Rasky Partners on behalf of the Government of Georgia. Additional information is available at the Department of Justice, Washington, DC.

Bethany M. Bassett
Senior Vice President
Rasky Partners, Inc.
D: 202 530 7701
C: 617 458 1302
www.rasky.com

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investment born of necessity. At this very moment, just 40 miles from where we stand, Russian tanks stand on occupied territories at South Ossetia. Today, Russia continues to occupy one fifth of Georgian territory. So to be clear, the United States of America strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgian soil. The United States support Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders. Under President Trump the United States will reject any claim, at any time, by any nation that undermines this enduring principle. President Trump has called on Russia to seize its destabilizing activities. My purpose here is to reinforce that message to the people of Georgia.

In sign of our commitment President Trump will sign very soon legislation to solid and codify the United States' sanctions against Russia. As always, our country prefers a constructive relationship with Russia, based on cooperation and common interests, but President and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia: a better relationship, lifting of sanctions, will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place. We hope for better days and we hope for better relations with Russia. But the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow, I can assure you, will not deter the United States' commitment to our security, that of our allies and freedom loving nations around the world, like Georgia. The US will continue to work with Georgia to reduce your vulnerabilities and counter Russian aggression and so, too will we work with Georgia to deepen our ties of commerce of which the Prime Minister just spoke.

The United States has a keen interest in expanding our trade and investment relationship with Georgia. And your ongoing reforms Mr. Prime Minister have clearly demonstrated your openness and commitment to the stronger commercial partnership with the west. Today I thank the Prime Minister for his leadership focused on bringing greater economic opportunity to all of Georgian citizens. The Anaklia Deep Sea Port shows the potential of a stronger bilateral relationship between our nations. American companies are investing alongside with Georgian counterparts in this multibillion-dollar project. As we look toward the future of our two nations have untold opportunities to contribute even more to each other's prosperity. The US has stood with Georgia for quarter century and under president Trump we will continue to stand with you as partners, as friends and one day we will stand together as allies. Georgia's future is in the west and as the people of Georgia have long declared, our strength is now and always will be in our unity. So thank you Mr. Prime Minister, thank you for your hospitality here today and thank you for the strong leadership that you provide for this country. We look forward to working with you for the prosperity and the security of the people of Georgia and of our great nation.

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Q: Ashley Parker from the Washington Post. Mr. Vice President, in light of Russia's retaliation against sanctions, as well as Russia sending 100,000 troops to the eastern edge of NATO territory to drill, do you truly believe that better relationship that you and President Trump want with Russia is possible? And if things continue in this direction, can we be headed toward another cold war?

Mr. Prime Minister, you know better than anyone how real the threat of Russian aggression is. The Vice President just said that the US supports Georgia's aspirations into NATO, but what concrete assurances do you have that the US will defend you should Russia attack, as President Putin threatened?

VP Pence:

Thank you for your question. President Trump sent me on this journey to send a very clear message to the Baltic States, to the people of Georgia, and before the end of the day, Montenegro that the United States of America will stand with freedom-loving nations around the world. And that we will do so as Mr. President has said, not merely with words, but with actions. The presence of American forces in Poland, the presence of British forces—with whom I met—in Estonia, at the gathering yesterday, all give material evidence of the commitment of NATO in that region to live up to our Article 5 obligations. The current Russian exercises, which news reports today suggest will move up to 100,000 Russian troops into Belarus, is simply a confirmation of the importance of clarity within the NATO partnership.

President Trump and I believe that better relations with Russia may be possible. But as the President has said, we will see. But negotiations between parties always begin with the recognition of and respect for the position of each party. And with the sanctions President Trump will sign this week, codifying sanction that have been in place by the United States, our country is sending a very clear message and calling on our European allies to join in a very clear message that we mean what we say and say what we mean; that Russia's destabilizing activities in Ukraine, their support for rogue regimes like Iran, Syria, and North Korea, their posture has to change. But we believe by being clear and being strong that we can pursue a dialogue based on mutual understanding. President Trump holds the view that it has been a lack of clarity in the commitment by the US that has created much of the instability in the world today. When, in the past, America has spoken of red lines and not followed through on red lines. Many argue that it emboldened others to act in ways that they would not have. So President Trump believes that we can have peace through strength,

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and strong and clear positions, we believe, can create the foundation where authentic dialogue that may, we hope, result in better relations and in the resolution of long-standing disputes in Ukraine, Georgia, and other areas of the world.

PM Kvirikashvili:

Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Vice President, and thank you for the question. I think that a very clear and string message—we are with you!—tells everything. Georgia faces endless provocations daily along the occupation line, facing challenges of borderization, capturing, kidnapping of ethnic Georgians, and violating basic human rights of ethnic Georgians residing on the occupied territories. But the response to that is even more resolve and consistency, and dedication to the goals we set for ourselves. And integration into NATO is a process which matters for Georgia. Of course, the final goal to join NATO is set by the Georgian population, and we are following this very difficult path of reforming Georgia's military system and developing institutional democracy in Georgia. Believe me, through the consistency and dedication, clearness of our messages, and unity with our important strategic partners, it will be able for Georgia to reach this very important goal, to ensure long-term stability, and it is possible. We Georgians believe that.

Q: Reuters news agency, Margarita Antidze. Mr. Vice-President, what are the red lines Washington's red lines on Russia especially in regard with Georgia. And also you said in Estonia that in case of Russia's aggression against NATO alliance, members of the alliance, the US will intervene. What would be your reaction in case of Russia's aggression against Georgia, against NATO's partners? Thank you very much. Mr. Prime Minister do we have enough patience to wait NATO's partnership? We are waiting, you are waiting, and Georgia is waiting for a while? Thank you.

VP Pence:

Thank you for the question. Well, the essence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is a mutual defense. We agree that attack on one is an attack on all. What President wanted me to communicate as I traveled to the NATO countries, as later today I will visit the newest member of NATO is that the US says what it means and means what it says and we will live

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Q&A

Q: Greetings. I am Salome Kokiashvili, Public Broadcaster of Georgia. Mr. Vice President, you said during your visit to the Baltic States that the US always stands strong for freedom. In addition, the US has always been a staunch supporter of Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Given the continuous occupation of Georgia's regions—and we see that the fundamental rights of those living in these territories, of IDPs, are being violated on a daily basis—what steps Georgia can take together with its partners to deal with these problems?

VP Pence:

Well, as I said, the United States of America stands strong for the territorial integrity of Georgia. We have stood on that principle since the time that Russian tanks overtook Abkhazia and Ossetia in 2008. And we will continue to stand strong. The joint military operations that are taking place today, we hope, are a visible sign of our commitment to Georgia's sovereignty and to her internationally recognized borders.

We also believe that, in addition to security partnership, the stronger and more prosperous Georgia will lead to the restoration of a whole and free Georgia. So the United States will continue to look for ways where we can strengthen Georgia not only from the standpoint of its defense and security, but where we can strengthen Georgia economically, creating jobs and opportunity, and prosperity. Strengthening the hand of Georgia so that, one day, Georgia can once again celebrate its historical territorial integrity intact.

PM Kvirikashvili:

Thank you very much for the question. I would like to thank Mr. Vice President for his very clear message and the strong support Georgia enjoys from the US.

As mentioned earlier, our territorial integrity is a deep-rooted problem that requires a consistent approach in terms of Georgia's stability and economic and democratic development, on one hand, and Georgia's crucial defense and security partnership, on the other. I would like to reaffirm that this conflict can be resolved, and territorial integrity can be restored, only peacefully, consistently, through our economic development and with strong support from our strategic partners, especially from the US. Thank you.

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up our obligation under article 5. With regard to Georgia, we strongly support Georgia's aspiration to become a member of NATO and we will continue to work closely with this Prime Minister and the Government of Georgia broadly to advance the policies that will facilitate becoming a NATO member. We believe that Georgia has made an extraordinary progress not in just last twenty five years but over the last five years. There has been significant progress that we believe will strengthen the application for NATO membership. But with regard to the Russian aggression, which took place in 2008 which has... as we stand here today Russian tanks are parked on Georgian soil forty miles from where we stand. The US will continue to be unambiguous in our commitment to the territorial integrity of Georgia. We will stand for a strong and a whole Georgia, we will continue to provide support for the defense and security of Georgia and we will continue to seek a peaceful resolution that will reestablished internationally recognized borders of this nation.

PM Kvirikashvili:

Thank you Mr. Vice President. Thank you for the question. You said it is about patience, yes, it is about strategic patience, I would say, to stay consistent on the road where we are. Today we have all practical tools to advance toward NATO membership. We have substantial package, we are implementing it very successfully; we have Georgia Defense Readiness Programme jointly with the US, which is complementary to the Substantial Package; and it was said many times by the leaders of our strategic partners, the US first, of course and NATO leadership that no other country has a say to block the membership of Georgia to NATO. It is only NATO members and applicant countries, who decide about their future in NATO. And we have made our own decision. Thank you.

Q: Thank you, it is Peter Nicholas of the Wall Street Journal. Mr. Vice President, you have talked about the new Russian sanction's bill as an example of the US resolve in the face of Russian aggression. But did not the Trump's White House oppose this bill fearing that this bill relinquishes Presidential authority to Congress. What happened in this process that caused the White House to sign on?

Mr. Prime Minister, the US Intelligence community has concluded that Russia tried to interfere in our Presidential election. Living so close to Russia, having dealt with Russian provocations, do you have any advice to the US in how to cope with Russian efforts to intervene in our elections and influence voters in our country?

VP Pence:

Thank you, Peter, thank you. President Trump will sign the Russian sanctions bill soon. Our administration had concerns about this legislation that emerged from the US Senate. The concern was that the bill did not include traditional flexibility that is afforded to the State

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Department or any administration in the conduct of American foreign policy. I am pleased to report that the bill improved significantly as it moved through the House of Representatives and through the legislative process. And this legislation, we believe, will not only codify current Russian sanctions that our administration has upheld, but will also strengthen those sanctions, even while giving the President of the United States and our State Department the ability and a flexibility to be able to administer American foreign policy as appropriate. Let me say that in signing these sanctions, our President and our Congress are speaking in a unified voice that those matters that the President spoke about so eloquently in Warsaw, but Russian destabilizing activities, Russia's efforts to support rogue regimes, has to change. For there to be a change in our relationship with Russia, Russia has to change its behavior. By these sanctions, by my presence here, by the President's powerful affirmation of the objectives and the values of our alliance in the west our hope is for that we will move toward better relations and a better future and a more peaceful world as a result.

PM Kvirikashvili:

Thank you. First of all, let me mention once again how important is strong America for Georgia. We are genuinely interested in the strength of the United States; we want to see the US united, coping with global challenges. I do not think that Georgia is in a position to judge about Russian interference. With our excellent intelligence capabilities, we were not able to detect any interference and we think that American nation has made its decision to elect the President and of course we look for more partnership with the current administration of the US.

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Remarks by the Vice President to Noble Partner Participants

August 1, 2017

Tbilisi International Airport

Tbilisi, Georgia

THE VICE PRESIDENT: President Margvelashvili, Prime Minister Kvrikashvili, Minister Izoria, General Chachibaya, members of the armed forces of the United States of America and Georgia, to all our distinguished guests, it is an honor to join you here today to address the men and women of Exercise Noble Partner. (Applause.)

And to all of you, I bring greetings from the leader of the free world, the President of the United States of America -- President Donald Trump. (Applause.)

The President sent me here to this place, at this time simply to thank all -- thank you for stepping up to serve your nations, for standing in the gap on this great frontier -- united in the defense of freedom.

You are the best of us -- heroes all.

And you are here, the Americans among you so far away from home, because the United States and Georgia are bound together by the abiding oath of friendship and by our shared commitment to the cause of freedom.

Under President Trump, the policy of the United States is to place the security and the prosperity of America first. But as the President has made clear, and as our presence here today demonstrates, America First does not mean America alone.

We are here today, with the steadfast assurance of the United States of America to tell our friends in Georgia: We are with you. (Applause.)

We stand with the nation and the people of Georgia, and we will stand with you as you pursue membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. And the United States of America stands with Georgia in defense of what President Trump in Warsaw called "the priceless ties that bind us together as nations, as allies, and as a civilization." And those ties are freedom, democracy, and the rule of law.

The roots of the nation and people of Georgia stretch back into the mists of history. Sitting here at the crossroads of empires and civilizations -- where East meets West, where North meets South -- Georgia has fostered a vibrant culture and a rich heritage of faith.

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And through all the millennia, none have been able to deprive you of your identity. The people and culture of Georgia have stood the test of time. (Applause.)

It was only a generation ago that Georgia was still imprisoned inside the Soviet Union. That Communist regime personified everything that free peoples reject, and it sought to crush you in its heartless, inhuman embrace. The Soviet Union sought to eradicate your history -- even the very essence of who you are, the cherished ties of culture and faith.

But when the Soviet Union collapsed, Georgia reclaimed its liberty. You reached out your hand in friendship to the free nations of Europe and the United States, and the United States of America proudly reached back. (Applause.)

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the diplomatic relations between the United States and Georgia, and we marvel at your progress -- the progress you've made since you regained your independence. Georgia's future is in the West.

For many years, Georgia has been a key strategic partner of the United States. Since 2004, thousands of brave Georgians have served with their American brothers-and-sisters-in-arms in Kosovo, in Iraq, and in Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan alone, Georgia has provided more troops on a per-capita basis than any other country in the world. (Applause.)

And today we remember 31 Georgian soldiers who've given their lives in the cause of freedom in that land. The American people remember their sacrifice and their families on this day. They are heroes. And let me assure you and their families that they will be enshrined in the hearts of the American people forever.

The strategic partnership between the United States and Georgia is stronger now than ever before, and this joint exercise is a tangible sign of our commitment to each other to make it stronger still.

Exercise Noble Partner brings together the Armed Forces of the United States, of Georgia, and many other nations to train together and execute complex operations.

Noble Partner will strengthen Georgia's ability to defend itself in the years ahead. It will prepare Georgian soldiers to join NATO's Response Force in the future.

This exercise is a testament to your professionalism, to the high value that the United States and our

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NATO allies place on Georgia's security. But our commitment to your security doesn't stop there.

American advisors will continue to work alongside your leaders to improve Georgia's military readiness. And along with all our NATO allies, the United States is contributing to the Substantial Package for Georgia, to strengthen Georgia's resilience, and to bring Georgia ever closer to your goal of membership in NATO. (Applause.)

And to be clear, President Trump and the United States stand firmly behind the 2008 NATO Bucharest statement, which made it clear that Georgia will someday become a member of the most successful military alliance in the history of the world. (Applause.)

Georgia has already taken important steps toward this goal -- especially in terms of security. Georgia has long exceeded NATO's own goal of spending 2 percent of gross domestic product on defense. Your commitment is a model for many current NATO members, many of which have not fulfilled their obligations to our common defense. And so I want to congratulate and thank Georgia for your strong commitment and your strong example of national leadership on national defense. (Applause.)

And to those here in the uniform of the United States, be assured your Commander-in-Chief is busy making the strongest fighting force in the history of the world stronger still.

As President Trump said just a few days ago, in his words, "American might is second to none -- and we're getting bigger, and better, and stronger every day."

The President has already signed the largest increase in military spending in nearly 10 years. And we're calling on Congress to pass one of the largest investments in defense since the days of the Cold War.

Our investments in our defense, like Georgia's, are borne of necessity. The rise of adversaries new and old requires renewed strength and renewed resolve by all who cherish freedom.

We stand here today in the gap, on a frontline of freedom, a frontline compromised by Russian aggression nearly a decade ago. At this very moment, just 40 miles from where we stand, Russian tanks sit on Georgian land in South Ossetia. Today, Russia continues to occupy one-fifth of Georgian territory.

The United States strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgia's soil. (Applause.)

Be assured: The United States will continue to support Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity

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within its internationally recognized borders.

The United States of America, under President Donald Trump, will reject any claim, at any time, by any nation that undermines this enduring principle.

To that end, President Trump has called on Russia recently, here and elsewhere, to "cease its destabilizing activities," and we will continue to work with Georgia to reduce your vulnerabilities and counter potential Russian aggression.

And in a further sign of our commitment, very soon, President Trump will sign legislation to strengthen and codify the United States' sanctions against Russia.

The United States prefers a constructive relationship with Russia based on mutual cooperation and common interests. But the President and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia -- a better relationship, the lifting of sanctions will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused the sanctions to be imposed in the first place. And not before. (Applause.)

We hope for better days, for better relations with Russia, but the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow I can assure you will not deter this President or the commitment of the United States to our security, that of our allies, and freedom-loving nations around the world like the freedom-loving people of Georgia.
The United States has stood with Georgia since your independence, and under President Trump, we will continue to stand shoulder-to-shoulder and work hand-in-hand with you to fortify your defense, to strengthen your democracy, and to deepen your ties of friendship with Europe and the United States.

We stand with you because we know the wisdom of that ancient Georgian saying there is -- "strength is in unity." (Applause.)

So in unity, together, we will be strong in arms. In unity, together, we will be strong in resolve. And in unity, together, we will be strong in faith -- faith in freedom, and faith in Him from whom our freedom springs.

Earlier today, my wife and I visited the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church at the Sioni Cathedral; that soaring temple, whose foundations stretch back more than 1,500 years, is deeply inspiring. It's a symbol of the ancient faith that fills this land.

As I walked beneath its painted dome, I could not help but think of an ancient truth from the sacred scriptures, one which we'd do well to reflect on in these challenging times. As we train, as we

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prepare, as we promote commerce and mutual prosperity, we do well to remember those words: "Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."

Today, we recommit ourselves to the cause of security, prosperity, and liberty for the people of Georgia. We renew our pledge to stand together in unity as partners and as friends, and to one day stand together as allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (Applause.)

And we do so with confidence and with faith -- faith in the courage of all of you who wear the uniform, faith and confidence in the strength and resilience of the proud people of this ancient land, confident in the leadership of our Commander-in-Chief, President Donald Trump, and your leadership in Georgia, and with faith in the blessings and protection of God above, I know the United States and Georgia will embrace a future of freedom in unity together.

Thank you. God bless you. God bless Georgia. And God bless the United States of America. (Applause.)

END

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PRESS RELEASE: Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and U.S. Vice President Mike Pence Agree to Further Enhance Georgia-US Security and Economic Cooperation

Tbilisi, 1st August 2017 – Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili today met with United States Vice President Mike Pence to discuss expanding future security and economic cooperation between Georgia and the U.S. Last night, Kvirikashvili hosted Vice President Pence and the American delegation for dinner in Tbilisi.

"Vice President Pence's visit so shortly after taking office bears witness to his and President Trump's great desire to deepen the strategic partnership and friendship with Georgia, for which I am very grateful," stated Prime Minister Kvirikashvili. "The Georgian nation deeply appreciates the American people's friendship, solidarity, and strong support."

During their meeting, Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and Vice President Pence discussed the U.S.-Georgian security partnership in depth. Following the meeting, the Vice President met with Georgian and U.S. soldiers participating in the Noble Partner exercise, a U.S. Army-led exercise to support the training, evaluation and eventual certification of Georgia's second light infantry company contribution to the NATO Response Force (NRF).

"The Vice President's meeting with Georgian and American service members participating in the Noble Partner exercises is an unmistakable demonstration of the strong U.S. support for spurring our country's sovereignty and integration into NATO," affirmed Prime Minister Kvirikashvili. "The special bonds and extraordinary sacrifices of our two militaries -- currently fighting extremism together -- is something to behold. Georgia and the U.S. are truly brothers in arms."

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and Vice President Pence also held productive discussions about furthering the economic and trade partnership between Georgia and the U.S. Georgia's Anaklia Deep Sea Port on the Black Sea, which will become a focal point in trade between Europe and Asia, is being built by an American-Georgian consortium, led by U.S. company Conti. SSA Marine, another U.S. company, will operate it.

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During the visit, Vice President Pence also reaffirmed U.S. support for continued progress toward Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

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For more information contact:

Levan Karumidze

Media Adviser

Department of Public Relations

Administration of the Government of Georgia

Phone: +995 599 969610

E-mail: lkarumidze@geo.gov.ge ; levankarumi@gmail.com

Address: 7, Ingorokva str. 0114 Tbilisi, Georgia

www.government.gov.ge

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Vice President Pence Trip to Georgia Coverage Report for July 31, 2017



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"We spoke about it today, but we didn't talk about a date or time," Ratas told state broadcaster ERR.

The U.S. Patriot defense system is a mobile, ground-based system designed to intercept missiles and warplanes.

Ratas also said the two leaders talked about the upcoming Russian military maneuvers planned for near the Estonian border, "and how Estonia, the United States, and NATO should monitor them and exchange information."

'Very Clear' Message

Estonian Foreign Minister Sven Mikser told Current Time TV, the Russian-language network run by RFE/RL in cooperation with Voice of America (VOA), that Pence's visit was "an extremely important event."

"The message from the vice president was very clear: The U.S. stands by all its allied obligations and commitments, and the U.S. is truly committed to being there for us, for all of its NATO allies," Mikser said.

Pence planted an English oak before departing Tallinn aboard Air Force Two en route to Georgia's capital, Tbilisi, where he was greeted at the airport by Prime Minister Giorgi Kvrikashvili later on July 31.

Officials said Pence will highlight U.S. support for the Caucasus nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity before continuing on to Montenegro, the newest NATO member.

Georgia, which has expressed hopes of joining the Western alliance, has seen Russian encroachment on its territory.

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili said on July 27 that Pence's visit will demonstrate that the United States continues to support Georgia in building a stronger military force.

During Pence's visit, 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the previously planned Noble Partner 2017 exercises.

Troops from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, and Armenia were taking part.

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Pence Arrives In Georgia In Bid To Reassure U.S. Allies
31 July 2017
Radio Free Europe

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence arrived in Georgia on July 31 for the second leg of his three-day trip aimed at reassuring allies in Eastern Europe in the face of what the United States calls Russia's efforts to destabilize the region.

Pence was greeted at the Tbilisi airport by Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili just hours after the U.S. vice president reaffirmed Washington's solidarity with the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders" and "undermine democracies."

"We stand with the people and nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and we always will," Pence said in Tallinn, where he met with the three Baltic presidents -- Kersti Kaljulaid, Raimonds Vejonis, and Dalia Grybauskaite, respectively.

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions, as have Georgia and the third ally on Pence's itinerary: new NATO member Montenegro.

"No threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said. "At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another."

The United States "rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation, or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies," he also said.

Article 5

Pence said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty -- the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

He also pledged that the United States would not be deterred from its goals by Moscow's demand for drastic cuts in staff levels at U.S. diplomatic facilities in Russia.

"Recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter commitment of the United States to our security, the security of our allies, and the security of freedom-loving nations around the world," he said.

After Pence began his visit to Estonia on July 30, Prime Minister Juri Ratas said the U.S. vice president raised the possibility of deploying the Patriot antimissile defense system in the country.

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"The vice president's presence here is definitely showing that this is not only about military exercises, but it is also showing unification with our values, with our foreign policy targets, and showing a clear message that we are together," Margvelashvili said.

Pence was to participate in an official dinner hosted by Kvrikashvili. State media in Georgia reported that Margvelashvili was expected to join them.

On the last stop, Pence will welcome NATO's newest member with his stop in Montenegro, whose accession to the alliance in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica, U.S. officials said.

Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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Pence to Visit Estonia, Georgia, Montenegro on NATO, Russia
By Laurie Kellman
28 July 2017
Associated Press

Vice President Mike Pence visits three countries in Russia's neighborhood beginning Monday to signal support for them and NATO while drawing a line against aggression.

Pence's trip to Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro is viewed as a follow-up to President Donald Trump's visit to Europe earlier this month. Then, Trump used stops in Poland and Germany to try to pull off a tricky balancing act of improving ties with Moscow while also presenting the U.S. as a check against Russia's moves in the region.

Pence's mission will be encouraging those countries to continue to ally with the West and resist Russia's attempts to splinter the NATO alliance.

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson have previously been dispatched to try to allay the concerns of countries near Russia that the U.S. really will stand behind NATO and support the sovereignty of non-member former Soviet republics.

The concerns stem from Trump's suggestion during the campaign that the U.S. might not defend NATO allies and his apparent desire for closer relations with Russia. Trump received criticism on his

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first European trip for passing up the chance to affirm the NATO mutual defense commitment clause known as Article 5, which frames an attack on one as an attack on all. Trump did affirm U.S. support for Article 5 on his second trip to Europe.

The vice president is expected to deliver a message of support for U.S. trade and investment with the countries while underscoring the U.S. commitment to the security of the three nations, according to senior administration officials who briefed reporters about the trip on the condition that they not be identified by name. Pence also will stress the values of freedom of speech, democracy and religious tolerance.

In Estonia, Pence is expected to highlight bilateral ties with the U.S., particularly on trade, investment and cyber issues. Pence also is expected to thank Estonian officials for their approach to "burden-sharing," diplomatic speak for agreeing to spend a full share of 2 percent of their GDP on defense, the administration officials said.

The vice president also is expected to underscore the U.S. commitment to NATO, which sees Russia as a security threat and offers protection to concerned member states near Russia's borders.

In Georgia, Pence is expected to highlight U.S. support for its sovereignty and territorial integrity, the officials said. Georgia is the only country on the trip that is not a NATO member and, like Ukraine, has seen Russian encroachment on its territory. The administration officials said the U.S. is encouraging Georgia to continue to make reforms to its judiciary and expand anti-corruption efforts.

In Montenegro, Pence will celebrate that nation as the newest NATO ally.

On Wednesday, he'll attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Podgorica, Montenegro, to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and underscore the importance of good governance, political reforms and rule of law. Also expected to attend are the leaders of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia.

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VP Pence, in the Baltics, voices support for mutual defense in NATO
By David Mardiste, Andrius Sytas
31 July 2017
Reuters

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence on Monday assured the Baltic states of U.S. support if they faced aggression from Russia, telling them that Washington firmly backs NATO's doctrine of collective defense.

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Pence's comments to the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, ahead of Russian war games on their doorstep, were clearly intended to reassure following Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine and U.S. President Donald Trump's early lukewarm support for NATO.

During a visit to NATO's Brussels headquarters in May, Trump jarred allies by not restating U.S. support for a critical portion of the alliance's charter and instead berated some members for not spending enough on defense.

Trump has since said he supports the NATO charter's Article 5, the requirement that each member of the alliance defend each other if they come under attack.

"A strong and united NATO is more necessary today than at any point since the collapse of communism a quarter-century ago and no threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said at news conference with the three Baltic presidents.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States stands firmly behind our Article 5 pledge of mutual defense. An attack on one of us is an attack on us all."

Russia is scheduled next month to hold large-scale military maneuvers with its ally Belarus. The U.S. army's top general in Europe said this month that the Zapad war games could be a "Trojan horse" resulting in military equipment being left in Belarus.

He warned that Russia continues to "seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine democracies of sovereign nations and divide the free nations of Europe, one against another".

Lithuania's President Dalia Grybauskaite told Lithuanian radio that NATO's air-policing missions would be doubled during the Russian-led Zapad exercise.

Pence is also due to visit Montenegro, the alliance's newest member, and make a stop in Georgia, an aspiring member, which fought a brief war with Russia in 2008.

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Pence: Baltic States' Greatest Threat Comes from Russian Aggression
31 July 2017
Voice of America

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence said Monday there is no larger threat to Baltic states than the "specter of aggression" by Russia, as he pledged support for NATO allies Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

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Pence met in Tallinn with the presidents of all the Baltic states — Estonia's Kersti Kaljulaid, Latvia's Raimonds Vejonis and Lithuania's Dalia Grybauskaite — and afterward summarized the U.S. position on Russia's "destabilizing" activities:

"At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine democracies of sovereign nations and divide the free nations of Europe one against another. Under President Donald Trump, the United States of America rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies."

During his public remarks in Estonia's capital, the U.S. vice president also expressed hope for improved relations with Russia. He said the Kremlin decree this week ordering most American diplomats to leave their posts in Moscow will not deter the U.S. commitment to its allies' security.

Pence praised Estonia for meeting the NATO alliance target for defense spending of at least 2 percent of its gross domestic product, and he noted Latvia and Lithuania would hit that level by the end of next year. Trump has repeatedly called on NATO members to boost defense spending.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania all have asked for tangible demonstrations of U.S. military support. Concerns about Russian expansionism have increased sharply in the Baltic region since Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine three years ago.

From Estonia, Pence traveled later Monday to Georgia, where troops from the United States and other NATO partners are conducting military exercises that began Sunday.

Welcoming him to Tbilisi, Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili said, "Vice President Pence's visit sends a strong message about the enduring strength of the relationship between Georgia and the United States."

Pence praised the Georgian people for their strong "commitment to independence and freedom." He and Kvirikashvili dined together Monday and will hold talks Tuesday.

Following his visit to Georgia, Pence's three-nation tour of Eastern Europe will conclude in Montenegro, NATO's newest member.

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Pence Says U.S. Will 'Always Stand' With Baltic Nations
31 July 2017
Radio Free Europe

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence has reaffirmed Washington's support for the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders " and "undermine democracies."

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"The message from the vice president was very clear: The U.S. stands by all its allied obligations and commitments, and the U.S. is truly committed to being there for us, for all of its NATO allies," Mikser said.

Pence planted an English oak before departing Tallinn aboard Air Force Two later on July 31, en route to Georgia's capital, Tbilisi, for the second leg of his trip.

Officials said Pence will highlight U.S. support for the Caucasus nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity before continuing on to visit the newest NATO member, Montenegro.

Georgia, which has expressed hopes of joining the Western alliance, has seen Russian encroachment on its territory.

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The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili said on July 27 that Pence's visit will demonstrate that the United States continues to support Georgia in building a stronger military force.

During Pence's visit, 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the previously planned Noble Partner 2017 exercises.

Troops from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, and Armenia were taking part.

"The vice president's presence here is definitely showing that this is not only about military exercises, but it is also showing unification with our values, with our foreign policy targets, and showing a clear message that we are together," Margvelashvili said.

Pence was due to arrive in Tbilisi in the evening of July 31 and participate in an official dinner hosted by Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvrikashvili.

On the last stop, Pence will welcome NATO's newest member with his stop in Montenegro, whose accession to the alliance in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica, U.S. officials said.

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"We stand with the people and nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and we always will," Pence said on July 31 in the Estonian capital, Tallinn, where he met with the three Baltic presidents -- Kersti Kaljulaid, Raimonds Vejonis, and Dalia Grybauskaite.

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries and other allies in Eastern Europe have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions in their respective regions.

"No threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said. "At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another."

The United States "rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation, or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies," he also said.

Pence said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty -- the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

He also pledged that the United States would not be deterred from its goals by Moscow's demand for drastic cuts in staff levels at U.S. diplomatic facilities in Russia.

"Recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter commitment of the United States to our security, the security of our allies, and the security of freedom-loving nations around the world," he said.

After Pence began his visit to Estonia on July 30, Prime Minister Juri Ratas said the U.S. vice president raised the possibility of deploying the Patriot antimissile defense system in the country.

"We spoke about it today, but we didn't talk about a date or time," Ratas told state broadcaster ERR.

The U.S. Patriot defense system is a mobile, ground-based system designed to intercept missiles and warplanes.

Ratas also said the two leaders talked about the upcoming Russian military maneuvers planned for near the Estonian border, "and how Estonia, the United States, and NATO should monitor them and exchange information."

Estonian Foreign Minister Sven Mikser told Current Time TV, the Russian-language network run by RFE/RL in cooperation with Voice of America (VOA), that Pence's visit was "an extremely important event."

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Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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Georgia begins U.S.-led military exercise a day before Vice President Pence visit
By Margarita Antidze
30 July 2017
Reuters

The Georgian army began two weeks of military exercises with the United States and other partner countries on Sunday, a day before U.S. Vice President Mike Pence visits the ex-Soviet nation.

About 2,800 soldiers from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, Armenia and Georgia were taking part in the maneuvers, with Washington dispatching an entire mechanized company including several Bradley infantry fighting vehicles and M1A2 Abrams main battle tanks.

Georgia's Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili said the drills were an important event for the South Caucasus republic.

"These exercises will help Georgia to get closer to NATO standards and to strengthen stability in the whole region," Kvirikashvili said at the opening ceremony on Sunday.

The "Noble Partner" exercises are being held in Georgia for the third time. Russian officials had not commented on the event yet, but in previous years Moscow warned that drills could destabilize the region, a charge denied by Georgian officials and U.S. diplomats.

"This exercise is not directed against any country. It's about to help Georgia to grow its capacity to interoperate in international operations," U.S. Ambassador Ian Kelly told Reuters.

Russia and Georgia fought a war in August 2008 over the breakaway Georgian region of South Ossetia. Moscow continues to garrison troops there and to support another breakaway region, Abkhazia.

The exercises were being run out of the Vaziani military base near Georgia's capital, Tbilisi.

Russian forces used to be based there until they withdrew at the start of the last decade under the terms of a European arms reduction agreement.

Pence plans to attend the drills and address participants on Tuesday.

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The United States has spoken favorably of the idea that Georgia might one day join NATO, something Russia firmly opposes.

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U.S. backing of Georgian military sends strong message to Russia: Margvelashvili
By Margarita Antidze
27 July 2017
Reuters

The United States has continued to support Georgia in building more resilient military forces, training and equipping its army, Georgian president Giorgi Margvelashvili said on Thursday.

He added that these issues would be "one of the main" topics discussed during U.S. Vice President Mike Pence's visit to the ex-Soviet country.

Margvelashvili also said the Georgian army will start two weeks of military exercises with the United States and other partner countries on Sunday, the day before Pence's visit to Tbilisi, to send an important message to Russia about their common values and political targets.

"The vice-president's presence here is definitely showing that this is not only about military exercises, but it is also showing unification with our values, with our foreign policy targets and showing a clear message that we are together," Margvelashvili told a news conference.

Russia defeated Georgia in a short war in 2008 over the breakaway Georgian region of South Ossetia, and Moscow continues to station troops there and to support another breakaway region, Abkhazia.

"This is an important message especially in the environment when (Russia's) training and exercises going on the occupied territories of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region (South Ossetia)," Margvelashvili added.

Pence plans to visit Georgia as a part of his trip to Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro.

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U.S., U.K., Ukraine, Others Begin Massive Military Drills In Georgia
30 July 2017
Radio Free Europe

Some 2,800 troops from host Georgia, the United States, and six other countries have begun a major military exercise in the South Caucasus nation.

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Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili and other leaders on July 30 said they see the event as a substantial step toward their goal of one day joining NATO.

"These exercises will help Georgia to get closer to NATO standards and to strengthen stability in the whole region," Kvirikashvili said at the opening ceremonies at the Vaziani military base near the capital, Tbilisi.

Georgia's defense minister, Levan Izoria, called the scale of exercises "unprecedented" and said they "make clear the support for Georgia by the NATO member states, especially the U.S."

U.S. officials in the past have spoken favorably toward Georgian hopes of eventually joining NATO, a move Russia vehemently opposes.

At a 2008 summit in Bucharest, NATO leaders made a formal pledge that Georgia "will become a NATO member," but alliance leaders have moved warily toward that goal in the face of Moscow's opposition.

About 1,600 U.S. troops and 800 Georgian soldiers are taking part in the two-week exercises, dubbed Noble Partner.

Troops from Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, and Armenia are also participating, with the United States deploying a mechanized company, including several Bradley infantry fighting vehicles and M1A2 Abrams battle tanks.

It is the third time the exercises have been held in Georgia, a country that has seen much-larger rival Russian encroach on its territory since its independence from the Soviet Union.

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway areas of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008, and Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

In previous years, Moscow warned that the drills could destabilize the region, a notion that Georgia and the United States have dismissed.

"This exercise is not directed against any country. It's about to help Georgia to grow its capacity to interoperate in international operations," U.S. Ambassador Ian Kelly told Reuters news agency, citing missions such as the current one in Afghanistan.

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence is scheduled to visit Georgia on July 31 after a stop in Estonia to meet with Baltic leaders also concerned about Russia's intensions in their region. He will meet with U.S. troops on August 1.

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During his stop in Tallinn, Pence said, "Our message to the Baltic states -- my message when we visit Georgia and Montenegro -- will be the same: To our allies here in Eastern Europe, we are with you, we stand with you on behalf of freedoms."

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US and Georgia hold military drills, as Russia shows off naval strength
30 July 2017
BBC

The US and Georgia have launched their biggest ever joint military exercises, as the Caucasus nation seeks to push its bid to join Nato.

US Vice-President Mike Pence will visit this week and is expected to back the plan, which Russia strongly opposes.

Georgia and Russia have had fractious relations over two breakaway republics and fought a brief war in 2008.

Russia staged its own show of force on Sunday with President Putin joining a naval display in St Petersburg.

The US-Georgia military drills, dubbed Noble Partner, involve some 1,600 US and 800 Georgian troops.

The US has also deployed M1A2 Abrams main battle tanks and M2 Bradley infantry vehicles for the exercises, which will go on until 12 August.

A number of other nations, including the UK, are involved.

Georgian Defence Minister Levan Izoria said the "unprecedented" exercises would "make clear the support for Georgia by the Nato member states, especially the US".

Although Georgia is not a member of Nato, it does voluntarily contribute to the Nato Response Force (NRF), the multinational force of land, air, navy and special operations units the alliance can deploy quickly when needed.

The Russo-Georgian War in August 2008 led to Moscow occupying the Russian-backed self-proclaimed republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Meanwhile on Sunday, President Vladimir Putin attended a show of might on Russia's annual Navy Day.

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Some 50 warships and submarines were on displayed in the Gulf of Finland and on the Neva river around St Petersburg.

He said in an address: "The navy is not only dealing with its traditional tasks but also responding with merit to new challenges, making a significant contribution to the fight against terrorism and piracy."

There were other displays around the country, and Russia also showed off its naval hardware at its Syrian base of Tartus.

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Mike Pence arrives in Estonia, kicking off Eastern Europe trip
By David Caplan
30 July 2017
ABC News

Vice President Mike Pence and second lady Karen Pence arrived in Estonia Sunday afternoon, kicking off a three-country visit of Eastern Europe.

The Pences, who left from Joint Base Andrews in Maryland Saturday night, were greeted at the Tallinn airport by U.S. ambassador to Estonia James D. Melville and Estonian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sven Mikser. The group shook hands and spoke briefly before the vice president's motorcade headed to the Pences' hotel.

"On behalf of @POTUS, arrived in Tallinn, Estonia with @SecondLady to meet w/ leaders of Baltic States on security & prosperity #VPinEurope," Pence tweeted upon his arrival.

In explaining the purpose of the trip, a senior Trump administration official told reporters last week, "This builds upon the administration's engagement. The Secretary of Defense had been there recently, and it builds upon the Vice President's trip when we addressed some of these leaders at the Munich Security Conference when he met with the three Baltic Presidents then. And he has since hosted the Prime Minister of Georgia here at the White House, as did the President. And then on Montenegro's accession into NATO, we also hosted leadership here in the White House."

The office of Estonian Prime Minister Juri Ratas said in a press release Saturday that Ratas and Pence will meet at 5:30 p.m. local time, to "discuss cooperation in defence, digital issues and cyber defence, as well as cooperation between the US and the EU in connection with the Estonia Presidency of the Council of the European Union."

Ratas said in a statement, "The contribution of the US to the security of the Baltic States and also the whole of Europe is vital, and I certainly wish to thank the Vice President for that. Besides that, we plan to speak about the Estonian digital solutions that are of interest to the US, and developing

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cooperation in cyber defence at our meeting. Another important topic that will be on the table, is the cooperation between the EU and the US."

A senior White House administration official told reporters last week that while in Estonia, Pence "will highlight our strong bilateral ties, including by trade and investment. And particularly with Estonia, successes in the cyber realm, and their current partnership on cyber issues, and their leading not only in that region, but globally."

On Thursday, Karen Pence expressed her enthusiasm for the trip, tweeting "Looking forward to our visit to Eastern Europe where I highlight my iniative, art therapy. What an honor!"

According to the second lady's office, she will tour a medical center in Tallinn, and participate in a roundtable discussion with art therapists.

The senior administration official said in Georgia, the vice president will "highlight our commitment to the U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership, our strong support Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity ... and its internationally recognized borders, and our support for Georgia and their Euro-Atlantic aspirations."

While in Georgia, Karen Pence will visit with patients of an art therapy program in Tbilisi.

On Wednesday, Pence will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Podgorica, Montenegro, to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and underscore the importance of good governance, political reforms and rule of law. Also expected to attend are the leaders of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia.

In Podgorica, Montenegro, the second lady will tour a honey farm, where she will learn about a local family's beekeeping business.

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Pence travels to Baltic states to reassure allies and send message to Russia
By Ashley Parker
31 July 2017
Washington Post

Vice President Pence touched down in Estonia on Sunday on the eve of President Trump's expected signing of legislation to impose broad sanctions against Russia, and said he came bearing a message from the president: "Russia's destabilizing activities, its support for rogue regimes, its activities in Ukraine, are unacceptable."

Speaking briefly with reporters in Town Hall Square here in Tallinn's old town, Pence reaffirmed the president's decision to sign the sanctions bill but also held out the possibility that the implementation

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of the penalties — for which Russia has already retaliated — might actually improve relations between the two countries, saying he and Trump "expect Russian behavior to change."

"The president and I remain very hopeful that we'll see different behavior by the Russian government, with regard to Ukraine, with regard to supporting rogue regimes in Iran and North Korea," Pence said. "We continue to believe that if Russia will change its behavior, our relationship can change for the good and improve for the interests in both of our countries and the interest of peace and stability in this region and around the world."

Russia has rejected the idea that the sanctions will in any way improve relations, with its U.S. embassy tweeting on Saturday: "Washington still doesn't get the fact that pressure never works against @Russia, bilateral relations can hardly be improved by sanctions."

Russian President Vladi-mir Putin said Sunday that the U.S. diplomatic missions in Russia will have to reduce their staffs by 755 people.

Pence's long-planned, 3½-day trip to Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro was originally intended to reaffirm the United States' commitment to NATO — Estonia is one of five countries meeting its defense spending commitment — and touch on the United States' commitment to the security of the Baltic states. All three countries have been the targets of Russian aggression.

But in the wake of Trump's decision to sign the legislation — which passed the Senate on Thursday on an overwhelming 98 to 2 vote — the vice president's trip has taken on a clear Russia focus, senior administration officials said. Nearly all of Pence's remarks and speeches are likely to address the challenges Russia poses in this part of the world.

But Pence's rhetoric abroad so far seems slightly out of sync with some of his boss's previous comments and actions on the topics of both Russia and NATO.

Despite the firm conclusion of his own intelligence community that Russia interfered in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Trump has repeatedly refused to fully accept that determination. When he has acknowledged that Russia did meddle, he has played down Moscow's role, saying other state or individual actors could have played a role as well.

When asked how the Baltic states can accept Pence's reassurances that the United States will support them against Russian aggression and interference in their domestic politics when Trump has frequently taken a softer line, the vice president said, "The president has confirmed repeatedly that we believe Russia did meddle in U.S. elections. I think he has also said it could have been other actors as well."

His message throughout Eastern Europe, Pence added, is a simple one. "While our policy is America-first, it's not America-alone, and that our allies in Eastern Europe can be confident that the United States of America stands with them," he said. "We are committed to NATO, we are committed to our common defense."

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Trump's comments and actions have at times raised questions about his commitment to the alliance, despite statements of strong support from Pence and other administration officials.

While attending a ceremony at NATO headquarters in Brussels in May on his first trip abroad, Trump delivered a speech from which he specifically removed a roughly 20-word section intended to reaffirm U.S. support for the treaty's Article 5, which says an attack on one member is an attack on all members. He later committed to NATO's collective defense ideal, which is the cornerstone of the treaty, but the earlier omission worried European leaders.

Pence on Sunday again tried to play down the president's previous uncertainty on Article 5, arguing Trump has never wavered in his commitment.

"From the time the president sent me to speak at the Munich Security Conference, we made it clear that the policy of our administration is to stand firmly with our NATO allies and to stand firmly behind our Article 5 commitment that an attack on one is an attack on all," Pence said. "The president has made it clear from the outset of our administration and will continue to make it clear to all our allies in the region."

Trump was initially reluctant to accept the Russia sanctions legislation, which curbs his ability to lift them on his own without consent from Congress. But he finally agreed to sign it after revisions, which also include sanctions on Iran and North -Korea.

In many ways, the president had no choice. Trump would have encountered a fierce political backlash — as well as faced the threat of a veto override from a Republican-controlled Congress — had he refused to sign the bill. Rejecting the legislation also would have raised further questions about his seeming reluctance to confront Putin.

Pence's trip also comes as Trump is facing growing scrutiny at home over Russia, in the form of special counsel Robert S. Mueller III's widening investigation. In addition to looking into whether Trump's associates colluded with Russians in the 2016 election, Mueller's probe has grown to include questions about the finances of Trump and his family, as well as possible attempts to obstruct the investigation.

Michael McFaul, the ambassador to Russia under former president Barack Obama, said that Pence's tough-on-Russia message will be "welcome" in each of the countries he's visiting — but may disguise a deeper uncertainty about what the Trump administration's true policy is toward Moscow.

"It will be easy for him to have positive bilateral meetings when he goes there," McFaul said. "But of course he has a very convoluted message on what they're doing on Russia."

All three countries have struggled for years with Russian aggression. In 2007, Estonia faced a cyberattack that hobbled dozens of corporate and government websites — an attack for which it blames Russia, though the Kremlin denies the charge. In 2008, Russia invaded Georgia, and

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Montenegro has accused Russian agents of an attempted coup in 2016, aimed at preventing the nation from joining NATO.

"Most certainly all three of these countries have felt the influence — the coercive influence — of Russia on their domestic politics, so from my point of view, that's an interesting and positive set of countries for him to go to, with the caveat that I don't know what their Russia policy is," McFaul said. "I follow it pretty closely, and I could not tell you what the strategy is."

But Sunday afternoon, in the sun-soaked town square, Pence seemed to only have one overarching message — that he and the president are in policy lockstep, and that he is just a humble emissary spreading Trump's greetings abroad.

The vice president stopped to shake hands with a few of the people who had gathered to watch the spectacle, many of them — like Pence — tourists in Estonia. As each individual introduced themselves, Pence often tied their comments back to Trump, telling a man from Paris, "The president was just in Paris for Bastille Day," and telling a couple from Poland, "The president was just in Warsaw."

Then, he ducked into his motorcade and pulled away.

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Pence Delivers Tough Speech on 'Unpredictable' Russia
By Peter Nicholas
31 July 2017
Wall Street Journal

Vice President Mike Pence issued one of the Trump administration's toughest attacks to date on Russia, coming to a nation on Russia's border to warn against aggression from the "unpredictable neighbor to the east."

Mr. Pence said Monday that President Donald Trump would sign a bill passed by Congress that imposes new sanctions on Russia, despite earlier reservations from the White House and a promise from Moscow to expel hundreds of U.S. diplomats in return.

Mr. Pence said the Russia must be held accountable for its actions, saying the U.S. wouldn't lift sanctions until it sees as a reversal of "the actions that caused the sanctions in the first place."

"At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe one against another," he said.

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Mr. Pence is in the midst of a three-day overseas trip that includes stops in two other countries that Moscow has seen as its traditional sphere of influence: the former Soviet state of Georgia and the Balkan state of Montenegro. His repeated message is that the U.S. won't abandon allies living in Russia's shadow.

The vice president delivered his remarks outside Estonia's defense headquarters, surrounded by symbols of military resolve. Flanking him were armored tanks and standing in front of the stage were hundreds of U.S., British, French and Estonian troops, hands clasped behind their backs.

Moscow has accused the U.S. of threatening Russia by pushing for the expansion of NATO up to its borders through the admittance of the Baltic states and the inclusion of Ukraine and Georgia.

Before the speech, Mr. Pence and the presidents of the three Baltic states, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, received a private military briefing that opened with an officer referencing the "eastern flank of NATO."

Mr. Pence praised Estonia for being one of just five in the NATO alliance to devote 2% of its gross domestic product to defense. The country of 1.3 million has pushed for more U.S. air cover for the region, but NATO officials say its 183-mile border with Russia would be hard to defend against a determined Russian assault. A Rand Corp. study last year showed that Russia could beat back NATO forces reach the outskirts of Tallinn, the capital, in just a few days.

In his 2016 presidential campaign, Mr. Trump often spoke of more cooperative dealings with Russia, and described NATO as obsolete. But he has since toughened his line on Russia, and Mr. Pence's remarks signaled again that the U.S. supported NATO's common-defense provision, known as Article 5.

"The United States rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation or malign influence in the Baltic States or against any of our treaty allies—and under President Donald Trump, the United States of America will stand firmly behind our (NATO) Article 5 pledge of mutual defense—and the presence of U.S. Armed Forces here today proves it," Mr. Pence said.

Mr. Trump in recent months has described relations with Russia at an all-time low point. After insisting he didn't believe Russia interfered in the 2016 presidential race, he has said Russia was "probably" involved, though he has also said China and other actors could have been. Russia has denied interfering in the election.

Mr. Pence, talking to reporters during a visit to Old Town Square, said that Mr. Trump's feelings on the matter are clear.

"The president has confirmed repeatedly that we believe Russia did meddle in U.S. elections." Mr. Pence said. "I think he has also said it could have been other actors as well. But he's confirmed his belief and our intelligence that Russia was involved in meddling in U.S. elections."

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Having chided Russia for its actions, Mr. Pence held open the possibility of a thaw. "President Trump has made it clear: America is open to a better relationship with Russia," he said.

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The Latest: US VP Wants Better Relations With Russia
31 July 2017
Associated Press

The Latest on U.S-Russian tensions (all times local):

2:50 p.m.

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence says that despite what the State Department described as "a regrettable and uncalled-for act" when the Kremlin ordered the U.S. to cut embassy and consulate staff in Russia, America wants to improve relations with Moscow.

Pence told reporters during a visit to Estonia that "we hope for better days, and better relations with Russia."

Speaking to the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania — all former Soviet republics bordering Russia — he said Monday that "the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, the security of our allies, and the security of freedom-loving nations around the world."

Pence was speaking on the first leg of a European tour that continues to Georgia and Montenegro.

On Sunday, Russian President Vladimir Putin said the U.S. would have to cut 755 of its embassy and consulate staff in Russia — a sweeping reduction that he described as a response to new U.S. sanctions.

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1:10 p.m.

The Kremlin says Washington needs to show "political will" for Russia-U.S. relations to recover.

President Vladimir Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said Monday that it will take time for the U.S. to rid itself of what he called "political schizophrenia." He added that Russia remains interested in constructive cooperation with the U.S.

On Sunday, Putin said the U.S. would have to cut 755 of its embassy and consulate staff in Russia — a sweeping reduction which he described as a response to new U.S. sanctions. The Russian Foreign

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Ministry also announced closing down a U.S. recreational retreat on the outskirts of Moscow as well as warehouse facilities.

Moscow's move showed that its earlier hopes for an improvement in Russia-U.S. ties after Donald Trump's victory in the U.S. presidential election have withered.

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12 noon

Russian President Vladimir Putin has demanded that United States cut its embassy and consulate staff in Russia by 755 people, heightening tensions between Washington and Moscow three days after the U.S. Congress approved sanctions against Russia.

The U.S. State Department called Putin's move "a regrettable and uncalled-for act."

The announcement Sunday also came hours after U.S. Vice President Mike Pence landed in Estonia, which borders Russia, for talks with the country that holds the rotating European Union presidency.

Russian's Foreign Ministry on Friday first ordered a reduction by Sept. 1 in U.S. diplomatic personnel in Russia to 455 people in response to a new package of American sanctions.

The sanctions seek to punish Moscow for meddling in the 2016 U.S. election and for its aggression in Ukraine and Syria.

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Pence: We will 'hold Russia accountable for its actions'
By Louis Nelson
31 July 2017
Politico

Amid a fresh wave of sanctions and renewed tension between the United States and Russia, Vice President Mike Pence reassured NATO's Baltic member states that the U.S. stands firmly behind its mutual-defense commitment in the face of stepped-up aggression from Moscow.

"The United States stands with the nations and people of the Baltic States — and we always will. We stand with our NATO allies in our commitment to your security," Pence said Monday in remarks at the headquarters of Estonia's defense forces. "Today we stand where East meets West — on a great frontier of freedom. No threat looms larger in the Baltic States than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east."

Pence's remarks came before members of the U.S., French, British and Estonian militaries and followed a meeting between the vice president and the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

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"Our message to the Baltic states, my message when we visit Georgia and Montenegro will be the same. To our allies in Eastern Europe, we are with you, we stand with you on behalf of freedom," he continued.

Pence's visit comes as tensions between NATO member states and Russia continue to rise. He arrived in Estonia on Sunday to showcase support for NATO allies in the Baltic region and Eastern Europe.

It also comes as Trump prepares to sign legislation that would slap brand new sanctions on Russia.

"The president has made it very clear that Russia's destabilizing activities and support for rogue regimes and its activities in Ukraine are unacceptable. The president made it clear that very soon he will sign sanctions from the Congress to reinforce that," Pence said Sunday.

"But at the same time as we make our intentions clear that we expect Russian behavior to change, the president and I remain very hopeful that we'll see very different behavior from the Russian government," he added.

Russia caught the attention of NATO and its allies earlier this month, when when it sent 2,500 troops to the Latvian and Estonian borders as a part of a military drill in the Pskov region.

It's also at the heart of the election meddling investigations that have expanded to include questions about possible Trump campaign contact with Moscow.

The vice president will also make stops in Montenegro, which became a NATO member earlier this year, and Georgia, which has attempted to join the alliance in the past.

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Vice President Mike Pence: Russian 'Aggression' Makes NATO Necessary
By Eoghan Macquire
31 July 2017
NBC News

The "specter of aggression" from Russia makes a strong and united NATO more important now than at any time since the Soviet Union's collapse, Vice President Mike Pence said Monday.

"Russia seeks to redraw international borders by force, undermine democracies of sovereign nations and divide the free nations of Europe," Pence said after meeting the leaders of the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

The three European countries are now members of NATO but were part of the Soviet Union and still feel the pressure of Russian influence after gaining independence in the early 1990s.

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Pence offered optimism that the U.S.-Russia relationship might improve but said that any warming would come with a shift in Moscow's behavior. The vice president reaffirmed President Donald Trump's commitment to signing sanction legislation targeting Russia passed overwhelmingly last week by Congress.

In response to the forthcoming sanctions measure, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the U.S. to reduce the number of diplomats stationed in Russia by more than 700. The dueling diplomatic maneuvers marked a new low in already frosty relations for the former Cold War rivals.

Trump's presidency brought with it the possibility of improved relations with Russia after the president spent much of the 2016 campaign speaking warmly of Putin and expressing optimism that he would be able to build a strong relationship with the Kremlin. Instead, relations have worsened amid investigations into Russia's efforts to interfere in last year's election, continued Russian military activity in Ukraine as well as Moscow's support for Syrian dictator Bashar Assad.

Trump, too, has shifted his rhetoric in regards to Russia, drawing a relatively tougher line even if some critics would prefer him to take an even more aggressive approach. And after characterizing NATO as "obsolete" and questioning the U.S.'s willingness to comply with the treaty's all-for-one, one-for-all defense agreement, Trump has more recently reaffirmed his nation's commitment while also urging member states to increase their defense spending.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States will continue to hold Russia accountable for its actions — and we call on our European allies and friends to do the same," Pence said Monday in Estonia. "President Trump has made it clear: America is open to a better relationship. But the president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia — a better relationship, and the lifting of sanctions, will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place."

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Pence: Administration policy is 'America first,' not 'America alone'
By Julia Manchester
31 July 2017
Hill

Vice President Mike Pence looked to reassure NATO allies on his trip to Eastern Europe on Sunday, saying President Trump's "America first" policies are not meant to isolate U.S. allies.

"President Trump sent me to eastern Europe with a very simple message, that is America first doesn't mean America alone," Pence said in an interview with Fox News during a stop in Tallinn, Estonia.

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"A strong and united NATO is more necessary today than at any point since the collapse of communism a quarter-century ago and no threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States of America rejects any attempts to use force, threats, intimidation or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies," he added.

Pence made the comments in the Estonian capital, Tallinn, the first stop on a three-day trip that will also take in Georgia and Montenegro.

Some in the Baltic nations have fretted they could be in Russia's sights after its annexation of Crimea and backing of pro-Moscow separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Although Pence stated that U.S. still wanted to foster "better relations" with Russia, he reiterated that the U.S. would continue to adhere to Article 5 of the alliance's charter — a tenet of collective defense.

President Trump had previously caused concern among NATO members by saying the organization was "obsolete" and declining to promise that America would defend fellow members if they did not up their military spending.

No other president since NATO was founded in 1949 had questioned that principle — until Trump, although he recently expressed support for NATO's Article 5.

Pence also stated that "recent diplomatic action" by Russia will not impact American commitments to the security of its NATO allies.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said Sunday that he was ordering the U.S. to reduce its diplomatic staff in the country by 755.

The move came in the wake of new sanctions voted through by the U.S. Congress last week which aim to punish Moscow for interfering in the 2016 presidential election and for its military aggression in Ukraine and Syria.

"Recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter the commitment of the United States of America to our security, the security of our allies and the security of freedom loving nations around the world," Pence said.

"[The U.S.] stands firmly behind our Article 5 pledge of mutual defense and an attack on one of us is an attack on us all," he added.

Estonian president, Kersti Kaljulaid, said the presence of Pence in Tallinn "underlined the credibility of Article 5."

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President Dalia Grybauskaitė of Lithuania, meanwhile, praised the decision of the U.S. Congress to pass new sanctions against Russia, describing it as a "very good message."

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The Testing Ground for Trump's Russia Policy
By Uri Friedman
30 July 2017
Atlantic

At the moment, U.S.-Russian relations could be thought of as a live experiment in the "Great Man" theory of history, which attributes historical change to the actions of exceptional individuals rather than impersonal forces that transcend any man or woman. If it were up to Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump, it seems, Russia and the United States would be teaming up to defeat terrorism, leaving the bitter days of sanctions and election meddling and proxy wars behind them.

The evidence to date, however, suggests it's mostly not up to the two men. Despite all the speculation about the American president cozying up to the Kremlin, the United States under Trump has repeatedly done the opposite. Yes, Trump has echoed Putin talking points, wavered on clearly committing to defend NATO allies, and ended some U.S. funding for rebels fighting Russia's ally in Syria, President Bashar al-Assad. Yet since Trump took office, the U.S. government has also attacked Assad's forces, admitted another country to the NATO military alliance over Russian objections, and advanced new sanctions to punish Russia for interfering in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign.

Many members of Congress and Trump's own administration, including the president's defense secretary and national-security adviser, consider Russia a U.S. adversary. Many Americans, amid investigations into whether the Trump campaign colluded with the Russian government to undermine Hillary Clinton's candidacy, are suspicious of any White House concession to the Kremlin. And so far, these views, as well as the clashing geopolitical goals of the two world powers, have proven stronger than Trump's desire to pursue friendlier relations with Moscow.

In the latest sign of the Russia hawks prevailing over the Russia doves, Vice President Mike Pence departs Sunday for a four-day trip to Eastern Europe, where he'll seek to reassure U.S. allies who see nearby Russia as a threat—and to shore up NATO in particular as a bulwark against that threat.

In Estonia, he'll meet with the leaders of the three Baltic countries, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, who are among NATO's easternmost members. In Georgia, an aspiring NATO member, he'll visit troops involved in a NATO-affiliated military exercise. And in Montenegro, a new NATO member that has never before received such a high-ranking U.S. official, he'll attend a summit of current and potentially future NATO members.

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According to the White House, Pence is making the trip "at the direction of President Trump." And surely there's some truth to that. But the direction of President Trump—especially when it comes to Russia—is far from clear. The countries on Pence's itinerary offer examples for how the administration's perplexing, bifurcated approach to Russia could be poked and prodded in the coming months and years. Small nations such as Estonia, Georgia, and Montenegro, which straddle East and West, literally test the limits of the America-First president's commitment to U.S. allies and to fundamentally changing America's relationship with Russia. And unlike another testing ground for Trump's Russia policy—his response to Russia's alleged intervention in the U.S. election—the one in Eastern Europe will yield results that don't primarily affect Americans. It isn't all about "us."

It's also very much about Estonians and Georgians and Montenegrins: The vice president is visiting a region that is "somewhere in between the EU and NATO and Russia," Vesko Garcevic, a former Montenegrin ambassador to NATO, told me. "Therefore, for Russia, this is really a battleground—a place where Russia can influence countries."

Or consider the view from Moscow: "The Baltic states right now are seen as a U.S./NATO foothold close to Russia's main [power] centers; Georgia is a U.S. ally in the Caucasus and the Black Sea region, a sensitive area in security terms," Dmitri Trenin, the director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, wrote in an email. As the Kremlin sees it, Pence "will be visiting the new U.S. sphere of influence. Russian conventional thinking maintains that the U.S. is supporting the Balts, Georgians, and Ukrainians not because they are democratic or strive for democracy but because they are vehemently anti-Russian and are only too happy to lease their territory to the Pentagon, CIA, et al."

In each country that Pence is visiting, the perceived threat from Russia looks different. In Georgia, which fought a war with neighboring Russia in 2008 that left two Georgian breakaway regions in de facto Russian control, there are fears that the Kremlin could do what it did in Ukraine in 2014: support separatists and seize control of just enough territory to keep the country in Russia's sphere of influence and out of the West's. Moscow currently seems content to nibble around the edges of Georgian territory, in what Georgian officials have condemned as "creeping occupation."

In Montenegro, the threat is more political than military. The former Yugoslav republic joined NATO in June despite Russian vows to retaliate against its onetime ally for taking a "hostile course"—one that would cut the Russian navy off from the Adriatic Sea and reduce Russia's sway in the Balkans. And several Serbian and Russian nationals will soon go on trial in Montenegro for allegedly planning a coup last fall that would have overthrown the nation's pro-West government, brought the pro-Russia opposition to power, and thwarted Montenegro's bid to become part of NATO and eventually the European Union. Montenegrin authorities claim the Russian government was involved in the plot, which the Kremlin denies. Montenegro is a young, fragile democracy, Garcevic observed, and Russia has exploited its "democratic deficiencies" to "gain greater geopolitical influence in the region."

In Estonia, a former Soviet republic that is now a thriving democracy ensconced in NATO and the EU, the main concern is Russia manipulating Estonian politics and policy by, for instance, launching cyberattacks, tampering with energy supplies, engaging in information warfare, or carrying out

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limited military provocations. The present preoccupation involves Russia's plans to stage large-scale military drills, known as Zapad ("West"), in Belarus this fall, ahead of which NATO has rotated troops through the Baltics and Poland. Baltic leaders are now increasing their defense budgets—already among NATO's most robust—and asking the alliance to permanently deploy anti-aircraft weapons in their countries as further deterrents against Russian aggression.

The wide open question, however, is the extent to which Pence's reassurance tour can really reassure these countries.

"People here, politicians, are puzzled with the new administration's position toward Russia," said Garcevic. There are moments when that position "seems to be very friendly and forthcoming to Putin," which suggests the United States is "turning its back to the Balkans," he explained, and other moments when it appears to be a "more traditional American approach" of fully supporting NATO and America's European alliances.

"Sometimes it seems like an unguided missile," Garcevic mused. "You don't know what's going to happen next."

Since Montenegrin officials "are interested in having good relations with the U.S.," they try to "minimize and downplay, water down, what President Trump says, particularly in his tweets," Garcevic added. But when I presented him with a scenario—Pence tells the Montenegrin government everything it wants to hear, only for Trump to complain about NATO on Twitter a couple days later—Garcevic acknowledged the limits of this approach. "If Trump says this, this would be like a cold shower," he responded. "This will cast a shadow over what I'm assuming the vice president will do in the Balkans."

I found Toomas Hendrik Ilves, who left office as Estonia's president shortly before Trump was elected, similarly mystified. "There will be cyber cooperation [between the U.S. and Russia], there won't be cyber cooperation, now there is cyber cooperation," he said. You have Trump and his supporters "trying to dream up some kind of conspiracy on the part of Ukraine against Trump and then you have [Trump's Ukraine envoy] Kurt Volker saying ... there are more Russian tanks in Ukraine than there are tanks in Western Europe."

"Were I to be in office right now, the concern would be trying to [determine] what is exactly the [U.S.] policy that we're going to have to count on," Ilves told me. So, I asked, how would he describe that policy?

He laughed. "I don't know. I don't know. I don't think anyone really does."

It's wrong to picture Estonian leaders panicking, Ilves said, but they're probably confused. "How do we proceed?" he asked. "Do we spend more money on [defense]? Do we start pushing for something in the European Union? Do we want NATO to have a shift in focus?"

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It used to be that "when the [American] president says something, it becomes policy," noted Ilves, who served as Estonia's president for 10 years, spanning the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Now he's unsure, especially when it comes to Trump's tweets. "I think that they don't reflect policy," he said.

Trenin, for his part, dismissed the idea behind much of the unease in Eastern European capitals: that Russia is poised to act aggressively against another country in its neighborhood, as it did in Ukraine. The worry is based on the assumption that Russia has some inherent desire to "expand, invade, [and] subjugate others," Trenin argued, and that assumption is mistaken. "From the Kremlin's standpoint, Russia's intervention in Ukraine [after a revolution overthrew Ukraine's pro-Russia President Viktor Yanukovych] was a defensive move. The importance of Ukraine to Russia's security and the Russian psyche can hardly be overestimated."

There "is only one Ukraine," Trenin added.

Nearby countries such as the Baltic nations will remain fearful of Russia, Trenin conceded, but those fears have less to do with Russia itself than with the West, whose leaders failed to protect them during the World War II era. (The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, a 1939 agreement in which Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union secretly staked out spheres of influence in the Baltics and elsewhere in the region, is "the big national scar" for Estonia and the other plundered countries, Ilves told me. From the Estonian perspective, great powers made a deal "about you," he explained. This left a legacy of "paranoia" that "is always a subcurrent" of the public's thinking on Russia-related matters.)

"In 1939-40, Britain and France did not much help [these countries] against the Nazis," Trenin wrote to me. "Now they are not sure whether the United States would defend them against a nuclear superpower. During the Cold War, the unanswered question was whether Washington would REALLY risk losing Chicago for Hamburg. Would it do so now for Tallinn? Since there can be no clear answer, there will always be fears"—whether Donald Trump is in office or not.

As for the Trump administration's contradictory Russia policy, and the latest move in Congress to impose additional sanctions on Russia in legislation that also slaps sanctions on Iran and North Korea, Trenin had this to say: "I think the Kremlin views the U.S. as a dysfunctional polity, with its political class at war with itself and its society deeply divided along cultural fault lines. Under these circumstances one hardly expects a consistent policy."

"The president has to bow to the prevailing anti-Russian consensus in the policy establishment," he continued. "The new sanctions bill, which puts Russia into the same category of U.S. worst enemies as Iran and North Korea, is a very candid statement that virtually nothing positive can be achieved between the U.S. and Russia for a long time to come," despite the hopes of a U.S.-Russian rapprochement that initially followed Trump's election.

"Bad as they are now, U.S.-Russian relations continue to get worse, edging ever closer to a kinetic collision between their armed forces somewhere: in Syria, over the Baltic and Black Seas, or Ukraine," Trenin warned. Putin's decision this week to retaliate against America's retaliation for

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Russian interference in the 2016 election, which included the seizure of U.S. diplomatic properties and a demand that the United States cut its diplomatic staff in the country, "will usher in a new and harsher round of rivalry" between the two countries, he predicted. On Sunday, Mike Pence wades into the territory where that rivalry is fiercest.

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VP Pence: Attack on 1 NATO ally is attack on all
By Jari Tanner
31 July 2017
Associated Press

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence on Monday strongly pledged America's commitment to protecting NATO allies against attacks, including the Baltic states, which have anxiously watched a growing Russian military presence in the region.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States stands firmly behind our Article 5 pledge of mutual defense — an attack on one of us is an attack on us all," Pence told reporters after meeting with the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the Estonian capital of Tallinn.

Mutual defense is a vital issue for the three small former Soviet states that border Russia, which were all occupied for nearly five decades by Soviet troops before regaining their independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The United States never recognized the claim by Soviet leader Josef Stalin on the three countries — which have a combined population of 6 million — allowing Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to maintain independent diplomatic missions and have their national flags stored at the State Department throughout the occupation.

Saying that Trump "knows security is the foundation of our prosperity," Pence said America and the Baltic countries would seek new ways to increase prosperity by increasing two-way trade that currently amounts to $3.5 billion and by increasing their mutual investments.

Earlier, he met Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid, Latvian President Raimonds Vejonis and Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaite at the baroque 18th-century Kadriorg Palace, which was built by the Russian Emperor Peter the Great.

Energy is one way that Washington is seeking to tighten its commercial ties with the Baltic countries. It closed a deal in June to sell liquefied natural gas (LNG) directly from the United States to the region.

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After the White House on Friday confirmed the sanctions on Russia, Putin responded by announcing the cuts, but Pence appears optimistic about the future relationship between the two countries.

Speaking from his European tour on Sunday, Pence said he hoped the sanctions would prompt Moscow to reconsider its position on a number of issues, including North Korea.

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"The President and I remain very hopeful that we'll see different behavior by the Russian government, with regard to Ukraine, with regard to supporting rogue regimes in Iran and North Korea," Pence said in comments reported by Fox News.

"We continue to believe that if Russia will change its behavior, our relationship can change for the good and improve for the interests in both of our countries and the interest of peace and stability in this region and around the world," he said.

Pence also took the opportunity to stress that President Trump does accept the intelligence community's conclusion that Russia attempted to "meddle" in the U.S. election, despite the president previously making contradictory statements on the topic.

"The President has confirmed repeatedly that we believe Russia did meddle in U.S. elections," Pence told Fox News.

"I think he has also said it could have been other actors as well. But he's confirmed his belief and our intelligence that Russia was involved in meddling in US elections and it's part of what inspired the bipartisan action in the Congress to codify the sanctions that our administration has been implementing against Russia and will continue to advance that," he added.

But any U.S. hopes that sanctions would prompt any cooperation from Moscow appear to have been dashed after Putin announced the U.S. would lose diplomatic staff in Russia, and warned about further retaliation over the sanctions.

"We were waiting for quite a long time that maybe something would change for the better, were holding out hope that the situation would change somehow. But it appears that even if it changes someday it will not change soon," Putin said in comments carried by Russian state media.

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Pence pressures China on North Korea, talks Russia sanctions, election meddling
By Deena Zaru
30 July 2017
CNN (Excerpt)

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Pence's visit to Estonia is the first leg of an Eastern European trip that will also take him to Georgia and Montenegro to show US support for them and NATO in the face of what the administration has called Russia's destabilizing activities in Ukraine and elsewhere and its efforts to undermine the alliance. The trip comes amid rising tensions between the US and Russia over a new sanctions bill that easily cleared Congress last week and that the White House says Trump is expected to sign.

Passage of the bill prompted Russia to retaliate by cutting US diplomatic missions by 755 people, which Moscow announced Friday -- an in-kind response to penalties that would be codified by the legislation, including the ejection of Russian diplomatic staff and closure of two Russian compounds in the US, for its alleged meddling in last year's election and aggression in Ukraine.

"We waited a long time for things to perhaps change for the better," Russian state media quoted Russian President Vladimir Putin as saying Sunday. "We had such hope that the situation would change, but judging by the situation that will not be soon."

On taking retaliatory measures, Putin said, "I thought it was time for us to show that we will not leave this without an answer. As for other possible measures, or whether it is a lot or not, this is quite sensible from the point of view of the work of the diplomatic department. ..."

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov threatened further retaliation against the US on Sunday morning, saying that if that US goes through with the sanctions, "we will respond in kind," but he would not specify how Russia plans to respond.

Pence said Sunday that he hopes that slapping new sanctions on Russia would lead Russia to change its behavior with regard to Ukraine and end its support for Iran and North Korea.

"The President and I remain very hopeful that we'll see different behavior by the Russian government, with regard to Ukraine, with regard to supporting rogue regimes in Iran and North Korea," Pence said. "We continue to believe that if Russia will change its behavior, our relationship can change for the good and improve for the interests in both of our countries and the interest of peace and stability in this region and around the world."

Pressed on how to square the purpose of his trip with Trump's position on Russia's alleged efforts to influence last year's election, Pence defended the President. He insisted Trump is in agreement with US intelligence services on Russian meddling despite newly appointed White House communications director Anthony Scaramucci telling CNN last week that Trump is still unsure.

"The President has confirmed repeatedly that we believe Russia did meddle in US elections," Pence said. "I think he has also said it could have been other actors as well. But he's confirmed his belief and our intelligence that Russia was involved in meddling in US elections and it's part of what inspired

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A Lithuanian state-owned gas trading company will receive the first delivery of U.S. imported LNG in August — something that Pence said will "benefit not only our prosperity, but regional security. And I am confident that this deal will only be the first of many."

Pence said he and Trump were pleased with the deal that will help the Baltic states to reduce their reliance on Russian gas.

Later Monday, Pence met with NATO troops from Britain, France and the United States that are stationed in Estonia. The alliance has deployed some 4,000 troops and military hardware in the three Baltic states and Poland to counter Russia's presence in the Baltic Sea region.

Before departing for Georgia, Pence took shovel and planted an English oak outside the headquarters of the Estonian defense forces together with the leaders of Latvia and Lithuania.

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Sunday ordered the U.S. to cut its embassy and consulate staff in Russia by 755 people. On Monday, Pence said America wants to improve bilateral relations with Russia "despite the recent diplomatic action by Moscow."

"We hope for better days and better relations with Russia," Pence told reporters.

Yet Russia's upcoming Zapad 2017 military exercises with 13,000 troops near the Baltic states' borders in September may further strain relations.

Grybauskaite told Lithuanian national radio on Monday that the U.S. would double the number of military jets and increase American troops on her country's soil during the Russian drills to signal that Washington is monitoring the Baltics situation closely.

Estonia — which currently holds the rotating presidency of the 28-nation European Union — is the first leg of Pence's European tour. The U.S. vice president flew later Monday to Georgia, another former Soviet republic, and will also visit new NATO member Montenegro, two countries facing strong pressure from Russia.

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Mike Pence Wants Sanctions to Change Russia's 'Behavior' as Putin Orders Expulsion of Hundreds of U.S. Diplomatic Staff
By Harriet Sinclair
31 July 2017
Newsweek

Vice President Mike Pence said he hopes the decision to place sanctions on Russia will prompt "different behavior" from Moscow, as President Vladimir Putin announced the U.S. would have to cut 755 diplomatic staff from Russia.

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the bipartisan action in the Congress to codify the sanctions that our administration has been implementing against Russia and will continue to advance that."

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Pence vows U.S. resistance to Russia during Estonia visit
By S.A. Miller
31 July 2017
Washington Times

Vice President Mike Pence on a visit to Estonia pledged Monday unwavering support of NATO allies and steadfast resistance to Russia aggression, especially in Baltic states that have been feeling intense pressure from Moscow.

Mr. Pence said he was in Eastern Europe to deliver a message from President Trump that the "the United States of America is with you."

"At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another," Mr. Pence said in a speech after meeting with the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuiana.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States of America rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation, or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies," he said.

The tough talk came amid mounting tension between Washington and Moscow. Russian President Vladimir Putin expelling 755 U.S. diplomats in retaliation for new sanctions legislation Mr. Trump is expected to sign.

"To be clear: We hope for better days, and better relations with Russia, recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, the security of our allies, and the security of freedom-loving nations around the world," Mr. Pence said.

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Pence's tricky trip has Russia hanging over it
By Andrew Hammond
30 July 2017
Gulf News (Opinion)

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Trump's proposed repositioning of relations with Russia now looks, at the least, to have been put on ice. Here it is not only the fact that any new US sanctions will make relations frostier, but also that the Trump team is under significant pressure over the congressional and FBI investigations, and this issue has already claimed the scalp of national security adviser Michael Flynn.

'Complicit' or 'incompetent'

Should Trump be forced to sign the sanctions legislation, it will reassure the allies in Eastern Europe that Pence is visiting. However, it will complicate US foreign policy in other theatres, including potentially the Middle East, where Russian relations are relevant.

Already this year, there were tensions between Moscow and Washington here, which saw US missile strikes targeted at Syria, following an earlier poison gas attack on citizens in a rebel-held town allegedly by the Damascus regime, which killed at least 80 people, including around two dozen children. Russia — highly implausibly, given the nature of the chemicals involved — asserted that they were released inadvertently when Syrian planes struck a terrorist laboratory.

The ratcheting up of tensions has widened differences between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin over the future of Syrian President Bashar Al Assad after they had seemed to be getting closer to an agreement to potentially bring an end to Syria's six-year civil war that has left half a million people dead and triggered floods of refugees, while letting Al Assad stay in power. Rhetorically, at least, Trump appeared to move away from the latter and called for the Syrian president to be ousted, and US Ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, said that the Trump administration was ready to take further military steps in the country if needed.

US Defence Secretary James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson were also forceful in their criticism of Moscow. For instance, Tillerson said that "either Russia has been complicit or simply incompetent" in Syria, referring to Moscow's apparent inability to prevent the Al Assad regime from using chemical weapons, despite a 2013 agreement under which Russia was a guarantor, to remove these stockpiles from the country.

The spike in Washington-Moscow tensions over Syria even saw Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev saying the two countries were "one step away from war" and had "totally ruined" relations. Signs of rising tensions include Moscow's suspension of an agreement with Washington to share communications about US and Russian aircraft conducting missions over Syria. The Admiral Grigorovich, the frigate warship was dispatched from Crimea to the Syrian port of Tartus.

Taken overall, as Pence undertakes his trip to reassure Eastern European allies, Trump now finds himself in a big bind over Russia. Despite his desire for warming of relations between Washington and Moscow, the window of opportunity for that may be narrowing significantly and this could have implications across the world, including in Syria.

(Andrew Hammond is an Associate at LSE IDEAS at the London School of Economics.)

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Vice President Pence's Trip: An Opportunity to Advance U.S. Leadership in Europe
By Luke Coffey, Daniel Kochis
20 July 2017
Heritage Foundation (Opinion)

From July 30 to August 2, Vice President Mike Pence will travel to Estonia, Georgia, and Montenegro. This trip is the perfect follow-up to President Donald Trump's visit to Poland for the "Three Seas" conference—a meeting focused on the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic Seas—in early July. Vice President Pence should use his trip to affirm U.S. commitment to these three important countries, and to strengthen U.S. focus on the key regions in which they reside. While in Europe, it is important for the Vice President to underscore U.S. commitment to NATO, Baltic security, and U.S. engagement in the Balkans and the Black Sea region, while taking a hard line on Russian aggression.

The Baltic Sea

In Estonia, Vice President Pence will meet with Estonian Prime Minister Jüri Ratas as well as the three Baltic leaders, President Kersti Kaljulaid of Estonia, President Raimonds Vējonis of Latvia, and President Dalia Grybauskaitė of Lithuania.

The U.S. has a long history of championing the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Baltic states dating back to the interwar period of the 1920s. After regaining their independence from Russia in the early 1990s, the Baltic states have been staunch supporters of the transatlantic relationship.

Estonia is the regional leader in defense matters and is currently one of only five NATO countries that spend the required 2 percent of gross domestic product on defense. In terms of economic freedom, the Baltic region is a beacon of hope for Europe and the rest of the world. The region is proof that pursuing policies of economic liberalization and growth works. Estonia ranks first in the eurozone, and sixth in the world, in the 2017 Index of Economic Freedom, published by The Heritage Foundation.

The Baltic states face an existential threat from Russia, and are concerned about the upcoming Russian Zapad 17 exercises. In addition to Zapad, the Vice President's arrival will come just as Russia and China will have wrapped up joint exercises in the Baltic Sea.

The keystone of NATO's new deterrence measures are multinational battalions stationed in each of the Baltic countries and Poland to deter Russian aggression. The Alliance has also increased the number of aircraft taking part in Baltic Air Policing. While in Estonia, Vice President Pence should reiterate U.S. commitment to the transatlantic alliance, NATO, and the Article V security guarantee.

The Black Sea

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US Vice-President Mike Pence started an important Eastern European tour yesterday that will last until tomorrow. The visit, whose subtext is that of the future of United States-Russia relations under US President Donald Trump, will see stops in Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro, and comes in the wake of the US Senate and House of Representatives' landmark votes to impose new sanctions on Moscow, which has already drawn Russian retaliation.

Key agenda items in Pence's tricky trip include a visit to see US and Georgian troops participating in the Noble Partner Nato-related exercise, which also features troops from the United Kingdom, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Armenia, and Slovenia. And the US vice-president will also participate, in Montenegro, with leaders across the Western Balkans in the Adriatic Charter Summit.

The immediate backdrop for Pence's visit is the continuing controversy over Russia and the Trump team. The US Senate and House voted overwhelmingly in recent days to impose sanctions on Moscow, and Trump now has to sign it into law or, in what would be a remarkable move, veto it. The legislation, whose restrictions would include on oil-and-gas projects in Russia, has been condemned by the country's Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergei Ryabkov, who asserts it would plant a "dangerous mine" under bilateral relations that could explode in coming months. Already, Moscow has retaliated to the congressional votes by ordering US diplomatic staff out of Russia and seizing two US diplomatic properties in the country.

The bill, which would also impose sanctions on North Korea and Iran, puts Trump in an awkward position, given his apparent pro-Moscow leanings. The president, who already has congressional and FBI investigations underway into his team's alleged ties with Russia, has only vowed at this stage to "study" the legislation, but is under strong pressure to sign it into law.

Trump's decision on this issue will be watched closely, not just in Moscow, but across Eastern Europe where Pence is visiting. Part of the nervousness that key US allies in Europe have about the Trump's positioning on Russia is what it potentially may mean for US commitments in the region and Nato. Trump has flip-flopped on this issue, describing the military alliance last year as "obsolete", and then this year as "not obsolete", sowing the seeds of confusion over what his true beliefs are.

Already, uncertainty over Trump's Nato policy is spurring the European Union to seek to reverse around a decade of defence spending cuts, totalling around 10 per cent in real terms. Moreover, a new European Defence Action Plan was agreed earlier this year by the EU, which will see greater continental military cooperation too.

For Trump, the key strategic question now on Russia is whether recent developments have destroyed the window of opportunity that may have existed for a warming of relations between Washington and Moscow. The US president has previously given multiple indications that he believes Russia is not a serious threat to America, hinting in January that he could even drop existing economic sanctions if the country "is helpful". Specifically, he appears to believe there were multiple common interests over issues such as preventing Iran from securing nuclear weapons, and combating terrorism.

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Reiterate America's commitment to NATO's Article V. The Vice President should echo President Trump's commitment made in Warsaw to NATO's Article V. The ultimate guarantor of security and stability in the Baltic region is the knowledge that the U.S. stands firmly by its mutual defense commitments as a member of NATO.

Make the case for a permanent military presence in the Baltic region. The U.S. and NATO need to show an enduring commitment to the region by permanently stationing armed forces in the Baltics and maintaining a robust maritime presence in the region.

Forcefully condemn Russian disinformation. Russia's disinformation measures are especially active in the region. In part, Russia has sought to undermine support for NATO's enhanced forward deployments by propagating false stories of abuse by troops serving in the multinational battalions, such as Canadian, British, or German soldiers. U.S. troops stationed in Poland for NATO's enhanced forward presence there have been targeted by similar Russian disinformation. Russia has also sought to delegitimize the Baltic nations as independent countries. The U.S. should forcefully condemn Russian disinformation and consider becoming a sponsoring nation at the NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence in Riga, the Latvian capital.

Empower global free-market energy policy. The U.S. should work immediately and comprehensively to eliminate remaining barriers to U.S. energy exports.

Push back against Nord Stream II. The Nord Stream II pipeline project that would connect Germany with Russia is neither economically necessary, nor is it geopolitically prudent. Vice President Pence should declare U.S. opposition to the pipeline, which in particular threatens allies in Eastern and Central Europe.

Ensure that the U.S. is clear on Georgia's future NATO membership. Vice President Pence should make it clear that Georgia's successful completion of subsequent Annual National Programs, the close relationship through the NATO–Georgia Commission, and the Substantial NATO–Georgia Package are the true markers of progress that will bring Georgia closer to ultimate membership.

Help the Georgians defend themselves. Georgia has the inherent right to self-defense. The U.S. should sell defensive anti-tank and anti-aircraft weaponry to Georgia.

Refer to the Russian military presence in Georgia as an occupation. During his visit, the Vice President should call the presence of several thousand Russian troops in South Ossetia and Abkhazia what it is: an illegal occupation.

Keep a focus on the Balkans. The Balkan nations are facing increased Russian interference and pressure with the aim of regional destabilization. In addition, the threat from Islamist ideology has not abated. The U.S. should look to take on a larger role within the region, and should seek to collaborate with NATO allies in the region to address growing instability.

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In Georgia, the Vice President will meet with President Giorgi Margvelashvili and Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili. In addition, he will visit U.S. and Georgian troops participating in the Noble Partner exercise. Vice President Pence's visit provides a perfect opportunity to strengthen the bilateral relationship with Tbilisi.

Georgia is a staunch ally of the United States. Since regaining its independence in 1991, successive Georgian governments have pursued an agenda of liberalizing the economy, cutting bureaucracy, fighting corruption, and embracing democracy—and in doing so, Georgia and its people have shown a firm and unwavering commitment to the transatlantic community.

Georgia is located in a dangerous and important geopolitical neighborhood for NATO. After the Russian invasion in 2008 and the subsequent Russian occupation of 20 percent of Georgia's territory, Georgia has transformed its military and has been steadfast in its support of overseas security operations. Georgia has contributed thousands of troops to Afghanistan (with 870 currently serving there) and Iraq, and hundreds of peacekeepers to the Balkans and in the Central African Republic.

The Adriatic Sea

In Podgorica, Montenegro, the Vice President will meet with Montenegrin President Filip Vujanović and Prime Minister Duško Marković. Vice President Pence will also participate with leaders from across the western Balkans in an Adriatic Charter Summit. Montenegro is the newest member of NATO, and an important U.S. ally in a region that is becoming increasingly unstable due to malign Russian influence, poor economic opportunities, and the rise of Islamist extremism.

The Balkans is home to unfinished business in Europe. In addition to historic, ethnic, religious, and cultural tensions, the Balkans are caught between Russia's destabilizing influence and pockets of Islamist extremism in the region. Montenegro is a poignant example.

Over the past seven years, Montenegro—a U.S. ally—has reformed itself in preparation for NATO membership. Last year, Russia, not happy with Montenegro's decision to join NATO, was suspected of having been behind a failed plot to break into parliament on election day, assassinate the former prime minister, and install a pro-Russian government in Podgorica, the nation's capital.

The U.S. has invested heavily in the Balkans since the end of the Cold War. Tens of thousands of U.S. service members have served in the Balkans, and billions of dollars in aid has been spent there, all in the hope of creating a secure and prosperous region that will someday be part of the transatlantic community. The Administration should articulate why the Balkan region remains important to the United States, and set out a clear policy to counter threats to the region.

The Way Forward

This trip offers a great opportunity to deepen three very important bilateral relations. To make this visit a success, Vice President Pence should:

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Offer political support for the Southern Gas Corridor project. As Europe seeks alternatives to Russian gas, the Southern Gas Corridor, which in part will run through Georgia and the Balkans, will play an important role.

Keep the door open to further NATO enlargement in the Balkans. NATO has helped promote democracy, stability, and security in the Balkans. It has also been a catalyst for reforms within candidate countries. Montenegro is just the latest example of this. The U.S. should ensure the door remains open to deserving Balkan nations, including Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Conclusion

Vice President Pence's trip, during which he will visit allies in the Adriatic, Baltic, and Black Sea regions, dovetails with President Trump's recent trip to Warsaw where he took part in the Three Seas conference. While each region faces threats from Russia, each also presents unique challenges, which demand robust attention. Estonia, Georgia, and Montenegro are important U.S. allies with basic common values. The success of the Trump Administration's policy in Europe will rest in large part on its ability to secure these important regions.

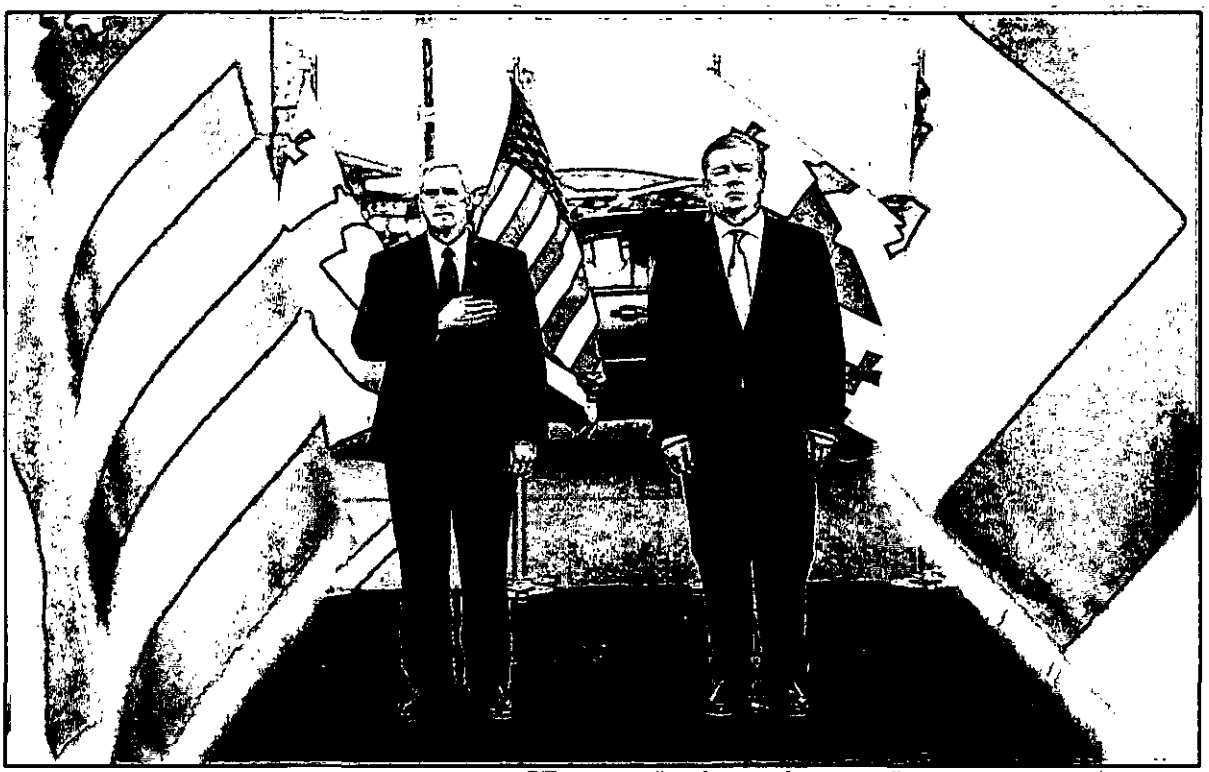
(Luke Coffey is Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation. Daniel Kochis is a Policy Analyst in European Affairs in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, of the Davis Institute)

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Vice President Pence Trip to Georgia Coverage Report for August 1, 2017



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Mike Pence promises US and NATO support for Georgia in Tbilisi
By Dan Alexe
1 August 2017
New Europe

Pence: Reversing Sanctions Requires Russia to Change
1 August 2017
Voice of America

VP Pence says Trump will sign Russia sanctions soon
1 August 2017
Associated Press

Embassy Reductions Won't Deter U.S., Pence Says
By Michael Shear
31 July 2017
New York Times

Vice President Pence in Europe: Georgia
By Office of the Vice President
1 August 2017
The White House

During Whirlwind Week in Washington, VP Pence Comforts East European Allies
By Emily Tamkin
1 August 2017
The Cable: Foreign Policy

Pence Says U.S. Backs Georgia in NATO Over Russian Objection
By Helena Bedwell
1 August 2017
Bloomberg

Vice President Mike Pence said the U.S. "strongly" supports Georgia's ambition of joining NATO, even as Russia remains hostile to the military alliance expanding its influence in Moscow's former Soviet backyard.

"We see Georgia as a key strategic partner and stand by your territorial integrity and your aspirations to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," Pence said at talks with Prime

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Pence Says U.S. Backs Georgia in NATO Over Russian Objection
By Helena Bedwell
1 August 2017
Bloomberg

Pence Conveys U.S. Support For Georgia In Visit To Tbilisi
1 August 2017
Radio Free Europe

Pence pledges support for Georgia, condemns Russian moves
By Nataliya Vasilyeva
1 August 2017
Associated Press

During Whirlwind Week in Washington, VP Pence Comforts East European Allies
By Emily Tamkin
1 August 2017
Foreign Policy

VP Pence says Russia's stance must change before ties improve
By Margarita Antidze
1 August 2017
Reuters

In Georgia, Pence says Trump will back toughened sanctions on Russia
By Allen Cone
1 August 2017
UPI

Trump Will Sign Russia Sanctions Law 'Very Soon,' Pence Says
By Sewell Chan
1 August 2017
New York Times

Pence Reaffirms U.S. Solidarity With Georgia, Denounces Russian 'Aggression'
1 August 2017
Radio Free Europe

In Georgia, Pence Assures Eastern Europe of US Backing
By Nana Sajaia
1 August 2017
Voice of America

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Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, on Tuesday. U.S. President Donald Trump "asked me to extend greetings to you this morning and to say we are with you," Pence said.

The vice president is also attending joint military exercises involving as many as 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops during his visit. The Noble Partner 2017 drills, which also include German, U.K., Turkish, Slovenian, Ukrainian and Armenian forces, are the largest in the Caucasus republic since Georgia fought a brief war with Russia in 2008 over the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Pence arrived in Georgia Monday after delivering a similar message in Estonia to leaders of Baltic nations facing the "specter of aggression" from Russia, which he called the greatest threat to their security as NATO members. Georgia wants to join NATO against opposition from Russia, whose annexation of Crimea and involvement in the conflict in eastern Ukraine has strained ties with the U.S. and Europe the most since the Cold War. Russia accuses NATO of seeking to undermine its security by expanding the alliance's presence near its borders.

Spiraling Tensions

The U.S. is monitoring preparations for major Russian exercises planned on NATO's eastern border amid concerns about the scale of the military buildup, the New York Times reported on Tuesday. Some 13,000 troops are to take part in joint military drills from Sept. 14-20 in Russia and neighboring Belarus, according to the Belarusian Defense Ministry, which said Russia will also send about 280 military vehicles to the Zapad 2017 exercises.

Pence's visits to Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro are taking place amid spiraling tensions with Russia after President Vladimir Putin said the U.S. must slash staff at its diplomatic mission by 755, or nearly two-thirds, in retaliation for new sanctions approved by Congress.

Trump "will sign the Russian sanctions bill soon," Pence said at a news conference later with Kvirikashvili. While the U.S. wants better relations, "Russia has to change its behavior" before this can be achieved, he said.

Kvirikashvili said Georgia's facing "daily provocations" from Russia, which has encroached deeper into its territory in recent weeks by shifting the dividing lines with the breakaway regions established after the war. Russia has stationed thousands of troops in Abkhazia and South Ossetia after recognizing them as independent republics. The international community considers the regions as part of Georgia.

'Important Milestone'

NATO declared at a summit shortly before the 2008 war that Georgia will become a member at some point. While it hasn't agreed to accept Georgia since then, partly out of concern about antagonizing Russia, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said in Tbilisi in September that the alliance is committed to the goal and that "the bonds between NATO and Georgia are stronger than ever."

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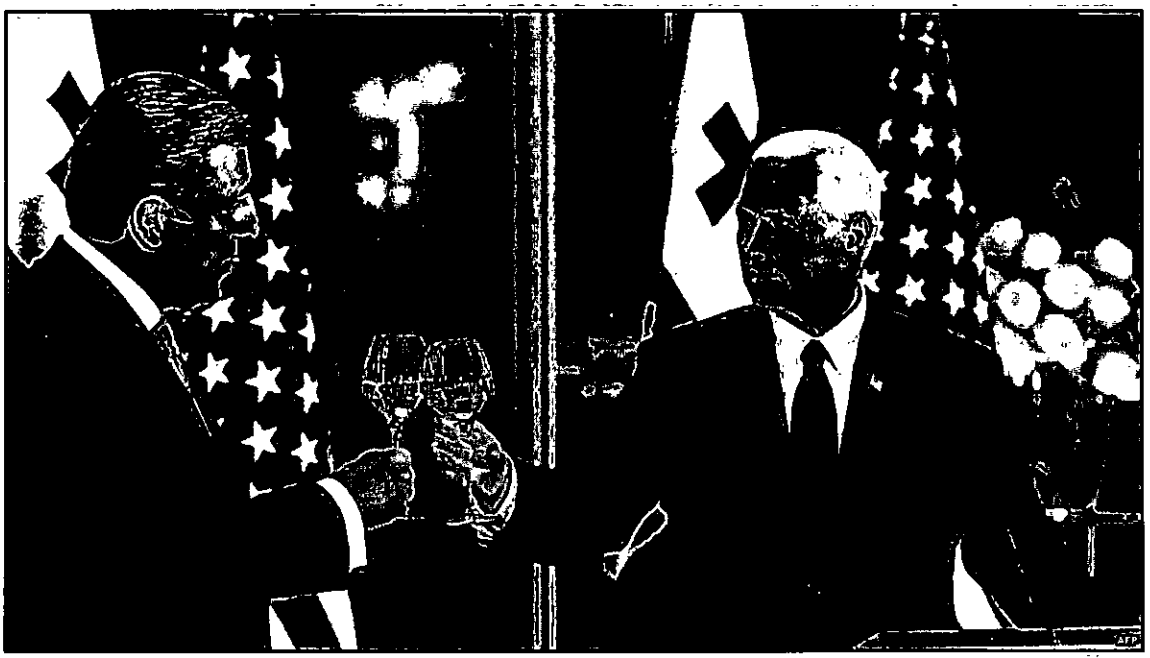
Pence's visit "is an important milestone in the bilateral relationship as we work to further strengthen security, economic, and trade cooperation," Kvirikashvili said Monday after the vice president's arrival.

Two-thirds of Georgians support joining NATO while 23 percent are opposed, according to a survey conducted by the Caucasus Resource Research Centers for the National Democratic Institute. The poll of 2,261 respondents was conducted between June 18 and July 9 with a margin of error of no more than 2.2 percentage points.

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Pence Conveys U.S. Support For Georgia In Visit To Tbilisi

1 August 2017
Radio Free Europe



U.S. Vice President Mike Pence conveyed a message of support from U.S. President Donald Trump to Georgian leaders at an official dinner in Tbilisi late on July 31.

The United States stands with Georgia, Pence said, as he toasted the Caucasus nation for fighting for freedom over the centuries, just as America has.

Pence said America hopes that Georgia prospers and becomes a strong country.

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Pence was greeted by thousands of people when he arrived in Tbilisi, where he will meet on August 1 with Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili, President Giorgi Margvelashvili, Patriarch Ilia II, and representatives of the Georgian opposition.

Pence is also planning to attend joint NATO military exercises being conducted in Georgia. About 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the Noble Partner 2017 drills there.

Pence was greeted at the Tbilisi airport by Kvirikashvili, who said that the visit is "an important milestone in the bilateral relationship as we work to further strengthen security, economic, and trade cooperation between our two countries."

"Vice President Pence's visit sends a strong message about the enduring strength of the relationship between Georgia and the United States," Kvirikashvili said in comments released by the Georgian government.

Pence arrived in the Georgian capital from Estonia, where earlier in the day he reaffirmed Washington's solidarity with the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders" and "undermine democracies."

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions, as have Georgia and the third ally on Pence's itinerary: new NATO member Montenegro.

"No threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said. "At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another."

Article 5 Support

Pence said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty -- the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

In Georgia, officials said Pence will highlight U.S. support for the Caucasus nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity before continuing on to Montenegro.

Georgia has seen Russian encroachment on its territory and has expressed hopes of joining the Western military alliance.

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The visit comes a day after Pence met with the presidents of three NATO countries — Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania — in the Estonian capital of Tallinn and pledged that "an attack on one of us is an attack on us all."

Georgia and the three Baltic nations were all occupied for nearly five decades by Soviet troops before regaining their independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Later on Tuesday Pence will inspect troops taking part in joint U.S.-Georgian military exercises.

Pence's European trip comes several days after the U.S. Senate voted last week to approve the new financial sanctions against Moscow. The legislation bars U.S. President Donald Trump from easing or waiving the penalties on Russia unless Congress agrees.

Pence told reporters on Tuesday that Trump would sign a bill on a new package of U.S. sanctions against Russia, adding the package was "improved significantly."

The bill underwent revisions to address concerns voiced by American oil and natural gas companies that sanctions specific to Russia's energy sector could backfire on them to Moscow's benefit. U.S. lawmakers said they also made adjustments so the sanctions on Russia's energy sector didn't undercut the ability of U.S. allies in Europe to get access to oil and gas resources outside of Russia.

Russia on Friday ordered the U.S. Embassy and three U.S. consulates in Russia to drastically cut its personnel there. President Vladimir Putin said on Sunday that means 755 staffers have to go. Russia also ordered to shut down the U.S. Embassy's recreational compound on the outskirts of Moscow. The Russian leader warned that he has more tricks up his sleeve to hurt the U.S., but he voiced hope that he wouldn't need to use them.

Pence indicated the U.S. was willing to improve ties with Russia but for that to happen "Russia has to change its behavior," he said, referring to Russia's support for separatists in eastern Ukraine and for Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Russia is planning Zapad 2017 military exercises with 13,000 troops near the Baltic states' borders in September, a move that may further strain relations.

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During Whirlwind Week in Washington, VP Pence Comforts East European Allies

By Emily Tamkin
1 August 2017
Foreign Policy

Amid chaos in Washington, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence is in Eastern Europe assuring American allies that the United States is committed to protecting them.

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The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

Margvelashvili said on July 27 that Pence's visit will demonstrate that the United States continues to support Georgia in building a stronger military force.

He highlighted the joint military exercises that will include troops from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, and Armenia.

"The vice president's presence here is definitely showing that this is not only about military exercises, but it is also showing unification with our values, with our foreign policy targets, and showing a clear message that we are together," Margvelashvili said.

On the last stop, Pence will welcome NATO's newest member with his stop in Montenegro, whose accession to the alliance in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica, U.S. officials said.

Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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Pence pledges support for Georgia, condemns Russian moves
By Nataliya Vasilyeva
1 August 2017
Associated Press

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence pledged support Tuesday for the former Soviet republic of Georgia, his second stop on a European trip backing nations that feel threatened by Russian aggression.

Russia and Georgia fought a brief war in 2008, which lead to two breakaway Georgian regions, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, declaring independence. Russia has since been supporting the regions both financially and militarily.

The U.S. "strongly condemns Russia's occupation on Georgian soil," Pence said Tuesday at a joint news conference with the Georgian prime minister in Tbilisi, the Georgian capital. "We will reject any claim at any time by any nation that undermines this enduring principle."

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"We are with you. We stand with the people and nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania — and we always will," Pence said at a joint press availability with the Baltic leaders in Tallinn, even as, back home, President Donald Trump has yet to comment on Russian expulsion of U.S. diplomatic staff.

The vice president participated in a listening session on cyber and innovation with the president of Estonia in Tallinn, and travelled on Tuesday to Tbilisi, where he met with the Georgian prime minister for their third substantive meeting since Pence took office.

"We see Georgia as a key strategic partner and stand by your territorial integrity and your aspirations to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," Pence said at a dinner with Prime Minister Kvirikashvili in Tbilisi. At a joint press conference with Georgia's prime minister, Pence noted that Russia occupies one-fifth of Georgian Territory.

Back in Washington, in the meantime, President Trump has yet to comment personally on a bill that Congress passed imposing tougher sanctions on Russia. The White House press secretary said Friday in a statement that Trump would sign the bill.

Speaking in Tbilisi, Pence said the bill would be signed soon.

From Tbilisi, Pence traveled to the newest NATO member, Montenegro. In May at a NATO summit, President Trump appeared to push Montenegro's prime minister aside during a photo session.

Pence's staid tour abroad is in stark contrast to the roller coaster in Washington this week. On Monday, U.S. President Donald Trump lost a communications director who was brought on roughly a week prior; Jared Kushner, his son in law and advisor, told White House interns the Trump team was too disorganized to have colluded with Russia; and the Washington Post reported the president had dictated a misleading message to his son about a meeting with a Russian lawyer.

Trump's is not the first administration to send a vice president abroad in the president's stead, or to develop relations with diplomats and dignitaries from particular countries — former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden was known as Ukraine's man in Washington.

"Vice President Pence's visit sent a clear message about the enduring strength of the relationship between Georgia and the United States," Georgian Ambassador to the United States David Bakradze told Foreign Policy by email. "This is an important milestone in the bilateral relationship."

The embassies of Estonia and Montenegro did not immediately respond to request for comment.

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During his visit, Pence attended Georgian-American military exercises, which began in Georgia on Sunday. About 2,800 soldiers from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, Armenia and Georgia are taking part in the maneuvers, which will last for two weeks.

On Wednesday, Pence visits Montenegro, which joined NATO in June. The tiny Balkan nation won praise from Washington for joining despite pressure against the move from Russia.

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In Georgia, Pence says Trump will back toughened sanctions on Russia
By Allen Cone
1 August 2017
UPI

Vice President Mike Pence on Tuesday pledged U.S. support for Georgia, a former Soviet republic, and said President Donald Trump "very soon" will approve stronger sanctions against Russia.

Georgia, which fought a brief war with Russia in 2008, is among Eastern European nations that feel threatened by the Russian regime, which annexed Crimea from Ukraine in 2014. That aggression led to existing U.S. sanctions against the Kremlin, which Congress moved to strengthen last week.

"At this very moment, just 40 miles from where we stand, Russian tanks stand on occupied territory in South Ossetia," Pence said at a joint news conference in Tbilisi Tuesday, the Georgian capital, with Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili. "Today, Russia continues to occupy one-fifth of Georgian territory.

"So to be clear: The United States of America strongly condemns Russia's occupation on Georgia's soil."

On Monday, Pence met with the presidents of three NATO countries -- Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania -- and said "an attack on one of us is an attack on us all."

The three Baltic nations, along with Georgia, were all occupied for nearly five decades by Soviet troops before regaining independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Pence also met U.S. and Georgian troops taking part in a joint military exercise called "Noble Partner".

"America first does not mean America only," Pence said. "We are here to tell our friends in Georgia, we are with you. We stand with you and will stand with you as you pursue membership in NATO."

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VP Pence says Russia's stance must change before ties improve
By Margarita Antidze
1 August 2017
Reuters

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence said on Tuesday that relations with Russia would not improve until Moscow changed its stance on Ukraine and withdrew support for "regimes like Iran and Syria and North Korea".

The U.S. Congress voted last week for new sanctions on Russia and, at a news conference in Georgia's capital Tbilisi, Pence said the "lifting of sanctions will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place".

"Russia's destabilizing activities in Ukraine, their support for rogue regimes like Iran and Syria and North Korea ... their posture has to change," he said at a joint news conference with Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili.

Pence said U.S. President Donald Trump would sign the new sanctions on Russia into law this week and said that Trump and Congress were "speaking with a unified voice".

Keeping to previous U.S. administrations' line, Pence also condemned Russia's presence in Georgia.

Moscow, whose annexation of Crimea in 2014 prompted U.S. and EU sanctions, still has troops stationed in Georgia after a 2008 war over the breakaway region of South Ossetia, backing Georgia's Abkhazia, a region also controlled by pro-Russian separatists.

Pence also said the U.S. was still behind Georgia's application to become a member of NATO.

"We'll continue to work closely with this prime minister and the government of Georgia broadly to advance the policies that will facilitate becoming a NATO member," he said.

NATO promised Georgia membership in 2008, and three ex-Soviet Baltic nations - Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania - are already members. Pence has reassured them during this tour that Washington firmly backs NATO's doctrine of collective defense.

In the Estonian capital of Tallinn on Monday, he assured them of U.S. support if they faced aggression from Russia.

Asked about Pence's visit, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said nations had the right to choose their partners.

"The only problem for us, is when this involves the expanding of various alliances and their infrastructure toward our borders. This is a cause of concern for us," Peskov told reporters on a conference call.

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At least in terms of diplomatic policy, the bet Russia might have made when, according to American intelligence agencies, it interfered in last year's presidential election in the United States has backfired in spectacular fashion. The legislation was revised, however, to address concerns by American oil and natural gas companies that do business with Russia's energy sector.

Though he was asked by a reporter about the election interference, Mr. Pence did not explicitly address it, reiterating instead the administration's concerns about Russia's "destabilizing activities," including "efforts to support rogue regimes."

In a brief visit to the Georgian capital, Mr. Pence delivered a message of reassurance to Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili. Russia and Georgia, both former republics of the Soviet Union, fought a brief war in August 2008; since then, Russia has continued to occupy the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in violation of international law.

"In a sign of our commitment, very soon, President Trump will sign legislation to strengthen and codify the United States' sanctions against Russia," Mr. Pence said. "As always, our country prefers a constructive relationship with Russia based on cooperation and common interests."

But, Mr. Pence said, the current state of the relationship between the United States and Russia demanded a different approach. "The president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia," he said. "A better relationship, the lifting of sanctions will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place."

On Sunday, in retaliation for the sanctions legislation, President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia ordered the dismissal of 755 employees from the United States diplomatic missions in the country. Most of the employees will be local Russians working in the embassy in Moscow and consulates in three other cities, but diplomats are bracing for what a former ambassador has called "a shock to the system."

Mr. Pence said on Tuesday that Mr. Putin's actions would not sway the United States, echoing a message he delivered on Monday in Estonia, where he reassured leaders of the three Baltic nations — the others are Lithuania and Latvia — of the American commitment to NATO's collective defense clause, known as Article 5.

"We hope for better days, and we hope for better relations with Russia, but the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow, I can assure, will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, to that of our allies and to freedom-loving nations around the world like Georgia," Mr. Pence said.

While in Georgia, Mr. Pence inspected troops taking part in a joint United States-Georgian military exercise, which Mr. Pence called "a visible sign of our commitment to Georgia's sovereignty and to her internationally recognized borders."

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"The United States supports Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders," Pence added. "And under President Donald Trump, the United States of America will object to any claim at any time by any nation that undermines this enduring principle."

Pence said Trump will "very soon" sign legislation that would impose additional economic sanctions on Russia.

The sanctions bill was overwhelmingly passed by Congress last week, and in response Moscow demanded that Washington drastically reduce its diplomatic staff in Russia.

"We hope for better relations with Russia," Pence said. "But the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow, I can assure you, will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, that of our allies, and the freedom-loving nations around the world, like Georgia."

The relationship between Washington and Moscow has been badly damaged by Russia's aggression in Ukraine, its role in the war in Syria, and its alleged interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Pence also reiterated that the United States "strongly" supports the Caucasus country's aspirations to become a NATO member.

"I commended the prime minister for Georgia's democratic development, which has brought Georgia closer to unity with Europe and membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," he said. "Further progress on the goals that the prime minister has set will bring Georgia even closer and NATO even closer to your grasp and it will strengthen the bond between our nations."

Pence also met on August 1 with the leaders of the Georgian opposition and addressed troops participating in NATO joint military exercises being conducted in Georgia, saying, "We stand here today in the gap -- on a front line of freedom, a front line compromised by Russian aggression nearly a decade ago."

Pence met earlier on August 1 with the leaders of the Georgian opposition and was also planning to attend NATO joint military exercises being conducted in Georgia. About 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the Noble Partner 2017 drills there.

At an official dinner in the Georgian capital late on July 31, Pence said, "We stand with you, for your freedom and for our shared values."

Kvirikashvili said the United States "has a dedicated friend in Georgia, a stable geopolitical ally, and a strategic partner."

In comments released earlier by the Georgian government, Kvirikashvili described Pence's visit as "an important milestone in the bilateral relationship as we work to further strengthen security, economic, and trade cooperation between our two countries."

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Mr. Pence also responded to reports that the Russian military was preparing to send as many as 100,000 troops to neighboring Belarus, on the eastern edge of NATO territory, at the end of the summer, as part of a show of force.

"The current Russian exercises, which news reports today suggest will move up to 100,000 Russian troops into Belarus, is simply a confirmation of the importance of clarity within the NATO partnership," Mr. Pence said.

He portrayed the legislation on sanctions as "a very clear message that we mean what we say and say what we mean: that Russia's destabilizing activities in Ukraine, their support for rogue regimes like Iran and Syria and North Korea, that their posture has to change."

Mr. Pence also reiterated criticisms that Mr. Trump had frequently made of his predecessor, President Barack Obama. "It's been a lack of clarity and commitment by the United States that's created much of the instability in the world today," he said.

He then referred to the "red line" warning that Mr. Obama made to Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, in 2012 over the use of chemical weapons. Mr. Assad's forces carried out such an attack the next year in a Damascus suburb, largely without repercussions.

"When in the past America had spoken of red lines and not followed through on red lines, many argue that that emboldened others to act in ways that they would not have," Mr. Pence said.

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Pence Reaffirms U.S. Solidarity With Georgia, Denounces Russian 'Aggression'
1 August 2017
Radio Free Europe

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence has reaffirmed Washington's support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity during a visit to Tbilisi and denounced Russia's "aggression" and "occupation" of Georgian territory.

"America stands with Georgia," Pence said on August 1 at a joint press conference with Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili.

"Today, Russia continues to occupy one-fifth of Georgian territory," Pence said. "So, to be clear -- the United States of America strongly condemns Russia's occupation on Georgia's soil."

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

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Pence arrived in Tbilisi from Estonia, where he reaffirmed Washington's solidarity with the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders" and "undermine democracies."

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions, as have Georgia and the third ally on Pence's itinerary: new NATO member Montenegro.

"No threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said. "At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another."

Pence also said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty -- the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica, U.S. officials said.

Montenegro accession to NATO in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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In Georgia, Pence Assures Eastern Europe of US Backing
By Nana Sajaia
1 August 2017
Voice of America

On the latest leg of his first official tour of Eastern Europe, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence assured regional allies the United States will stand by their side.

Facing a crowd of Georgian and international journalists at government offices in Tbilisi, Pence, standing alongside his host, Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili, said America first does not mean America alone.

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Pence said Trump will sign legislation to "strengthen and codify" U.S. sanctions against Russia. The proposal, overwhelmingly approved by the House and Senate, bars Trump from easing or waiving penalties on Russia unless Congress agrees.

Pence said that legislation "improved significantly" when it moved through Congress, and added the sanctions are stronger but are "giving the president of the United States and our State Department the ability and the flexibility to be able to administer American foreign policy as appropriate."

On Sunday, Russian President Vladimir Putin told the United States it must reduce its diplomatic staff by 755 to match the reduction of Russians in the United States.

"As always, our country prefers a constructive relationship with Russia based on cooperation and common interests," Pence said Tuesday. "But the president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia: A better relationship, the lifting of sanctions will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place.

"We hope for better days, and we hope for better relations with Russia, but the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow I can assure will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, to that of our allies, and to freedom-loving nations around the world like Georgia."

Besides working with Georgia "to reduce your vulnerabilities and counter Russian aggression," the vice president said the United States wants to work with the nation "to deepen our ties of commerce."

Pence next visits Montenegro, also a NATO member.

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Trump Will Sign Russia Sanctions Law 'Very Soon,' Pence Says
By Sewell Chan
1 August 2017
New York Times

President Trump will "very soon" sign a law limiting his ability to lift sanctions against Russia, even though he has "concerns" about the measure, Vice President Mike Pence said on Tuesday.

The announcement during a visit to Tbilisi, Georgia, comes as no surprise, because the Trump administration had signaled it would not stand in the law's way. But it nonetheless carries significance: It is the first time that Congress, with both houses controlled by Mr. Trump's fellow Republicans, has imposed its will on the administration on a major policy matter, and the legislation has helped bring relations between Russia and the United States to one of its lowest points since the Cold War.

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"President Trump has sent me with the simple message to you and to the people of Georgia, we are with you, we stand with you ... America stands with Georgia," said Pence.

The vice president came to Georgia, the only non-NATO member country on his itinerary, from Estonia, a model of a successful EU-leaning transformation, before heading to Montenegro, NATO's newest member.

Pence is the highest-ranking American official of the current administration to visit Georgia and the larger Caucasus region.

"Thanks to your help, Georgia is no longer a Soviet or a post-Soviet country," said Kvirikashvili at Tuesday's joint press conference. "Today we are a democracy closely associated with the European Union."

Kvirikashvili's comments, in which he touted Georgia's role as "a key strategic partner of America," come amid an ongoing partial Russian occupation.

About 60 kilometers from the news conference, Russian tank units maintain control over 20 percent of Georgian terrain, a holdover from the August 2008 five-day war.

Pence reiterated the U.S. non-recognition policy regarding the Russian-occupied zone, condemning Moscow's presence on Georgian soil, what many observers describe as an evolving, "creeping" occupation.

"President Trump has called on Russia to cease its destabilizing activities," Pence said, adding that President Donald Trump will soon sign sanctions against Russia.

"Our country prefers a constructive relations with Russia, based on cooperation and common interest. But the president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia: a better relationship, lifting of sanctions, will require Russia to reverse actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place."

'Reset' jitters

Former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden visited Georgia about a year after the 2008 war. Biden's visit came shortly after the Obama administration's "reset" policy with Russia, which caused concern among many Europeans that the United States would give Moscow a pass for its invasion of Georgia.

Years later, Russia annexed Crimea and destabilized Eastern Ukraine, which led the West to unilaterally impose sanctions on Russia.

Both Georgia and Ukraine are aspiring NATO members. Some observers argue Georgia's 2008 war and Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea could have been avoided if those countries hadn't been denied Membership Action Plan status at NATO's Bucharest summit in April, 2008.

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"President Trump and I stand by the 2008 NATO Bucharest statement, which made it clear that Georgia, one day, will become a member of NATO," said Pence.

According to recent nationwide polls carried by National Democratic Institute, 66 percent of Georgia's population approves of the government's stated goal to join NATO. Sixty-two percent of Georgians say the country should join the European Union. Both organizations are largely seen as security instruments that would protect Georgia independence and development.

2017 represents the 25th anniversary of U.S.-Georgian diplomatic relations.

George W. Bush is the only U.S. president who has visited Georgia, which he called "a beacon of democracy."

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Mike Pence promises US and NATO support for Georgia in Tbilisi
By Dan Alexe
1 August 2017
New Europe

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence pledged Washington's support to Georgian leaders as he met with Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili in Tbilisi.

"We see Georgia as a key strategic partner and stand by your territorial integrity and your aspirations to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," Pence said.

Georgia has been going through Russian occupation of parts of its territory and has expressed hopes of joining NATO.

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

Kvirikashvili said the United States "has a dedicated friend in Georgia, a stable geopolitical ally, and a strategic partner."

Vice president Pence is also planning to attend the NATO joint military exercises being conducted in Georgia. About 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the Noble Partner 2017 drills there.

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Pence arrived in Tbilisi from Estonia, where he reaffirmed Washington's solidarity with the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders" and "undermine democracies."

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions, as have Georgia and the third ally on Pence's itinerary: new NATO member Montenegro.

Pence said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty — the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

On the last stop, Pence will visit Montenegro, whose accession to NATO in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica.

Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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Pence: Reversing Sanctions Requires Russia to Change
1 August 2017
Voice of America

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence says diplomatic actions taken by Russian in response to fresh sanctions will not deter U.S. commitment to its security and that of its allies.

Speaking Tuesday during a visit to Georgia, Pence said the sanctions bill President Donald Trump will soon sign sends a "very clear message" that with Russia's activities in Ukraine and its support for Iran and Syria, its "posture has to change."

Congress overwhelmingly passed the sanctions bill punishing Russia for interference in the 2016 U.S. election, while also imposing new measures on Iran and North Korea. Russia responded by ordering the U.S. to cut its overall staff of more than 1,200 in Russia by 755 people.

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"The president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia: a better relationship, the lifting of sanctions, will require Russia to reverse the actions that required sanctions to be imposed in the first place," Pence said.

Pence is on a multi-nation tour meant to show U.S. support for its allies in the region.

He said after a meeting with Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili in Tbilisi that the United States will work with Georgia to counter Russian aggression and "seek a peaceful resolution" that restores the country's internationally recognized borders.

In 2008, Russia intervened militarily in Georgia, and later recognized the breakaway republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states. A few other countries also recognize that independence, though the vast majority of nations consider the areas still as part of Georgia.

"The United States supports Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders, and under President Donald Trump the United States of America will reject any claim at any time by any nation that undermines this enduring principle," Pence said.

The vice president is also traveling Tuesday to Montenegro, NATO's newest member.

No response yet to Putin

Russia's retaliation for the U.S. sanctions is believed to be the single largest cut ever imposed on the U.S. embassy in Moscow and consulates elsewhere in Russia, although many of those to be dismissed are likely Russians working in support positions.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said the cuts would leave both Russia and the U.S. with the same number of staff and diplomats in Washington and Moscow, respectively - 455.

President Donald Trump has been silent on the issue since Putin announced his action. Asked about this Monday, White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said, "Right now we are reviewing our options, and when we have something to say on it we will let you know."

The U.S. State Department said the order to reduce the number of American diplomats in Russia was "a regrettable and uncalled for act." A spokesman said U.S. officials are assessing how to respond to Putin.

A Russian analyst, Nikolai Petrov of the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, said the move reflects the Kremlin's disillusionment with President Trump: "These measures are tough, and it is linked to a deep disappointment that came after the euphoria linked to the arrival of Donald Trump [to power], and to the idea that today we will start our relations anew."

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Another Russian analyst, Gleb Pavlovsky, said a return to Cold War-era hostilities with the U.S. will only boost Putin's popularity at home ahead of another likely bid for the Russian presidency next year.

Pavlovsky, a former political consultant for the Kremlin who is now president of the Foundation for Effective Politics in Moscow, explained how U.S. efforts to "punish" Putin may have the opposite effect: "American sanctions naturally are causing a definite mass reaction [in Russia] - an anti-American, pro-Putin reaction." If Putin wished, Pavlovsky added, he could make the American sanctions the centerpiece of his re-election campaign next year.

Russians will feel cutback

Other experts say the vital work of the U.S. embassy in Moscow will continue despite the massive cuts. Steven Pifer, a former U.S. diplomat now with the Brookings Institution, told VOA that Russians also may discover some unintended consequences of their president's crackdown on U.S. diplomacy.

"My assumption is hundreds of Russians are going to lose their jobs now," Pifer said. "And when you're looking at priority functions of the embassy, you know, visa functions are important but they're not as important as other functions. So my guess is that those Russians [who] want to travel to the United States are going to find that visa processing is going to take longer than usual because of reduced staff in the consular section."

Pifer was assigned to the U.S. embassy in Moscow in 1986, at a time when there were several back-and-forth expulsions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. He later served on the National Security Council under former President Bill Clinton, and was ambassador to Ukraine from 1998-2000.

During his time in the Russian capital, Pifer said, American staff were called upon for "all-purpose duty" at times when Russian support staff were unavailable for political reasons.

"So, five or six days out of every seven, I would work on my normal portfolio, which is arms control," Pifer recalled. "And then one day, I'd drive a truck. And the embassy got by. There was actually this incredible spirit in the embassy that we were going to show the Soviets that this kind of action was not going to cramp the embassy."

Pifer said he expects the same determined spirit from U.S. embassy personnel now.

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VP Pence says Trump will sign Russia sanctions soon
1 August 2017
Associated Press

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence says President Donald Trump will sign a bill on a new package of sanctions against Russia.

The Senate voted last week to approve the new financial sanctions against Moscow. The legislation bars Trump from easing or waiving the penalties on Russia unless Congress agrees.

Pence, who is visiting the former Soviet republic of Georgia Tuesday, said the Trump administration "had concerns" about the bill when it was drafted in the Senate, but that Trump will sign it soon.

Russia on Friday ordered the U.S. Embassy and three U.S. consulates in Russia to drastically cut its personnel there. President Vladimir Putin said on Sunday it would mean 755 staffers will have to be dismissed.

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Embassy Reductions Won't Deter U.S., Pence Says
By Michael Shear
31 July 2017
New York Times

Vice President Mike Pence responded aggressively on Monday to the decision by President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia to order the shedding of 755 positions at the United States Embassy in Moscow, even as President Trump remained silent on the escalating diplomatic row.

Traveling in Eastern Europe, Mr. Pence delivered a blunt message for Mr. Putin, noting that "recent diplomatic actions taken by Moscow will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, that of our allies and to freedom-loving nations around the world."

Mr. Pence said that while Mr. Trump remains "open to a better relationship" with Russia, he warned that "the United States rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation or malign influence in the Baltic States or against any of our treaty allies."

Mr. Putin over the weekend ordered that the embassy work force be trimmed by Sept. 1, responding to legislation approved last week by Congress to impose new sanctions on Russia for its meddling in the 2016 presidential election. The legislation also imposes additional sanctions on Iran and North Korea.

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Mr. Trump passed up several public opportunities on Monday to condemn the action, which includes American diplomats and Russian employees. As president, his posture toward Mr. Putin has been closely watched during a congressional inquiry into Russian election meddling and a special counsel investigation on the issue.

"Right now we're reviewing our options, and when we have something to say on it, we'll let you know," said Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the White House press secretary.

Ms. Sanders also declined to say when Mr. Trump planned to sign the sanctions legislation, which passed with overwhelming, veto-proof majorities in both the House and the Senate. On Friday, the White House said the president would sign the bill but had initially suggested it was an improper attempt by Congress to exercise the president's foreign policy powers.

Mr. Trump's silence on the new dispute with Russia struck some veteran foreign policy experts as a sign of weakness as he faces a dramatic diplomatic offense by a major adversary.

"Why is he not denouncing? It's a very weak signal that he's sending," said Michael McFaul, a Stanford University professor who served as ambassador to Russia under former President Barack Obama.

Mr. McFaul said that removing 755 people from the United States Embassy in Moscow — about two-thirds of the personnel in the compound — would severely affect the work that American diplomats do there. That includes processing visa applications for Russians seeking to visit the United States.

He also noted that a statement by the State Department called the Russian action "regrettable and uncalled-for." But Mr. McFaul said that previous administrations would have condemned the expulsion more strenuously and would have made sure the American president responded directly to his counterpart in Russia.

"That he chose not to was striking to me," Mr. McFaul said. "He's on Twitter all the time. If he has something to say, it would take him 10 seconds to say it."

Russian officials said over the weekend that Mr. Putin's diplomatic move was retaliation for the sanctions legislation, promising to go even further if the United States imposed additional economic restrictions in the future.

"This retaliation is long, long overdue," Sergei Ryabkov, Russia's deputy foreign minister, said on ABC's "This Week" on Sunday. Mr. Ryabkov called the sanctions legislation "completely weird and unacceptable" and said that in response to any more moves by the United States, "we will respond in kind."

"We will mirror this," he added. "We will retaliate."

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While Mr. Trump remained silent on Monday, Mr. Pence used his trip to Estonia to underscore a tougher stance for the Baltic nations toward Russia and its aggression in the region. He will visit Georgia and Montenegro later on his trip.

In a speech at Kadriorg Palace in Tallinn, the presidential residence of Estonia, Mr. Pence said he brought a message from Mr. Trump that "we are with you." In the speech, Mr. Pence reiterated the president's call for Russia to end "destabilizing activities in Ukraine and elsewhere."

"The United States will continue to hold Russia accountable for its actions — and we call on our European allies and friends to do the same," Mr. Pence said.

The vice president also explicitly promised that the United States would meet its obligations under NATO's Article 5 mutual defense pledge to come to the aid of a member nation who is attacked. Mr. Trump made a similar statement this summer after earlier refusing to say so directly.

Mr. Pence said that Mr. Trump would sign the sanctions legislation "very soon."

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Vice President Pence in Europe: Georgia
By Office of the Vice President
1 August 2017
The White House

Vice President Mike Pence's next stop on his visit to Eastern Europe was Georgia. Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili and the Vice President met to discuss how the United States, under President Donald Trump, strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgia's soil. Following his meetings, the Vice President and Second Lady Karen Pence toured the Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition, a symbol of the ancient faith that fills Georgia's ancient land, with Patriarch Ilias II and Father Giorgi Zviadadze. Vice President Pence also addressed American and Georgian troops at Exercise Noble Partner where he discussed our shared commitment to promote security and stability across the wider world. Following his speech, the Vice President departed for Montenegro, the last stop of his visit to Eastern Europe.

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During Whirlwind Week in Washington, VP Pence Comforts East European Allies
By Emily Tamkin
1 August 2017
The Cable: Foreign Policy

Amid chaos in Washington, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence is in Eastern Europe assuring American allies that the United States is committed to protecting them.

"We are with you. We stand with the people and nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania — and we always will," Pence said at a joint press availability with the Baltic leaders in Tallinn, even as, back home, President Donald Trump has yet to comment on Russian expulsion of U.S. diplomatic staff.

The vice president participated in a listening session on cyber and innovation with the president of Estonia in Tallinn, and travelled on Tuesday to Tbilisi, where he met with the Georgian prime minister for their third substantive meeting since Pence took office.

"We see Georgia as a key strategic partner and stand by your territorial integrity and your aspirations to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," Pence said at a dinner with Prime Minister Kvirikashvili in Tbilisi. At a joint press conference with Georgia's prime minister, Pence noted that Russia occupies one-fifth of Georgian Territory.

Back in Washington, in the meantime, President Trump has yet to comment personally on a bill that Congress passed imposing tougher sanctions on Russia. The White House press secretary said Friday in a statement that Trump would sign the bill.

Speaking in Tbilisi, Pence said the bill would be signed soon.

From Tbilisi, Pence traveled to the newest NATO member, Montenegro. In May at a NATO summit, President Trump appeared to push Montenegro's prime minister aside during a photo session.

Pence's staid tour abroad is in stark contrast to the roller coaster in Washington this week. On Monday, U.S. President Donald Trump lost a communications director who was brought on roughly a week prior; Jared Kushner, his son in law and advisor, told White House interns the Trump team was too disorganized to have colluded with Russia; and the *Washington Post* reported the president had dictated a misleading message to his son about a meeting with a Russian lawyer.

Trump's is not the first administration to send a vice president abroad in the president's stead, or to develop relations with diplomats and dignitaries from particular countries — former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden was known as Ukraine's man in Washington.

"Vice President Pence's visit sent a clear message about the enduring strength of the relationship between Georgia and the United States," Georgian Ambassador to the United States David Bakradze told Foreign Policy by email. "This is an important milestone in the bilateral relationship."

"In short," a representative from the Estonian Embassy in Washington, D.C. relayed to FP, "we consider the trip a great success."

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The embassy of Montenegro did not immediately respond to request for comment.

Update, Aug. 1 2017, 4:16 pm ET: This piece was updated to include comment from the Estonian Embassy.

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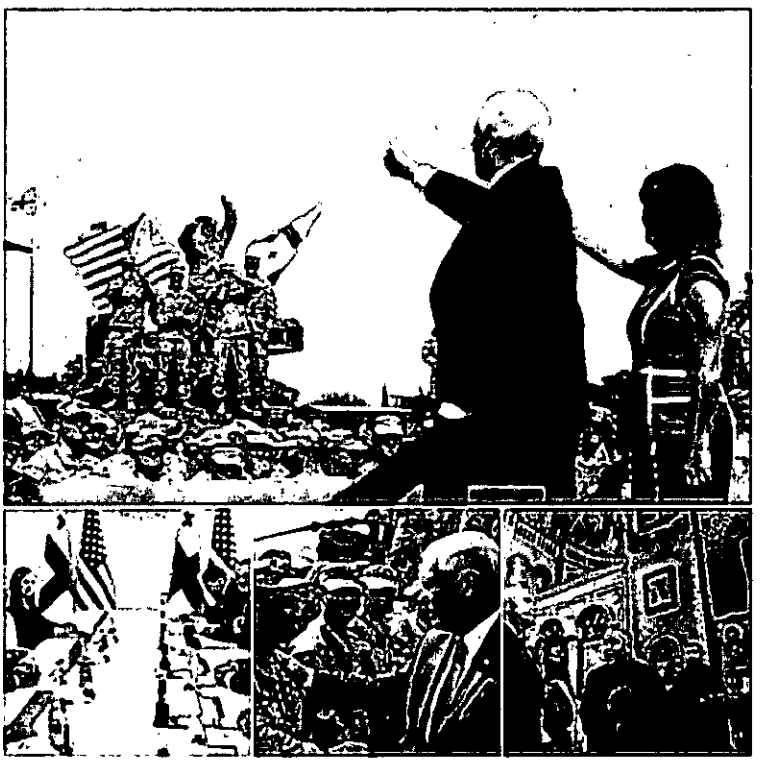
Social Media Coverage

Prominent Facebook Posts on the VP Trip

Vice President Mike Pence

Vice President Mike Pence added 4 new photos
2 hrs

#VPinEurope Photos of the Day: Karen and I landed in Georgia last night and were welcomed by Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili and his wife, Maia. Today, the Prime Minister and I met and I told him that the United States of America, under President Donald J. Trump, strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgia's soil. Following our productive discussions, we toured the Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition, a symbol of the ancient faith that fills Georgia's ancient land, with Patriarch Ilias II and Father Giorgi Zviadadze. To conclude our visit to Georgia, I spoke with American and Georgian troops at Exercise Noble Partner and discussed our shared commitment to promote security and stability across the wider world. Today we recommit ourselves to the cause of security, prosperity, and freedom for the people of Georgia.



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White House Official Facebook Page

Albums > Vice President Pen.

Vice President Pence's Trip to Europe

24 Photos Updated 2 hours ago

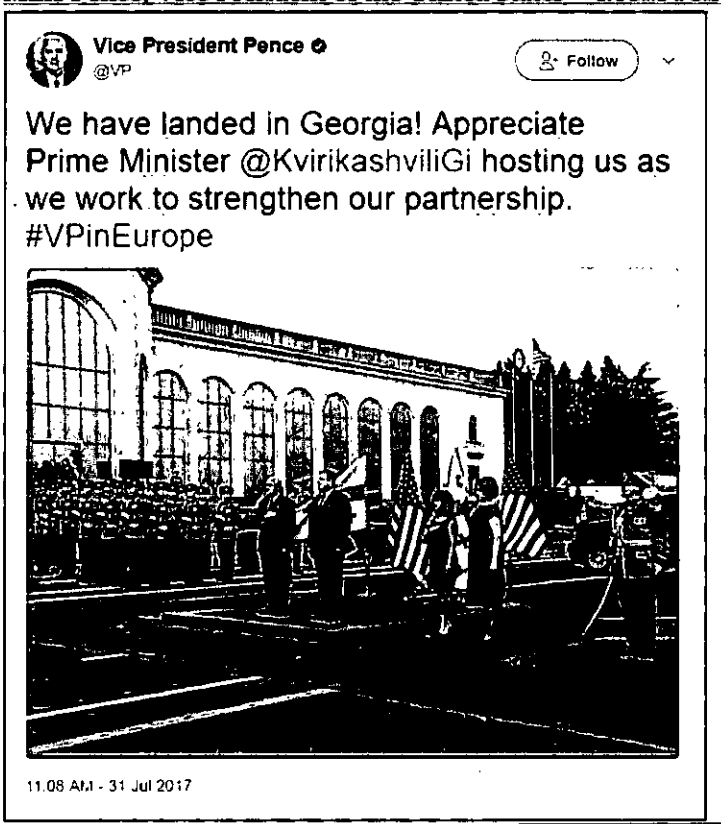


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Prominent Tweets on VP Visit

Mike Pence, Vice President of the United States – 4.08M Followers







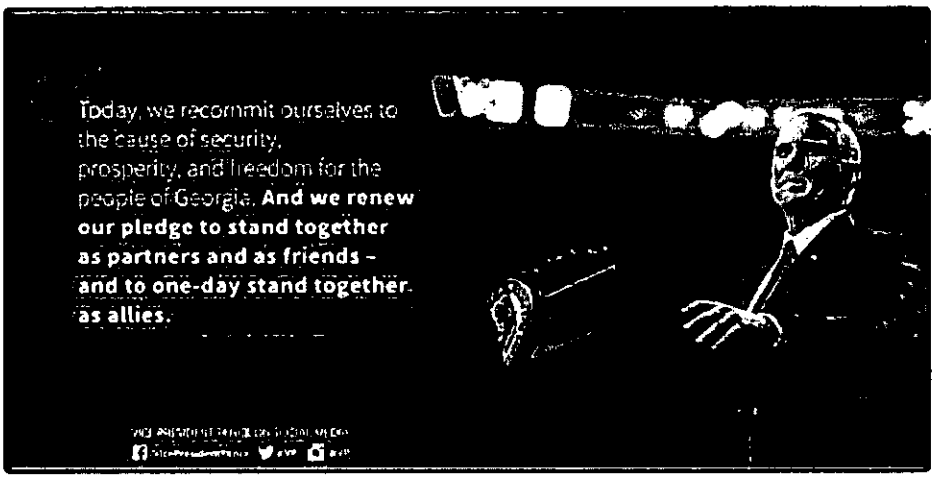
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Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

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Today, we recommit ourselves to the cause of security, prosperity, and freedom for the people of Georgia. #VPinEurope

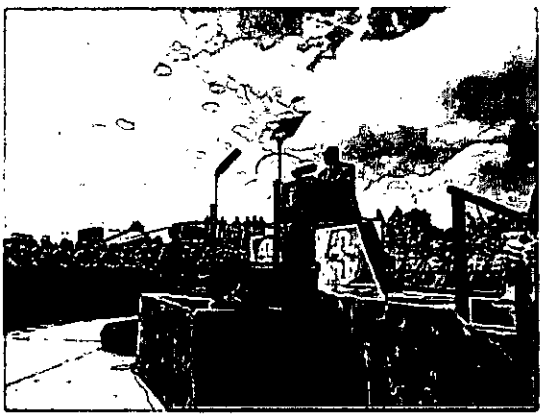


4:34 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

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A better relationship will require Russia to reverse actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place. #VPinEurope

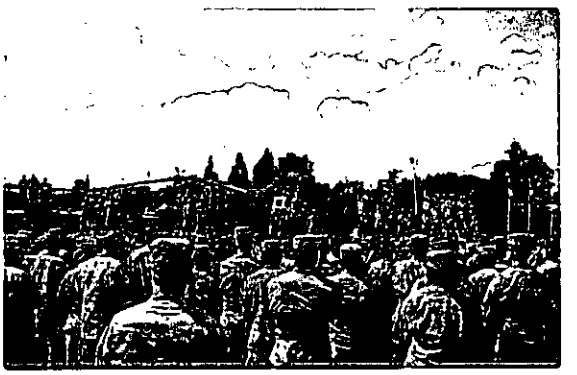


1:32 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

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We stand here today in the gap - on a front line of freedom, compromised by Russian aggression nearly a decade ago. #VPinEurope



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Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

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The rise of adversaries new and old requires renewed strength and resolve by all who cherish freedom. #VPinEurope



4:31 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

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Karen & I visited Sioni Cathedral a symbol of the faith that fills Georgia's ancient land. Thanks Patriarch Ilia II & Fr Zviadze #VPinEurope

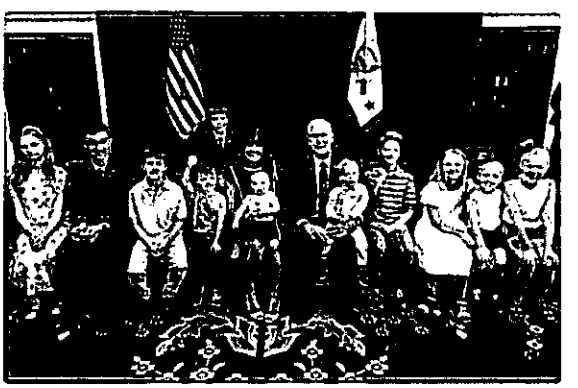


4:01 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

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Karen & I spoke w/ dedicated @EmbassyTbilisi staff members & their families & thanked them for the great work they do for the US #VPinEurope



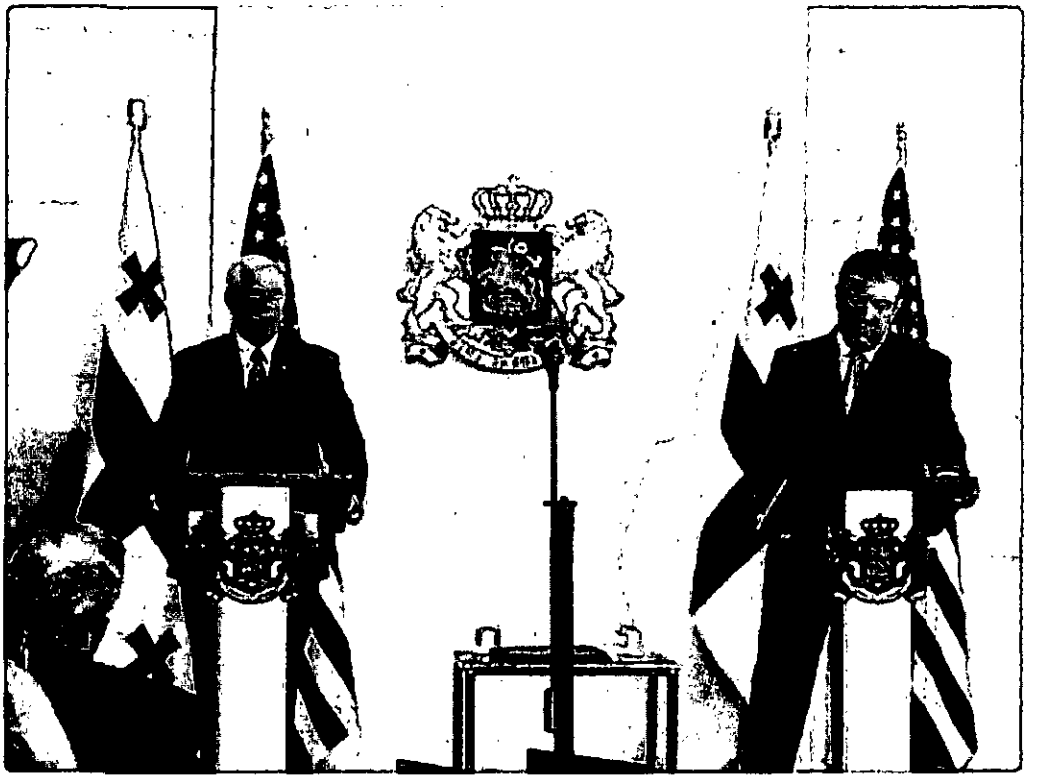
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Vice President Pence @VP · 7h

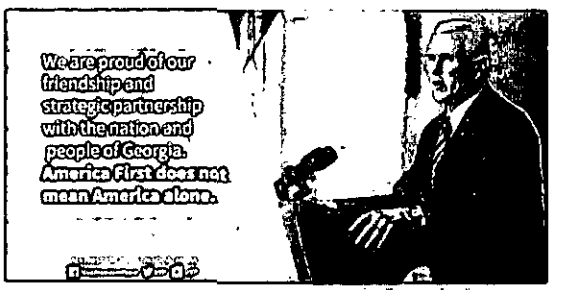
It is heartening to see that Georgia already exceeds NATO's goal of spending two percent of gross domestic product on defense. #VPinEurope



102 433 1.7K

Vice President Pence @VP Follow

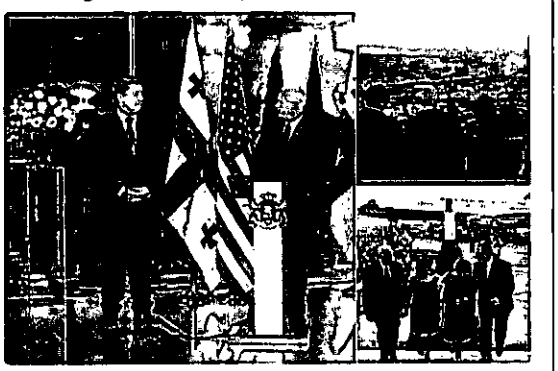
We are proud of our friendship and partnership with the nation and people of Georgia. America First does not mean America alone. #VPinEurope



12:45 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence @VP Follow

Thanks @KvirikashviliGi & Maia for welcoming Karen & I to Georgia yesterday. We enjoyed Tbilisi, looking forward to our meetings #VPinEurope



10:09 PM - 31 Jul 2017

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Karen Pence, Second Lady of the United States – 235K Followers





John McCain, U.S. Senator – 2.39M Followers

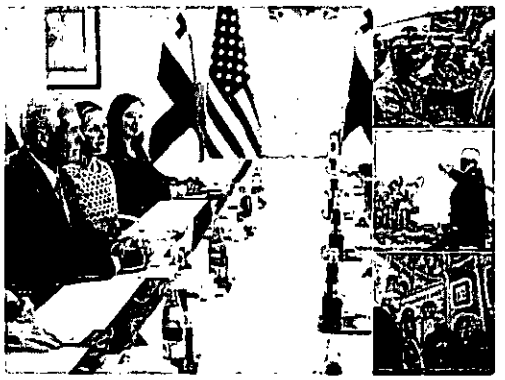


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Vice President Pence
@VP
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#VPinEurope Day 3: Visited @EmbassyTbilisi families, met w/ PM @KvirikashviliGi & spoke to US & Georgia troops at Exercise Noble Partner



9:38 AM - 1 Aug 2017

White House Official Twitter – 15.1M Followers

The White House
@WhiteHouse
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Catch up with #VPinEurope:



Vice President Pence in Eastern Europe

Vice President Pence @VP

On behalf of President Donald Trump, Vice President Mike Pence is in Eastern Europe to meet with leaders from Estonia, Georgia, and Montenegro. Stay connected on his social media channels to follow...

Moments

11:21 AM - 1 Aug 2017

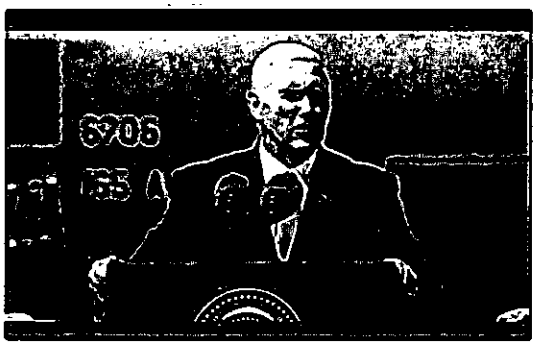
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Mark Knoller, CBS News White House Correspondent – 301K Followers

Mark Knoller
@markknoller
Follow

In Tblisi, addressing US and Georgian troops. @VP declares the US "strongly condemns Russian occupation of Georgian soil."



4:35 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Mark Knoller
@markknoller
Follow

Declaring Georgia's "future is in the west," the @VP reaffirmed US support for Georgia's eventual membership in @NATO.



4:58 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Mark Knoller
@markknoller
Follow

Earlier, VP and Mrs Pence visited Tblisi's Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition. They toured, lit candles and spent a moment in prayer.



1:58 AM - 1 Aug 2017

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Government Statements and Releases

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and U.S. Vice President Mike Pence Agree to Further Enhance Georgia-US Security and Economic Cooperation
1 August 2017
Government of Georgia (Press Release)

Readout of Second Lady Karen Pence's Visit to Tbilisi, Georgia
Office of the Second Lady
1 August 2017
White House

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and U.S. Vice President Mike Pence Agree to Further Enhance Georgia-US Security and Economic Cooperation
1 August 2017
Government of Georgia (Press Release)

Tbilisi, 1st August 2017 – Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili today met with United States Vice President Mike Pence to discuss expanding future security and economic cooperation between Georgia and the U.S. Last night, Kvirikashvili hosted Vice President Pence and the American delegation for dinner in Tbilisi.

"Vice President Pence's visit so shortly after taking office bears witness to his and President Trump's great desire to deepen the strategic partnership and friendship with Georgia, for which I am very grateful," stated Prime Minister Kvirikashvili. "The Georgian nation deeply appreciates the American people's friendship, solidarity, and strong support."

During their meeting, Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and Vice President Pence discussed the U.S.-Georgian security partnership in depth. Following the meeting, the Vice President met with Georgian and U.S. soldiers participating in the Noble Partner exercise, a U.S. Army-led exercise to support the training, evaluation and eventual certification of Georgia's second light infantry company contribution to the NATO Response Force (NRF).

"The Vice President's meeting with Georgian and American service members participating in the Noble Partner exercises is an unmistakable demonstration of the strong U.S. support for spurring our country's sovereignty and integration into NATO," affirmed Prime Minister Kvirikashvili. "The special bonds and extraordinary sacrifices of our two militaries -- currently fighting extremism together -- is something to behold. Georgia and the U.S. are truly brothers in arms."

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and Vice President Pence also held productive discussions about furthering the economic partnership between Georgia and the U.S. Georgia's Anaklia Port on the Black Sea, which will become a focal point in trade between Europe and Asia, is being built by an American-Georgian consortium, led by U.S. company Conti. SSA Marine, another U.S. company, will

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operate it. The two leaders also discussed potential steps for moving forward with a bilateral free trade agreement between the two countries.

During the visit, Vice President Pence also reaffirmed U.S. support for continued progress toward Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

-/-

Readout of Second Lady Karen Pence's Visit to Tbilisi, Georgia
Office of the Second Lady
1 August 2017
White House

Second Lady Karen Pence started her day with the Vice President where they participated in a meet-and-greet with U.S. embassy employees and their families. Mrs. Pence continued her day to the National Parliamentary Library where she joined art therapists and patients from Kamara, a pscho-social rehabilitation center and leading provider of art therapy in Georgia. The Second Lady observed the patient's art therapy work before participating in a roundtable discussion with Kamara co-founders and art therapists, Natia Panjikidze and Nino Komakhidze, and art therapist Salome Panjikidze. After the art therapy program visit, the Second Lady enjoyed lunch at the Vinotel Restaurant with United States Marines who represented both the Marine Security Guard Detachment and Marines from the Georgia Deployment Program. After lunch, Mrs. Pence met with Georgian artist, Olesya Tavadze, who works in easel paintings and graphics. Mrs. Tavadze is passionate about American literature, in particular Robert Frost. Mrs. Pence viewed Mrs. Tavadze's exhibit of paintings inspired by Robert Frost's poems at the Tbilisi History Museum Karvasla. Following the museum visit, Mrs. Pence joined the Vice President to tour the Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition. After the tour, Mrs. Pence listened to the Vice President deliver remarks to U.S. and Georgian Noble Partner Participants at the Tbilisi Airport before departing to Podgorica, Montenegro.

"Art therapy is an emerging profession in Georgia with only a few professionally trained art therapists in the country," said Second Lady Karen Pence. "I will cherish my opportunity to meet with the leading art therapists in Georgia who are breaking new ground in the country by offering art therapy as an option for therapeutic treatment. They are doing great work and making a positive difference in Georgia."

Tomorrow, Wednesday, August 2nd, Mrs. Pence will wrap up her Eastern Europe visit with activities in Podgorica, Montenegro. To stay updated on Mrs. Pence's events, follow her on Twitter at, @SecondLady.

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From: Bethany Bassett
Sent: Thursday, August 03, 2017 3:53 PM
To: 'patti.ross@mail.house.gov'
Subject: Pence/Georgia Trip

Hi Patti-

Hope you are well. We do some work with the Government of Georgia and thought you might be interested in material covering Vice President Pence's recent trip to Georgia.

Let me know if you need anything else.

Thanks much-

Bethany

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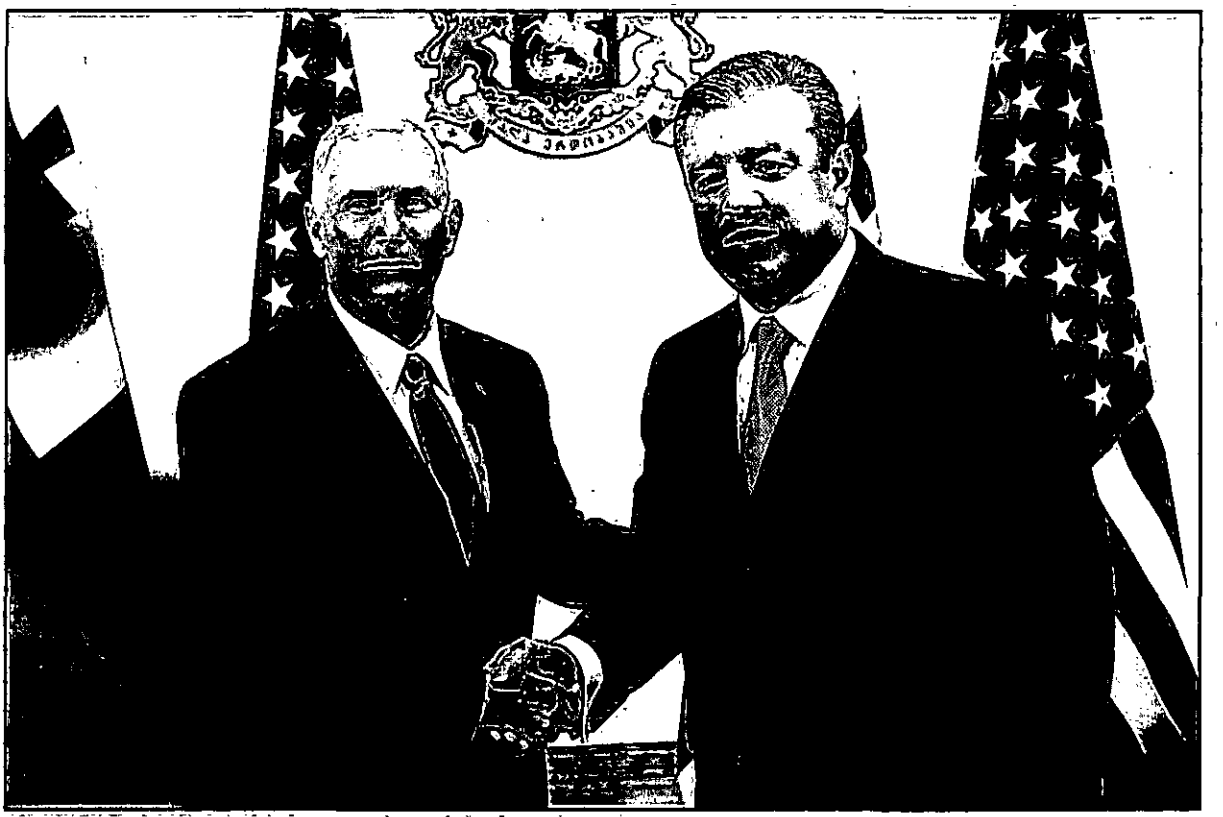
Bethany M. Bassett
Senior Vice President
Rasky Partners, Inc.
D: 202 530 7701
C: 617 458 1302
www.rasky.com

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VICE PRESIDENT MIKE PENCE'S VISIT WITH GOVERNMENT OF GEORGIA

July 31-August 1, 2017



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Transcript of the Press Conference of Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili and US Vice President Mike Pence

PM Kvirikashvili:

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to host in Georgia Mr. Mike Pence, who is not only the Vice President of our country's key strategic partner, the United States of America, but also a great friend whom Georgia has made in such a short period. It is especially exciting that he is visiting Georgia in the company of his spouse.

After our brief introductory meeting in Munich, I was honored to hold meetings in Washington, at the invitation of the Vice President, and today we continue our dialogue in Tbilisi.

Mr. Vice President, your visit very shortly after taking office bears witness to your and President Trump's great desire to deepen your strategic partnership and friendship with Georgia, for which I am very grateful to you.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of our diplomatic relations. Throughout this time, America has played a vital role on our country's path toward democratic and economic development, safeguarding Georgia's sovereignty, and NATO membership.

Thanks to your assistance, today Georgia is neither a Soviet nor post-Soviet country. Today we are an EU associated European democracy. Together with the Americans, we are proudly standing guard protecting global security and making our contribution to regional stability.

The Georgian nation deeply appreciates the American people's friendship, solidarity, and strong support.

Mr. Vice President, today we discussed our strategic partnership further in depth. First, I would like to single out and welcome our defense and security cooperation. Your meeting with Georgian and American service members participating in the Noble Partner exercises is an unmistakable demonstration of the strong US support for spurring our country's sovereignty and integration into NATO alike.

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This year, we adopted the Joint Action Plan that ensures enhancing Georgia's resilience, which is so crucially important for maintaining the stability and sustainability of Georgia and the region.

The United States of America has provided Georgia with significant financial assistance over these 25 years, and today we are happy to be an increasingly attractive country for American businesses. Today we offer one of the best business environments, extremely low corruption and red-tape rates, and equally low taxes, which is the best opportunity for American businesses to benefit.

Our goal is to put in place the best platform in the region suitable for American business interests. Notably, American companies are taking interest in engaging in large-scale regional infrastructural projects implemented in our country. Along with the Conti Group joining the Anaklia Deep Sea Port Consortium, we welcome the signing of the document on cooperation between the Anaklia Deep Sea Port Consortium and SSA Marine, one of the leading American port operators in the world. According to this document, the SSA Marine will operate the container terminal and invest in this most valuable project in the country today. The foregoing reaffirms the growing interest of American businesses and our country's immense potential for becoming the regional hub.

In the past 25 years, we have implemented numerous energy projects in cooperation with the United States. These projects ensure sustainable Euro-Atlantic energy security, and we are committed to continuing our cooperation in this direction as well.

We are a partner ready for high-level trade and investment relations with the USA based on mutual economic benefits.

Georgia is America's important partner in the region, which, among others, stems from our shared values, such as democracy and human rights. America has played an important role in the building of our democratic institutions. Our democratic development, for its part, is a precondition for developing Georgia as a sustainable and stable state that ensures the protection of the rights of every citizen and preserves our cultural uniqueness.

US support is vital in peaceful resolution of Georgia-Russia conflict. We deeply appreciate the US strong and unwavering stance on Georgia's territorial integrity. The decisions made by President Trump, you personally, Mr. Vice President, and the new Administration and the Congress on Georgia's occupied territories have proved unprecedented.

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Today we discussed the serious challenges facing our country as a result of occupation. The US plays a tremendous role in the Geneva International Discussions format. Importantly, through high-level engagement, particular decisions must be sought for ensuring the de-occupation of and security in Georgia's territories, and for political conflict resolution.

In conclusion, I would like to reaffirm that Georgia has always been and will always be by the US' side when it comes to any challenge or threat facing the world. Our strategic partnership focuses equally on strengthening security in Georgia, regionally, and worldwide, on promoting peaceful and democratic development.

Once again, I emphasize the importance of this visit and its outcomes. We appreciate the fact that, despite more than one challenge in different parts of the world, the Vice President is visiting Georgia as part of his first European trip.

I am also thankful to our American colleagues for visiting Georgia and their special contribution to deepening our bilateral cooperation.

I am convinced that our joint efforts will further deepen our strategic partnership. At the same time, we are eager to introduce the Vice President, his spouse, and the American guests to Georgia's culture and historical heritage as the pride and joy of the Georgian nation.

Thank you.

VP Pence:

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili thank you so much for those words and for the hospitality you shown me and my family. It was an honor to welcome you to the White House just a few short months ago. And now it is my honor to be welcomed by you to the beautiful and storied nation of Georgia.

The President of the United States of America, President Donald Trump sent me here with a simple message for you and for the people of Georgia: we are with you; we stand with you; we are proud of our friendship and strategic partnership with the nation and the people of Georgia. In a word, I am here to say: America first does not mean America alone. And America stands with Georgia.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the US diplomatic relationship with Georgia. Yet, this is a nation whose roots stretch back to the amiss of history. Sitting at the crossroads of

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empires and civilizations, where East meets West, where North meets South; Georgia has fostered your own language, your own traditions, your own identity over the millennia. Today the people of Georgia are renowned the world over for your vibrant culture, which, my wife and I enjoyed last night at our first super dinner featuring Georgian cuisine, and a lot of it and traditional song and dance from Abkhazia, South Ossetia and all across Georgia.

We have also been deeply inspired by the rich heritage of faith and my wife and I look forward to visiting the historic Sioni Cathedral and meeting the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church this afternoon. While this may be my first visit to this nation, the enduring courage and spirit of Georgian people have long inspired me. It was only a generation ago that Georgia was still imprisoned in then-Soviet Union. When that brutal regime collapsed, you reclaimed your independence and your freedom. You reached out our hand of friendship to Europe and United States of America and we were proud to reach back.

Today, I commended the Prime Minister for Georgia's democratic development, which has brought Georgia closer to unity with Europe and membership in North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Further progress on the goals that the Prime Minister has set will bring Georgia even closer and NATO even closer to your grasp and it will strengthen the bond between our nations.

Now, nowhere is the bond between our two nations stronger than in our shared effort to promote security and stability across the wider world. Georgia is the key strategic partner of the US. Since 2004, thousands of Georgians have served shoulder to shoulder with Americans in Kosovo, in Iraq and in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan alone, I say with grateful heart, Georgia has provided more troops on a per capita basis than any other country in the world. And 31 brave Georgian soldiers have given their lives for the cause of freedom. American people remember and mourn the sacrifice of your countrymen. They are heroes, all and they and their families will be enshrined in the hearts of American people forever. Later today I will meet with troops participating in the exercise Noble Partner. This initiative has brought together the armed forces of the US, Georgia and many other nations to train together and strengthen Georgia's ability to defend itself. It is only one of many examples of the US' commitment to Georgia's security.

President Trump and I stand by the 2008 NATO Bucharest statement, which made it clear that Georgia will one day become a member of NATO. As I expressed to the Prime Minister, it is heartening to see that Georgia already exceeds the NATO's goal of spending 2 % of its GDP on its national defense. But as we all know, Georgia's investment in defense is an

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investment born of necessity. At this very moment, just 40 miles from where we stand, Russian tanks stand on occupied territories at South Ossetia. Today, Russia continues to occupy one fifth of Georgian territory. So to be clear, the United States of America strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgian soil. The United States support Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders. Under President Trump the United States will reject any claim, at any time, by any nation that undermines this enduring principle. President Trump has called on Russia to seize its destabilizing activities. My purpose here is to reinforce that message to the people of Georgia.

In sign of our commitment President Trump will sign very soon legislation to solid and codify the United States' sanctions against Russia. As always, our country prefers a constructive relationship with Russia, based on cooperation and common interests, but President and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia: a better relationship, lifting of sanctions, will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place. We hope for better days and we hope for better relations with Russia. But the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow, I can assure you, will not deter the United States' commitment to our security, that of our allies and freedom loving nations around the world, like Georgia. The US will continue to work with Georgia to reduce your vulnerabilities and counter Russian aggression and so, too will we work with Georgia to deepen our ties of commerce of which the Prime Minister just spoke.

The United States has a keen interest in expanding our trade and investment relationship with Georgia. And your ongoing reforms Mr. Prime Minister have clearly demonstrated your openness and commitment to the stronger commercial partnership with the west. Today I thank the Prime Minister for his leadership focused on bringing greater economic opportunity to all of Georgian citizens. The Anaklia Deep Sea Port shows the potential of a stronger bilateral relationship between our nations. American companies are investing alongside with Georgian counterparts in this multibillion-dollar project. As we look toward the future of our two nations have untold opportunities to contribute even more to each other's prosperity. The US has stood with Georgia for quarter century and under president Trump we will continue to stand with you as partners, as friends and one day we will stand together as allies. Georgia's future is in the west and as the people of Georgia have long declared, our strength is now and always will be in our unity. So thank you Mr. Prime Minister, thank you for your hospitality here today and thank you for the strong leadership that you provide for this country. We look forward to working with you for the prosperity and the security of the people of Georgia and of our great nation.

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Q&A

Q: Greetings. I am Salome Kokiashvili, Public Broadcaster of Georgia. Mr. Vice President, you said during your visit to the Baltic States that the US always stands strong for freedom. In addition, the US has always been a staunch supporter of Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Given the continuous occupation of Georgia's regions—and we see that the fundamental rights of those living in these territories, of IDPs, are being violated on a daily basis—what steps Georgia can take together with its partners to deal with these problems?

VP Pence:

Well, as I said, the United States of America stands strong for the territorial integrity of Georgia. We have stood on that principle since the time that Russian tanks overtook Abkhazia and Ossetia in 2008. And we will continue to stand strong. The joint military operations that are taking place today, we hope, are a visible sign of our commitment to Georgia's sovereignty and to her internationally recognized borders.

We also believe that, in addition to security partnership, the stronger and more prosperous Georgia will lead to the restoration of a whole and free Georgia. So the United States will continue to look for ways where we can strengthen Georgia not only from the standpoint of its defense and security, but where we can strengthen Georgia economically, creating jobs and opportunity, and prosperity. Strengthening the hand of Georgia so that, one day, Georgia can once again celebrate its historical territorial integrity intact.

PM Kvirikashvili:

Thank you very much for the question. I would like to thank Mr. Vice President for his very clear message and the strong support Georgia enjoys from the US.

As mentioned earlier, our territorial integrity is a deep-rooted problem that requires a consistent approach in terms of Georgia's stability and economic and democratic development, on one hand, and Georgia's crucial defense and security partnership, on the other. I would like to reaffirm that this conflict can be resolved, and territorial integrity can be restored, only peacefully, consistently, through our economic development and with strong support from our strategic partners, especially from the US. Thank you.

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Q: Ashley Parker from the Washington Post. Mr. Vice President, in light of Russia's retaliation against sanctions, as well as Russia sending 100,000 troops to the eastern edge of NATO territory to drill, do you truly believe that better relationship that you and President Trump want with Russia is possible? And if things continue in this direction, can we be headed toward another cold war?

Mr. Prime Minister, you know better than anyone how real the threat of Russian aggression is. The Vice President just said that the US supports Georgia's aspirations into NATO, but what concrete assurances do you have that the US will defend you should Russia attack, as President Putin threatened?

VP Pence:

Thank you for your question. President Trump sent me on this journey to send a very clear message to the Baltic States, to the people of Georgia, and before the end of the day, Montenegro that the United States of America will stand with freedom-loving nations around the world. And that we will do so as Mr. President has said, not merely with words, but with actions. The presence of American forces in Poland, the presence of British forces—with whom I met—in Estonia, at the gathering yesterday, all give material evidence of the commitment of NATO in that region to live up to our Article 5 obligations. The current Russian exercises, which news reports today suggest will move up to 100,000 Russian troops into Belarus, is simply a confirmation of the importance of clarity within the NATO partnership.

President Trump and I believe that better relations with Russia may be possible. But as the President has said, we will see. But negotiations between parties always begin with the recognition of and respect for the position of each party. And with the sanctions President Trump will sign this week, codifying sanction that have been in place by the United States, our country is sending a very clear message and calling on our European allies to join in a very clear message that we mean what we say and say what we mean; that Russia's destabilizing activities in Ukraine, their support for rogue regimes like Iran, Syria, and North Korea, their posture has to change. But we believe by being clear and being strong that we can pursue a dialogue based on mutual understanding. President Trump holds the view that it has been a lack of clarity in the commitment by the US that has created much of the instability in the world today. When, in the past, America has spoken of red lines and not followed through on red lines. Many argue that it emboldened others to act in ways that they would not have. So President Trump believes that we can have peace through strength,

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and strong and clear positions, we believe, can create the foundation where authentic dialogue that may, we hope, result in better relations and in the resolution of long-standing disputes in Ukraine, Georgia, and other areas of the world.

PM Kvirikashvili:

Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Vice President, and thank you for the question. I think that a very clear and string message—we are with you!—tells everything. Georgia faces endless provocations daily along the occupation line, facing challenges of borderization, capturing, kidnapping of ethnic Georgians, and violating basic human rights of ethnic Georgians residing on the occupied territories. But the response to that is even more resolve and consistency, and dedication to the goals we set for ourselves. And integration into NATO is a process which matters for Georgia. Of course, the final goal to join NATO is set by the Georgian population, and we are following this very difficult path of reforming Georgia's military system and developing institutional democracy in Georgia. Believe me, through the consistency and dedication, clearness of our messages, and unity with our important strategic partners, it will be able for Georgia to reach this very important goal, to ensure long-term stability, and it is possible. We Georgians believe that.

Q: Reuters news agency, Margarita Antidze. Mr. Vice-President, what are the red lines Washington's red lines on Russia especially in regard with Georgia. And also you said in Estonia that in case of Russia's aggression against NATO alliance, members of the alliance, the US will intervene. What would be your reaction in case of Russia's aggression against Georgia, against NATO's partners? Thank you very much. Mr. Prime Minister do we have enough patience to wait NATO's partnership? We are waiting, you are waiting, and Georgia is waiting for a while? Thank you.

VP Pence:

Thank you for the question. Well, the essence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is a mutual defense. We agree that attack on one is an attack on all. What President wanted me to communicate as I traveled to the NATO countries, as later today I will visit the newest member of NATO is that the US says what it means and means what it says and we will live

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up our obligation under article 5. With regard to Georgia, we strongly support Georgia's aspiration to become a member of NATO and we will continue to work closely with this Prime Minister and the Government of Georgia broadly to advance the policies that will facilitate becoming a NATO member. We believe that Georgia has made an extraordinary progress not in just last twenty five years but over the last five years. There has been significant progress that we believe will strengthen the application for NATO membership. But with regard to the Russian aggression, which took place in 2008 which has... as we stand here today Russian tanks are parked on Georgian soil forty miles from where we stand. The US will continue to be unambiguous in our commitment to the territorial integrity of Georgia. We will stand for a strong and a whole Georgia, we will continue to provide support for the defense and security of Georgia and we will continue to seek a peaceful resolution that will reestablished internationally recognized borders of this nation.

PM Kvirikashvili:

Thank you Mr. Vice President. Thank you for the question. You said it is about patience, yes, it is about strategic patience, I would say, to stay consistent on the road where we are. Today we have all practical tools to advance toward NATO membership. We have substantial package, we are implementing it very successfully; we have Georgia Defense Readiness Programme jointly with the US, which is complementary to the Substantial Package; and it was said many times by the leaders of our strategic partners, the US first, of course and NATO leadership that no other country has a say to block the membership of Georgia to NATO. It is only NATO members and applicant countries, who decide about their future in NATO. And we have made our own decision. Thank you.

Q: Thank you, it is Peter Nicholas of the Wall Street Journal. Mr. Vice President, you have talked about the new Russian sanction's bill as an example of the US resolve in the face of Russian aggression. But did not the Trump's White House oppose this bill fearing that this bill relinquishes Presidential authority to Congress. What happened in this process that caused the White House to sign on?

Mr. Prime Minister, the US Intelligence community has concluded that Russia tried to interfere in our Presidential election. Living so close to Russia, having dealt with Russian provocations, do you have any advice to the US in how to cope with Russian efforts to intervene in our elections and influence voters in our country?

VP Pence:

Thank you, Peter, thank you. President Trump will sign the Russian sanctions bill soon. Our administration had concerns about this legislation that emerged from the US Senate. The concern was that the bill did not include traditional flexibility that is afforded to the State

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Department or any administration in the conduct of American foreign policy. I am pleased to report that the bill improved significantly as it moved through the House of Representatives and through the legislative process. And this legislation, we believe, will not only codify current Russian sanctions that our administration has upheld, but will also strengthen those sanctions, even while giving the President of the United States and our State Department the ability and a flexibility to be able to administer American foreign policy as appropriate. Let me say that in signing these sanctions, our President and our Congress are speaking in a unified voice that those matters that the President spoke about so eloquently in Warsaw, but Russian destabilizing activities, Russia's efforts to support rogue regimes, has to change. For there to be a change in our relationship with Russia, Russia has to change its behavior. By these sanctions, by my presence here, by the President's powerful affirmation of the objectives and the values of our alliance in the west our hope is for that we will move toward better relations and a better future and a more peaceful world as a result.

PM Kvirikashvili:

Thank you. First of all, let me mention once again how important is strong America for Georgia. We are genuinely interested in the strength of the United States; we want to see the US united, coping with global challenges. I do not think that Georgia is in a position to judge about Russian interference. With our excellent intelligence capabilities, we were not able to detect any interference and we think that American nation has made its decision to elect the President and of course we look for more partnership with the current administration of the US.

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Remarks by the Vice President to Noble Partner Participants

August 1, 2017
Tbilisi International Airport
Tbilisi, Georgia

THE VICE PRESIDENT: President Margvelashvili, Prime Minister Kvrikashvili, Minister Izoria, General Chachibaya, members of the armed forces of the United States of America and Georgia, to all our distinguished guests, it is an honor to join you here today to address the men and women of Exercise Noble Partner. (Applause.)

And to all of you, I bring greetings from the leader of the free world, the President of the United States of America -- President Donald Trump. (Applause.)

The President sent me here to this place, at this time simply to thank all -- thank you for stepping up to serve your nations, for standing in the gap on this great frontier -- united in the defense of freedom.

You are the best of us -- heroes all.

And you are here, the Americans among you so far away from home, because the United States and Georgia are bound together by the abiding oath of friendship and by our shared commitment to the cause of freedom.

Under President Trump, the policy of the United States is to place the security and the prosperity of America first. But as the President has made clear, and as our presence here today demonstrates, America First does not mean America alone.

We are here today, with the steadfast assurance of the United States of America to tell our friends in Georgia: We are with you. (Applause.)

We stand with the nation and the people of Georgia, and we will stand with you as you pursue membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. And the United States of America stands with Georgia in defense of what President Trump in Warsaw called "the priceless ties that bind us together as nations, as allies, and as a civilization." And those ties are freedom, democracy, and the rule of law.

The roots of the nation and people of Georgia stretch back into the mists of history. Sitting here at the crossroads of empires and civilizations -- where East meets West, where North meets South -- Georgia has fostered a vibrant culture and a rich heritage of faith.

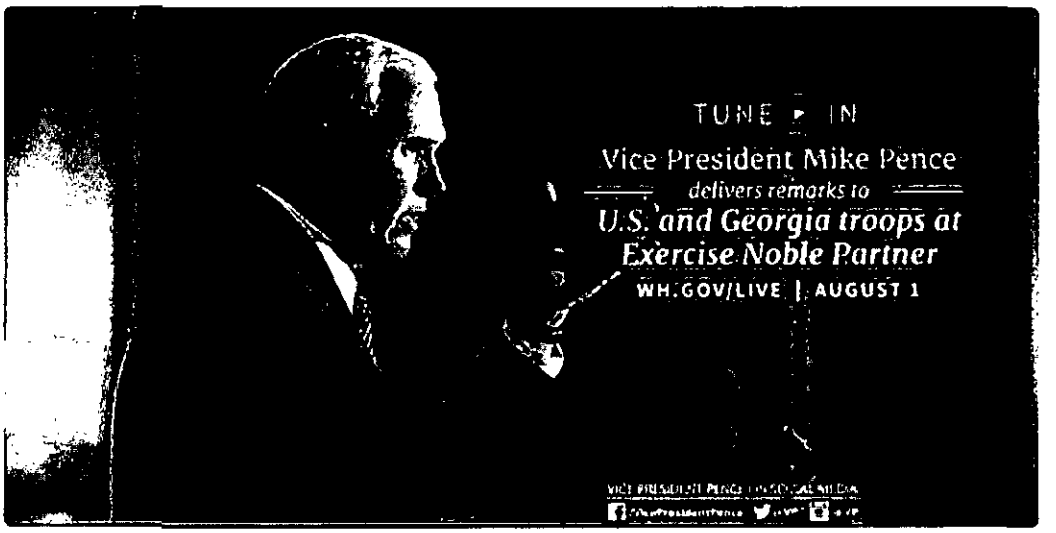
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Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

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TUNE IN! I'm speaking to U.S. and Georgia troops at Exercise Noble Partner: 45.wh.gov/v3dhHa #VPinEurope

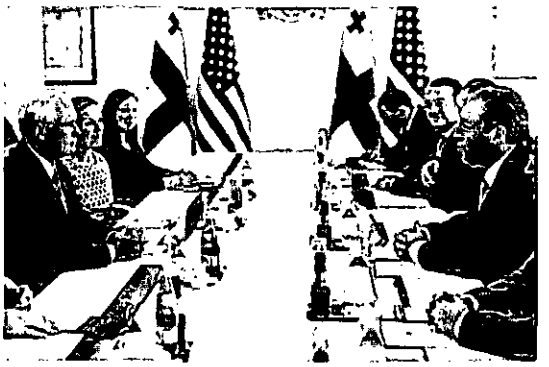


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The United States will continue to work with Georgia to reduce vulnerabilities and counter Russian aggression. #VPinEurope

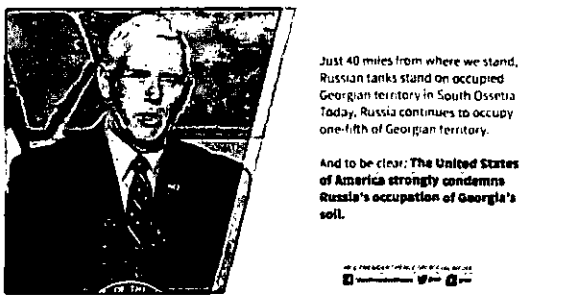


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To be clear: the United States of America strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgia's soil. #VPinEurope



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And through all the millennia, none have been able to deprive you of your identity. The people and culture of Georgia have stood the test of time. (Applause.)

It was only a generation ago that Georgia was still imprisoned inside the Soviet Union. That Communist regime personified everything that free peoples reject, and it sought to crush you in its heartless, inhuman embrace. The Soviet Union sought to eradicate your history -- even the very essence of who you are, the cherished ties of culture and faith.

But when the Soviet Union collapsed, Georgia reclaimed its liberty. You reached out your hand in friendship to the free nations of Europe and the United States, and the United States of America proudly reached back. (Applause.)

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the diplomatic relations between the United States and Georgia, and we marvel at your progress -- the progress you've made since you regained your independence. Georgia's future is in the West.

For many years, Georgia has been a key strategic partner of the United States. Since 2004, thousands of brave Georgians have served with their American brothers-and-sisters-in-arms in Kosovo, in Iraq, and in Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan alone, Georgia has provided more troops on a per-capita basis than any other country in the world. (Applause.)

And today we remember 31 Georgian soldiers who've given their lives in the cause of freedom in that land. The American people remember their sacrifice and their families on this day. They are heroes. And let me assure you and their families that they will be enshrined in the hearts of the American people forever.

The strategic partnership between the United States and Georgia is stronger now than ever before, and this joint exercise is a tangible sign of our commitment to each other to make it stronger still.

Exercise Noble Partner brings together the Armed Forces of the United States, of Georgia, and many other nations to train together and execute complex operations.

Noble Partner will strengthen Georgia's ability to defend itself in the years ahead. It will prepare Georgian soldiers to join NATO's Response Force in the future.

This exercise is a testament to your professionalism, to the high value that the United States and our

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NATO allies place on Georgia's security. But our commitment to your security doesn't stop there.

American advisors will continue to work alongside your leaders to improve Georgia's military readiness. And along with all our NATO allies, the United States is contributing to the Substantial Package for Georgia, to strengthen Georgia's resilience, and to bring Georgia ever closer to your goal of membership in NATO. (Applause.)

And to be clear, President Trump and the United States stand firmly behind the 2008 NATO Bucharest statement, which made it clear that Georgia will someday become a member of the most successful military alliance in the history of the world. (Applause.)

Georgia has already taken important steps toward this goal -- especially in terms of security. Georgia has long exceeded NATO's own goal of spending 2 percent of gross domestic product on defense. Your commitment is a model for many current NATO members, many of which have not fulfilled their obligations to our common defense. And so I want to congratulate and thank Georgia for your strong commitment and your strong example of national leadership on national defense. (Applause.)

And to those here in the uniform of the United States, be assured your Commander-in-Chief is busy making the strongest fighting force in the history of the world stronger still.

As President Trump said just a few days ago, in his words, "American might is second to none -- and we're getting bigger, and better, and stronger every day."

The President has already signed the largest increase in military spending in nearly 10 years. And we're calling on Congress to pass one of the largest investments in defense since the days of the Cold War.

Our investments in our defense, like Georgia's, are borne of necessity. The rise of adversaries new and old requires renewed strength and renewed resolve by all who cherish freedom.

We stand here today in the gap, on a frontline of freedom, a frontline compromised by Russian aggression nearly a decade ago. At this very moment, just 40 miles from where we stand, Russian tanks sit on Georgian land in South Ossetia. Today, Russia continues to occupy one-fifth of Georgian territory.

The United States strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgia's soil. (Applause.)

Be assured: The United States will continue to support Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity

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within its internationally recognized borders.

The United States of America, under President Donald Trump, will reject any claim, at any time, by any nation that undermines this enduring principle.

To that end, President Trump has called on Russia recently, here and elsewhere, to "cease its destabilizing activities," and we will continue to work with Georgia to reduce your vulnerabilities and counter potential Russian aggression.

And in a further sign of our commitment, very soon, President Trump will sign legislation to strengthen and codify the United States' sanctions against Russia.

The United States prefers a constructive relationship with Russia based on mutual cooperation and common interests. But the President and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia -- a better relationship, the lifting of sanctions will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused the sanctions to be imposed in the first place. And not before. (Applause.)

We hope for better days, for better relations with Russia, but the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow I can assure you will not deter this President or the commitment of the United States to our security, that of our allies, and freedom-loving nations around the world like the freedom-loving people of Georgia.
The United States has stood with Georgia since your independence, and under President Trump, we will continue to stand shoulder-to-shoulder and work hand-in-hand with you to fortify your defense, to strengthen your democracy, and to deepen your ties of friendship with Europe and the United States.

We stand with you because we know the wisdom of that ancient Georgian saying there is -- "strength is in unity." (Applause.)

So in unity, together, we will be strong in arms. In unity, together, we will be strong in resolve. And in unity, together, we will be strong in faith -- faith in freedom, and faith in Him from whom our freedom springs.

Earlier today, my wife and I visited the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church at the Sioni Cathedral; that soaring temple, whose foundations stretch back more than 1,500 years, is deeply inspiring. It's a symbol of the ancient faith that fills this land.

As I walked beneath its painted dome, I could not help but think of an ancient truth from the sacred scriptures, one which we'd do well to reflect on in these challenging times. As we train, as we

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prepare, as we promote commerce and mutual prosperity, we do well to remember those words: "Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."

Today, we recommit ourselves to the cause of security, prosperity, and liberty for the people of Georgia. We renew our pledge to stand together in unity as partners and as friends, and to one day stand together as allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (Applause.)

And we do so with confidence and with faith -- faith in the courage of all of you who wear the uniform, faith and confidence in the strength and resilience of the proud people of this ancient land, confident in the leadership of our Commander-in-Chief, President Donald Trump, and your leadership in Georgia, and with faith in the blessings and protection of God above, I know the United States and Georgia will embrace a future of freedom in unity together.

Thank you. God bless you. God bless Georgia. And God bless the United States of America. (Applause.)

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PRESS RELEASE: Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and U.S. Vice President Mike Pence Agree to Further Enhance Georgia-US Security and Economic Cooperation

Tbilisi, 1st August 2017 – Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili today met with United States Vice President Mike Pence to discuss expanding future security and economic cooperation between Georgia and the U.S. Last night, Kvirikashvili hosted Vice President Pence and the American delegation for dinner in Tbilisi.

"Vice President Pence's visit so shortly after taking office bears witness to his and President Trump's great desire to deepen the strategic partnership and friendship with Georgia, for which I am very grateful," stated Prime Minister Kvirikashvili. "The Georgian nation deeply appreciates the American people's friendship, solidarity, and strong support."

During their meeting, Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and Vice President Pence discussed the U.S.-Georgian security partnership in depth. Following the meeting, the Vice President met with Georgian and U.S. soldiers participating in the Noble Partner exercise, a U.S. Army-led exercise to support the training, evaluation and eventual certification of Georgia's second light infantry company contribution to the NATO Response Force (NRF).

"The Vice President's meeting with Georgian and American service members participating in the Noble Partner exercises is an unmistakable demonstration of the strong U.S. support for spurring our country's sovereignty and integration into NATO," affirmed Prime Minister Kvirikashvili. "The special bonds and extraordinary sacrifices of our two militaries -- currently fighting extremism together -- is something to behold. Georgia and the U.S. are truly brothers in arms."

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and Vice President Pence also held productive discussions about furthering the economic and trade partnership between Georgia and the U.S. Georgia's Anaklia Deep Sea Port on the Black Sea, which will become a focal point in trade between Europe and Asia, is being built by an American-Georgian consortium, led by U.S. company Conti. SSA Marine, another U.S. company, will operate it.

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During the visit, Vice President Pence also reaffirmed U.S. support for continued progress toward Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

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For more information contact:

Levan Karumidze

Media Adviser

Department of Public Relations

Administration of the Government of Georgia

Phone: +995 599 969610

E-mail: lkarumidze@geo.gov.ge ; levankarumi@gmail.com

Address: 7, Ingorokva str. 0114 Tbilisi, Georgia

www.government.gov.ge

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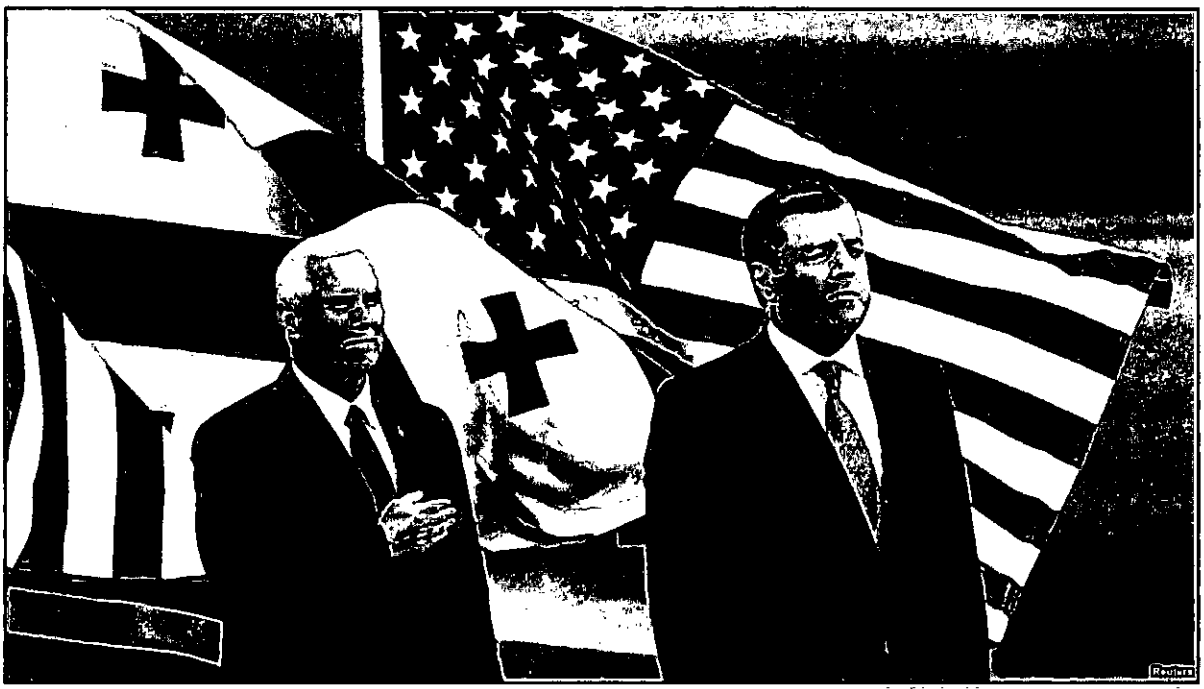
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Pence Arrives In Georgia In Bid To Reassure U.S. Allies
31 July 2017
Radio Free Europe

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence arrived in Georgia on July 31 for the second leg of his three-day trip aimed at reassuring allies in Eastern Europe in the face of what the United States calls Russia's efforts to destabilize the region.

Pence was greeted at the Tbilisi airport by Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili just hours after the U.S. vice president reaffirmed Washington's solidarity with the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders" and "undermine democracies."

"We stand with the people and nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and we always will," Pence said in Tallinn, where he met with the three Baltic presidents -- Kersti Kaljulaid, Raimonds Vejonis, and Dalia Grybauskaite, respectively.

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions, as have Georgia and the third ally on Pence's itinerary: new NATO member Montenegro.

"No threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said. "At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another."

The United States "rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation, or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies," he also said.

Article 5

Pence said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty -- the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

He also pledged that the United States would not be deterred from its goals by Moscow's demand for drastic cuts in staff levels at U.S. diplomatic facilities in Russia.

"Recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter commitment of the United States to our security, the security of our allies, and the security of freedom-loving nations around the world," he said.

After Pence began his visit to Estonia on July 30, Prime Minister Juri Ratas said the U.S. vice president raised the possibility of deploying the Patriot antimissile defense system in the country.

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"We spoke about it today, but we didn't talk about a date or time," Ratas told state broadcaster ERR.

The U.S. Patriot defense system is a mobile, ground-based system designed to intercept missiles and warplanes.

Ratas also said the two leaders talked about the upcoming Russian military maneuvers planned for near the Estonian border, "and how Estonia, the United States, and NATO should monitor them and exchange information."

'Very Clear' Message

Estonian Foreign Minister Sven Mikser told Current Time TV, the Russian-language network run by RFE/RL in cooperation with Voice of America (VOA), that Pence's visit was "an extremely important event."

"The message from the vice president was very clear: The U.S. stands by all its allied obligations and commitments, and the U.S. is truly committed to being there for us, for all of its NATO allies," Mikser said.

Pence planted an English oak before departing Tallinn aboard Air Force Two en route to Georgia's capital, Tbilisi, where he was greeted at the airport by Prime Minister Giorgi Kvrikashvili later on July 31.

Officials said Pence will highlight U.S. support for the Caucasus nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity before continuing on to Montenegro, the newest NATO member.

Georgia, which has expressed hopes of joining the Western alliance, has seen Russian encroachment on its territory.

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili said on July 27 that Pence's visit will demonstrate that the United States continues to support Georgia in building a stronger military force.

During Pence's visit, 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the previously planned Noble Partner 2017 exercises.

Troops from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, and Armenia were taking part.

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"The vice president's presence here is definitely showing that this is not only about military exercises, but it is also showing unification with our values, with our foreign policy targets, and showing a clear message that we are together," Margvelashvili said.

Pence was to participate in an official dinner hosted by Kvrikashvili. State media in Georgia reported that Margvelashvili was expected to join them.

On the last stop, Pence will welcome NATO's newest member with his stop in Montenegro, whose accession to the alliance in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica, U.S. officials said.

Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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Pence to Visit Estonia, Georgia, Montenegro on NATO, Russia
By Laurie Kellman
28 July 2017
Associated Press

Vice President Mike Pence visits three countries in Russia's neighborhood beginning Monday to signal support for them and NATO while drawing a line against aggression.

Pence's trip to Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro is viewed as a follow-up to President Donald Trump's visit to Europe earlier this month. Then, Trump used stops in Poland and Germany to try to pull off a tricky balancing act of improving ties with Moscow while also presenting the U.S. as a check against Russia's moves in the region.

Pence's mission will be encouraging those countries to continue to ally with the West and resist Russia's attempts to splinter the NATO alliance.

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson have previously been dispatched to try to allay the concerns of countries near Russia that the U.S. really will stand behind NATO and support the sovereignty of non-member former Soviet republics.

The concerns stem from Trump's suggestion during the campaign that the U.S. might not defend NATO allies and his apparent desire for closer relations with Russia. Trump received criticism on his

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first European trip for passing up the chance to affirm the NATO mutual defense commitment clause known as Article 5, which frames an attack on one as an attack on all. Trump did affirm U.S. support for Article 5 on his second trip to Europe.

The vice president is expected to deliver a message of support for U.S. trade and investment with the countries while underscoring the U.S. commitment to the security of the three nations, according to senior administration officials who briefed reporters about the trip on the condition that they not be identified by name. Pence also will stress the values of freedom of speech, democracy and religious tolerance.

In Estonia, Pence is expected to highlight bilateral ties with the U.S., particularly on trade, investment and cyber issues. Pence also is expected to thank Estonian officials for their approach to "burden-sharing," diplomatic speak for agreeing to spend a full share of 2 percent of their GDP on defense, the administration officials said.

The vice president also is expected to underscore the U.S. commitment to NATO, which sees Russia as a security threat and offers protection to concerned member states near Russia's borders.

In Georgia, Pence is expected to highlight U.S. support for its sovereignty and territorial integrity, the officials said. Georgia is the only country on the trip that is not a NATO member and, like Ukraine, has seen Russian encroachment on its territory. The administration officials said the U.S. is encouraging Georgia to continue to make reforms to its judiciary and expand anti-corruption efforts.

In Montenegro, Pence will celebrate that nation as the newest NATO ally.

On Wednesday, he'll attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Podgorica, Montenegro, to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and underscore the importance of good governance, political reforms and rule of law. Also expected to attend are the leaders of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia.

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VP Pence, in the Baltics, voices support for mutual defense in NATO
By David Mardiste, Andrius Sytas
31 July 2017
Reuters

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence on Monday assured the Baltic states of U.S. support if they faced aggression from Russia, telling them that Washington firmly backs NATO's doctrine of collective defense.

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Pence's comments to the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, ahead of Russian war games on their doorstep, were clearly intended to reassure following Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine and U.S. President Donald Trump's early lukewarm support for NATO.

During a visit to NATO's Brussels headquarters in May, Trump jarred allies by not restating U.S. support for a critical portion of the alliance's charter and instead berated some members for not spending enough on defense.

Trump has since said he supports the NATO charter's Article 5, the requirement that each member of the alliance defend each other if they come under attack.

"A strong and united NATO is more necessary today than at any point since the collapse of communism a quarter-century ago and no threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said at news conference with the three Baltic presidents.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States stands firmly behind our Article 5 pledge of mutual defense. An attack on one of us is an attack on us all."

Russia is scheduled next month to hold large-scale military maneuvers with its ally Belarus. The U.S. army's top general in Europe said this month that the Zapad war games could be a "Trojan horse" resulting in military equipment being left in Belarus.

He warned that Russia continues to "seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine democracies of sovereign nations and divide the free nations of Europe, one against another".

Lithuania's President Dalia Grybauskaite told Lithuanian radio that NATO's air-policing missions would be doubled during the Russian-led Zapad exercise.

Pence is also due to visit Montenegro, the alliance's newest member, and make a stop in Georgia, an aspiring member, which fought a brief war with Russia in 2008.

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Pence: Baltic States' Greatest Threat Comes from Russian Aggression
31 July 2017
Voice of America

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence said Monday there is no larger threat to Baltic states than the "specter of aggression" by Russia, as he pledged support for NATO allies Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

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Pence met in Tallinn with the presidents of all the Baltic states — Estonia's Kersti Kaljulaid, Latvia's Raimonds Vejonis and Lithuania's Dalia Grybauskaite — and afterward summarized the U.S. position on Russia's "destabilizing" activities:

"At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine democracies of sovereign nations and divide the free nations of Europe one against another. Under President Donald Trump, the United States of America rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies."

During his public remarks in Estonia's capital, the U.S. vice president also expressed hope for improved relations with Russia. He said the Kremlin decree this week ordering most American diplomats to leave their posts in Moscow will not deter the U.S. commitment to its allies' security.

Pence praised Estonia for meeting the NATO alliance target for defense spending of at least 2 percent of its gross domestic product, and he noted Latvia and Lithuania would hit that level by the end of next year. Trump has repeatedly called on NATO members to boost defense spending.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania all have asked for tangible demonstrations of U.S. military support. Concerns about Russian expansionism have increased sharply in the Baltic region since Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine three years ago.

From Estonia, Pence traveled later Monday to Georgia, where troops from the United States and other NATO partners are conducting military exercises that began Sunday.

Welcoming him to Tbilisi, Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili said, "Vice President Pence's visit sends a strong message about the enduring strength of the relationship between Georgia and the United States."

Pence praised the Georgian people for their strong "commitment to independence and freedom." He and Kvirikashvili dined together Monday and will hold talks Tuesday.

Following his visit to Georgia, Pence's three-nation tour of Eastern Europe will conclude in Montenegro, NATO's newest member.

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Pence Says U.S. Will 'Always Stand' With Baltic Nations
31 July 2017
Radio Free Europe

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence has reaffirmed Washington's support for the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders " and "undermine democracies."

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"We stand with the people and nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and we always will," Pence said on July 31 in the Estonian capital, Tallinn, where he met with the three Baltic presidents -- Kersti Kaljulaid, Raimonds Vejonis, and Dalia Grybauskaite.

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries and other allies in Eastern Europe have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions in their respective regions.

"No threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said. "At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another."

The United States "rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation, or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies," he also said.

Pence said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty -- the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

He also pledged that the United States would not be deterred from its goals by Moscow's demand for drastic cuts in staff levels at U.S. diplomatic facilities in Russia.

"Recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter commitment of the United States to our security, the security of our allies, and the security of freedom-loving nations around the world," he said.

After Pence began his visit to Estonia on July 30, Prime Minister Juri Ratas said the U.S. vice president raised the possibility of deploying the Patriot antimissile defense system in the country.

"We spoke about it today, but we didn't talk about a date or time," Ratas told state broadcaster ERR.

The U.S. Patriot defense system is a mobile, ground-based system designed to intercept missiles and warplanes.

Ratas also said the two leaders talked about the upcoming Russian military maneuvers planned for near the Estonian border, "and how Estonia, the United States, and NATO should monitor them and exchange information."

Estonian Foreign Minister Sven Mikser told Current Time TV, the Russian-language network run by RFE/RL in cooperation with Voice of America (VOA), that Pence's visit was "an extremely important event."

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"The message from the vice president was very clear: The U.S. stands by all its allied obligations and commitments, and the U.S. is truly committed to being there for us, for all of its NATO allies," Mikser said.

Pence planted an English oak before departing Tallinn aboard Air Force Two later on July 31, en route to Georgia's capital, Tbilisi, for the second leg of his trip.

Officials said Pence will highlight U.S. support for the Caucasus nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity before continuing on to visit the newest NATO member, Montenegro.

Georgia, which has expressed hopes of joining the Western alliance, has seen Russian encroachment on its territory.

Georgia, which has expressed hopes of joining the Western alliance, has seen Russian encroachment on its territory.

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili said on July 27 that Pence's visit will demonstrate that the United States continues to support Georgia in building a stronger military force.

During Pence's visit, 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the previously planned Noble Partner 2017 exercises.

Troops from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, and Armenia were taking part.

"The vice president's presence here is definitely showing that this is not only about military exercises, but it is also showing unification with our values, with our foreign policy targets, and showing a clear message that we are together," Margvelashvili said.

Pence was due to arrive in Tbilisi in the evening of July 31 and participate in an official dinner hosted by Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvrikashvili.

On the last stop, Pence will welcome NATO's newest member with his stop in Montenegro, whose accession to the alliance in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica, U.S. officials said.

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Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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Georgia begins U.S.-led military exercise a day before Vice President Pence visit
By Margarita Antidze
30 July 2017
Reuters

The Georgian army began two weeks of military exercises with the United States and other partner countries on Sunday, a day before U.S. Vice President Mike Pence visits the ex-Soviet nation.

About 2,800 soldiers from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, Armenia and Georgia were taking part in the maneuvers, with Washington dispatching an entire mechanized company including several Bradley infantry fighting vehicles and M1A2 Abrams main battle tanks.

Georgia's Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili said the drills were an important event for the South Caucasus republic.

"These exercises will help Georgia to get closer to NATO standards and to strengthen stability in the whole region," Kvirikashvili said at the opening ceremony on Sunday.

The "Noble Partner" exercises are being held in Georgia for the third time. Russian officials had not commented on the event yet, but in previous years Moscow warned that drills could destabilize the region, a charge denied by Georgian officials and U.S. diplomats.

"This exercise is not directed against any country. It's about to help Georgia to grow its capacity to interoperate in international operations," U.S. Ambassador Ian Kelly told Reuters.

Russia and Georgia fought a war in August 2008 over the breakaway Georgian region of South Ossetia. Moscow continues to garrison troops there and to support another breakaway region, Abkhazia.

The exercises were being run out of the Vaziani military base near Georgia's capital, Tbilisi.

Russian forces used to be based there until they withdrew at the start of the last decade under the terms of a European arms reduction agreement.

Pence plans to attend the drills and address participants on Tuesday.

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The United States has spoken favorably of the idea that Georgia might one day join NATO, something Russia firmly opposes.

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U.S. backing of Georgian military sends strong message to Russia: Margvelashvili
By Margarita Antidze
27 July 2017
Reuters

The United States has continued to support Georgia in building more resilient military forces, training and equipping its army, Georgian president Giorgi Margvelashvili said on Thursday.

He added that these issues would be "one of the main" topics discussed during U.S. Vice President Mike Pence's visit to the ex-Soviet country.

Margvelashvili also said the Georgian army will start two weeks of military exercises with the United States and other partner countries on Sunday, the day before Pence's visit to Tbilisi, to send an important message to Russia about their common values and political targets.

"The vice-president's presence here is definitely showing that this is not only about military exercises, but it is also showing unification with our values, with our foreign policy targets and showing a clear message that we are together," Margvelashvili told a news conference.

Russia defeated Georgia in a short war in 2008 over the breakaway Georgian region of South Ossetia, and Moscow continues to station troops there and to support another breakaway region, Abkhazia.

"This is an important message especially in the environment when (Russia's) training and exercises going on the occupied territories of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region (South Ossetia)," Margvelashvili added.

Pence plans to visit Georgia as a part of his trip to Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro.

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U.S., U.K., Ukraine, Others Begin Massive Military Drills In Georgia
30 July 2017
Radio Free Europe

Some 2,800 troops from host Georgia, the United States, and six other countries have begun a major military exercise in the South Caucasus nation.

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Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili and other leaders on July 30 said they see the event as a substantial step toward their goal of one day joining NATO.

"These exercises will help Georgia to get closer to NATO standards and to strengthen stability in the whole region," Kvirikashvili said at the opening ceremonies at the Vaziani military base near the capital, Tbilisi.

Georgia's defense minister, Levan Izoria, called the scale of exercises "unprecedented" and said they "make clear the support for Georgia by the NATO member states, especially the U.S."

U.S. officials in the past have spoken favorably toward Georgian hopes of eventually joining NATO, a move Russia vehemently opposes.

At a 2008 summit in Bucharest, NATO leaders made a formal pledge that Georgia "will become a NATO member," but alliance leaders have moved warily toward that goal in the face of Moscow's opposition.

About 1,600 U.S. troops and 800 Georgian soldiers are taking part in the two-week exercises, dubbed Noble Partner.

Troops from Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, and Armenia are also participating, with the United States deploying a mechanized company, including several Bradley infantry fighting vehicles and M1A2 Abrams battle tanks.

It is the third time the exercises have been held in Georgia, a country that has seen much-larger rival Russian encroach on its territory since its independence from the Soviet Union.

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway areas of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008, and Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

In previous years, Moscow warned that the drills could destabilize the region, a notion that Georgia and the United States have dismissed.

"This exercise is not directed against any country. It's about to help Georgia to grow its capacity to interoperate in international operations," U.S. Ambassador Ian Kelly told Reuters news agency, citing missions such as the current one in Afghanistan.

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence is scheduled to visit Georgia on July 31 after a stop in Estonia to meet with Baltic leaders also concerned about Russia's intensions in their region. He will meet with U.S. troops on August 1.

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During his stop in Tallinn, Pence said, "Our message to the Baltic states -- my message when we visit Georgia and Montenegro -- will be the same: To our allies here in Eastern Europe, we are with you, we stand with you on behalf of freedoms."

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US and Georgia hold military drills, as Russia shows off naval strength
30 July 2017
BBC

The US and Georgia have launched their biggest ever joint military exercises, as the Caucasus nation seeks to push its bid to join Nato.

US Vice-President Mike Pence will visit this week and is expected to back the plan, which Russia strongly opposes.

Georgia and Russia have had fractious relations over two breakaway republics and fought a brief war in 2008.

Russia staged its own show of force on Sunday with President Putin joining a naval display in St Petersburg.

The US-Georgia military drills, dubbed Noble Partner, involve some 1,600 US and 800 Georgian troops.

The US has also deployed M1A2 Abrams main battle tanks and M2 Bradley infantry vehicles for the exercises, which will go on until 12 August..

A number of other nations, including the UK, are involved.

Georgian Defence Minister Levan Izoria said the "unprecedented" exercises would "make clear the support for Georgia by the Nato member states, especially the US".

Although Georgia is not a member of Nato, it does voluntarily contribute to the Nato Response Force (NRF), the multinational force of land, air, navy and special operations units the alliance can deploy quickly when needed.

The Russo-Georgian War in August 2008 led to Moscow occupying the Russian-backed self-proclaimed republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Meanwhile on Sunday, President Vladimir Putin attended a show of might on Russia's annual Navy Day.

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Some 50 warships and submarines were on displayed in the Gulf of Finland and on the Neva river around St Petersburg.

He said in an address: "The navy is not only dealing with its traditional tasks but also responding with merit to new challenges, making a significant contribution to the fight against terrorism and piracy."

There were other displays around the country, and Russia also showed off its naval hardware at its Syrian base of Tartus.

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Mike Pence arrives in Estonia, kicking off Eastern Europe trip
By David Caplan
30 July 2017
ABC News

Vice President Mike Pence and second lady Karen Pence arrived in Estonia Sunday afternoon, kicking off a three-country visit of Eastern Europe.

The Pences, who left from Joint Base Andrews in Maryland Saturday night, were greeted at the Tallinn airport by U.S. ambassador to Estonia James D. Melville and Estonian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sven Mikser. The group shook hands and spoke briefly before the vice president's motorcade headed to the Pences' hotel.

"On behalf of @POTUS, arrived in Tallinn, Estonia with @SecondLady to meet w/ leaders of Baltic States on security & prosperity #VPinEurope," Pence tweeted upon his arrival.

In explaining the purpose of the trip, a senior Trump administration official told reporters last week, "This builds upon the administration's engagement. The Secretary of Defense had been there recently, and it builds upon the Vice President's trip when we addressed some of these leaders at the Munich Security Conference when he met with the three Baltic Presidents then. And he has since hosted the Prime Minister of Georgia here at the White House, as did the President. And then on Montenegro's accession into NATO, we also hosted leadership here in the White House."

The office of Estonian Prime Minister Juri Ratas said in a press release Saturday that Ratas and Pence will meet at 5:30 p.m. local time, to "discuss cooperation in defence, digital issues and cyber defence, as well as cooperation between the US and the EU in connection with the Estonia Presidency of the Council of the European Union."

Ratas said in a statement, "The contribution of the US to the security of the Baltic States and also the whole of Europe is vital, and I certainly wish to thank the Vice President for that. Besides that, we plan to speak about the Estonian digital solutions that are of interest to the US, and developing

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cooperation in cyber defence at our meeting. Another important topic that will be on the table, is the cooperation between the EU and the US."

A senior White House administration official told reporters last week that while in Estonia, Pence "will highlight our strong bilateral ties, including by trade and investment. And particularly with Estonia, successes in the cyber realm, and their current partnership on cyber issues, and their leading not only in that region, but globally."

On Thursday, Karen Pence expressed her enthusiasm for the trip, tweeting "Looking forward to our visit to Eastern Europe where I highlight my iniative, art therapy. What an honor!"

According to the second lady's office, she will tour a medical center in Tallinn, and participate in a roundtable discussion with art therapists.

The senior administration official said in Georgia, the vice president will "highlight our commitment to the U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership, our strong support Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity ... and its internationally recognized borders, and our support for Georgia and their Euro-Atlantic aspirations."

While in Georgia, Karen Pence will visit with patients of an art therapy program in Tbilisi.

On Wednesday, Pence will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Podgorica, Montenegro, to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and underscore the importance of good governance, political reforms and rule of law. Also expected to attend are the leaders of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia.

In Podgorica, Montenegro, the second lady will tour a honey farm, where she will learn about a local family's beekeeping business.

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Pence travels to Baltic states to reassure allies and send message to Russia
By Ashley Parker
31 July 2017
Washington Post

Vice President Pence touched down in Estonia on Sunday on the eve of President Trump's expected signing of legislation to impose broad sanctions against Russia, and said he came bearing a message from the president: "Russia's destabilizing activities, its support for rogue regimes, its activities in Ukraine, are unacceptable."

Speaking briefly with reporters in Town Hall Square here in Tallinn's old town, Pence reaffirmed the president's decision to sign the sanctions bill but also held out the possibility that the implementation

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of the penalties — for which Russia has already retaliated — might actually improve relations between the two countries, saying he and Trump "expect Russian behavior to change."

"The president and I remain very hopeful that we'll see different behavior by the Russian government, with regard to Ukraine, with regard to supporting rogue regimes in Iran and North Korea," Pence said. "We continue to believe that if Russia will change its behavior, our relationship can change for the good and improve for the interests in both of our countries and the interest of peace and stability in this region and around the world."

Russia has rejected the idea that the sanctions will in any way improve relations, with its U.S. embassy tweeting on Saturday: "Washington still doesn't get the fact that pressure never works against @Russia, bilateral relations can hardly be improved by sanctions."

Russian President Vladi-mir Putin said Sunday that the U.S. diplomatic missions in Russia will have to reduce their staffs by 755 people.

Pence's long-planned, 3½-day trip to Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro was originally intended to reaffirm the United States' commitment to NATO — Estonia is one of five countries meeting its defense spending commitment — and touch on the United States' commitment to the security of the Baltic states. All three countries have been the targets of Russian aggression.

But in the wake of Trump's decision to sign the legislation — which passed the Senate on Thursday on an overwhelming 98 to 2 vote — the vice president's trip has taken on a clear Russia focus, senior administration officials said. Nearly all of Pence's remarks and speeches are likely to address the challenges Russia poses in this part of the world.

But Pence's rhetoric abroad so far seems slightly out of sync with some of his boss's previous comments and actions on the topics of both Russia and NATO.

Despite the firm conclusion of his own intelligence community that Russia interfered in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Trump has repeatedly refused to fully accept that determination. When he has acknowledged that Russia did meddle, he has played down Moscow's role, saying other state or individual actors could have played a role as well.

When asked how the Baltic states can accept Pence's reassurances that the United States will support them against Russian aggression and interference in their domestic politics when Trump has frequently taken a softer line, the vice president said, "The president has confirmed repeatedly that we believe Russia did meddle in U.S. elections. I think he has also said it could have been other actors as well."

His message throughout Eastern Europe, Pence added, is a simple one. "While our policy is America-first, it's not America-alone, and that our allies in Eastern Europe can be confident that the United States of America stands with them," he said. "We are committed to NATO, we are committed to our common defense."

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Trump's comments and actions have at times raised questions about his commitment to the alliance, despite statements of strong support from Pence and other administration officials.

While attending a ceremony at NATO headquarters in Brussels in May on his first trip abroad, Trump delivered a speech from which he specifically removed a roughly 20-word section intended to reaffirm U.S. support for the treaty's Article 5, which says an attack on one member is an attack on all members. He later committed to NATO's collective defense ideal, which is the cornerstone of the treaty, but the earlier omission worried European leaders.

Pence on Sunday again tried to play down the president's previous uncertainty on Article 5, arguing Trump has never wavered in his commitment.

"From the time the president sent me to speak at the Munich Security Conference, we made it clear that the policy of our administration is to stand firmly with our NATO allies and to stand firmly behind our Article 5 commitment that an attack on one is an attack on all," Pence said. "The president has made it clear from the outset of our administration and will continue to make it clear to all our allies in the region."

Trump was initially reluctant to accept the Russia sanctions legislation, which curbs his ability to lift them on his own without consent from Congress. But he finally agreed to sign it after revisions, which also include sanctions on Iran and North -Korea.

In many ways, the president had no choice. Trump would have encountered a fierce political backlash — as well as faced the threat of a veto override from a Republican-controlled Congress — had he refused to sign the bill. Rejecting the legislation also would have raised further questions about his seeming reluctance to confront Putin.

Pence's trip also comes as Trump is facing growing scrutiny at home over Russia, in the form of special counsel Robert S. Mueller III's widening investigation. In addition to looking into whether Trump's associates colluded with Russians in the 2016 election, Mueller's probe has grown to include questions about the finances of Trump and his family, as well as possible attempts to obstruct the investigation.

Michael McFaul, the ambassador to Russia under former president Barack Obama, said that Pence's tough-on-Russia message will be "welcome" in each of the countries he's visiting — but may disguise a deeper uncertainty about what the Trump administration's true policy is toward Moscow.

"It will be easy for him to have positive bilateral meetings when he goes there," McFaul said. "But of course he has a very convoluted message on what they're doing on Russia."

All three countries have struggled for years with Russian aggression. In 2007, Estonia faced a cyberattack that hobbled dozens of corporate and government websites — an attack for which it blames Russia, though the Kremlin denies the charge. In 2008, Russia invaded Georgia, and

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Montenegro has accused Russian agents of an attempted coup in 2016, aimed at preventing the nation from joining NATO.

"Most certainly all three of these countries have felt the influence — the coercive influence — of Russia on their domestic politics, so from my point of view, that's an interesting and positive set of countries for him to go to, with the caveat that I don't know what their Russia policy is," McFaul said. "I follow it pretty closely, and I could not tell you what the strategy is."

But Sunday afternoon, in the sun-soaked town square, Pence seemed to only have one overarching message — that he and the president are in policy lockstep, and that he is just a humble emissary spreading Trump's greetings abroad.

The vice president stopped to shake hands with a few of the people who had gathered to watch the spectacle, many of them — like Pence — tourists in Estonia. As each individual introduced themselves, Pence often tied their comments back to Trump, telling a man from Paris, "The president was just in Paris for Bastille Day," and telling a couple from Poland, "The president was just in Warsaw."

Then, he ducked into his motorcade and pulled away.

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Pence Delivers Tough Speech on 'Unpredictable' Russia
By Peter Nicholas
31 July 2017
Wall Street Journal

Vice President Mike Pence issued one of the Trump administration's toughest attacks to date on Russia, coming to a nation on Russia's border to warn against aggression from the "unpredictable neighbor to the east."

Mr. Pence said Monday that President Donald Trump would sign a bill passed by Congress that imposes new sanctions on Russia, despite earlier reservations from the White House and a promise from Moscow to expel hundreds of U.S. diplomats in return.

Mr. Pence said the Russia must be held accountable for its actions, saying the U.S. wouldn't lift sanctions until it sees as a reversal of "the actions that caused the sanctions in the first place."

"At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe one against another," he said.

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Mr. Pence is in the midst of a three-day overseas trip that includes stops in two other countries that Moscow has seen as its traditional sphere of influence: the former Soviet state of Georgia and the Balkan state of Montenegro. His repeated message is that the U.S. won't abandon allies living in Russia's shadow.

The vice president delivered his remarks outside Estonia's defense headquarters, surrounded by symbols of military resolve. Flanking him were armored tanks and standing in front of the stage were hundreds of U.S., British, French and Estonian troops, hands clasped behind their backs.

Moscow has accused the U.S. of threatening Russia by pushing for the expansion of NATO up to its borders through the admittance of the Baltic states and the inclusion of Ukraine and Georgia.

Before the speech, Mr. Pence and the presidents of the three Baltic states, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, received a private military briefing that opened with an officer referencing the "eastern flank of NATO."

Mr. Pence praised Estonia for being one of just five in the NATO alliance to devote 2% of its gross domestic product to defense. The country of 1.3 million has pushed for more U.S. air cover for the region, but NATO officials say its 183-mile border with Russia would be hard to defend against a determined Russian assault. A Rand Corp. study last year showed that Russia could beat back NATO forces reach the outskirts of Tallinn, the capital, in just a few days.

In his 2016 presidential campaign, Mr. Trump often spoke of more cooperative dealings with Russia, and described NATO as obsolete. But he has since toughened his line on Russia, and Mr. Pence's remarks signaled again that the U.S. supported NATO's common-defense provision, known as Article 5.

"The United States rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation or malign influence in the Baltic States or against any of our treaty allies—and under President Donald Trump, the United States of America will stand firmly behind our (NATO) Article 5 pledge of mutual defense—and the presence of U.S. Armed Forces here today proves it," Mr. Pence said.

Mr. Trump in recent months has described relations with Russia at an all-time low point. After insisting he didn't believe Russia interfered in the 2016 presidential race, he has said Russia was "probably" involved, though he has also said China and other actors could have been. Russia has denied interfering in the election.

Mr. Pence, talking to reporters during a visit to Old Town Square, said that Mr. Trump's feelings on the matter are clear.

"The president has confirmed repeatedly that we believe Russia did meddle in U.S. elections." Mr. Pence said. "I think he has also said it could have been other actors as well. But he's confirmed his belief and our intelligence that Russia was involved in meddling in U.S. elections."

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Having chided Russia for its actions, Mr. Pence held open the possibility of a thaw. "President Trump has made it clear: America is open to a better relationship with Russia," he said.

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The Latest: US VP Wants Better Relations With Russia
31 July 2017
Associated Press

The Latest on U.S-Russian tensions (all times local):

2:50 p.m.

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence says that despite what the State Department described as "a regrettable and uncalled-for act" when the Kremlin ordered the U.S. to cut embassy and consulate staff in Russia, America wants to improve relations with Moscow.

Pence told reporters during a visit to Estonia that "we hope for better days, and better relations with Russia."

Speaking to the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania — all former Soviet republics bordering Russia — he said Monday that "the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, the security of our allies, and the security of freedom-loving nations around the world."

Pence was speaking on the first leg of a European tour that continues to Georgia and Montenegro.

On Sunday, Russian President Vladimir Putin said the U.S. would have to cut 755 of its embassy and consulate staff in Russia — a sweeping reduction that he described as a response to new U.S. sanctions.

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1:10 p.m.

The Kremlin says Washington needs to show "political will" for Russia-U.S. relations to recover.

President Vladimir Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said Monday that it will take time for the U.S. to rid itself of what he called "political schizophrenia." He added that Russia remains interested in constructive cooperation with the U.S.

On Sunday, Putin said the U.S. would have to cut 755 of its embassy and consulate staff in Russia — a sweeping reduction which he described as a response to new U.S. sanctions. The Russian Foreign

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Ministry also announced closing down a U.S. recreational retreat on the outskirts of Moscow as well as warehouse facilities.

Moscow's move showed that its earlier hopes for an improvement in Russia-U.S. ties after Donald Trump's victory in the U.S. presidential election have withered.

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12 noon

Russian President Vladimir Putin has demanded that United States cut its embassy and consulate staff in Russia by 755 people, heightening tensions between Washington and Moscow three days after the U.S. Congress approved sanctions against Russia.

The U.S. State Department called Putin's move "a regrettable and uncalled-for act."

The announcement Sunday also came hours after U.S. Vice President Mike Pence landed in Estonia, which borders Russia, for talks with the country that holds the rotating European Union presidency.

Russian's Foreign Ministry on Friday first ordered a reduction by Sept. 1 in U.S. diplomatic personnel in Russia to 455 people in response to a new package of American sanctions.

The sanctions seek to punish Moscow for meddling in the 2016 U.S. election and for its aggression in Ukraine and Syria.

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Pence: We will 'hold Russia accountable for its actions'
By Louis Nelson
31 July 2017
Politico

Amid a fresh wave of sanctions and renewed tension between the United States and Russia, Vice President Mike Pence reassured NATO's Baltic member states that the U.S. stands firmly behind its mutual-defense commitment in the face of stepped-up aggression from Moscow.

"The United States stands with the nations and people of the Baltic States — and we always will. We stand with our NATO allies in our commitment to your security," Pence said Monday in remarks at the headquarters of Estonia's defense forces. "Today we stand where East meets West — on a great frontier of freedom. No threat looms larger in the Baltic States than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east."

Pence's remarks came before members of the U.S., French, British and Estonian militaries and followed a meeting between the vice president and the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

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Pence offered optimism that the U.S.-Russia relationship might improve but said that any warming would come with a shift in Moscow's behavior. The vice president reaffirmed President Donald Trump's commitment to signing sanction legislation targeting Russia passed overwhelmingly last week by Congress.

In response to the forthcoming sanctions measure, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the U.S. to reduce the number of diplomats stationed in Russia by more than 700. The dueling diplomatic maneuvers marked a new low in already frosty relations for the former Cold War rivals.

Trump's presidency brought with it the possibility of improved relations with Russia after the president spent much of the 2016 campaign speaking warmly of Putin and expressing optimism that he would be able to build a strong relationship with the Kremlin. Instead, relations have worsened amid investigations into Russia's efforts to interfere in last year's election, continued Russian military activity in Ukraine as well as Moscow's support for Syrian dictator Bashar Assad.

Trump, too, has shifted his rhetoric in regards to Russia, drawing a relatively tougher line even if some critics would prefer him to take an even more aggressive approach. And after characterizing NATO as "obsolete" and questioning the U.S.'s willingness to comply with the treaty's all-for-one, one-for-all defense agreement, Trump has more recently reaffirmed his nation's commitment while also urging member states to increase their defense spending.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States will continue to hold Russia accountable for its actions — and we call on our European allies and friends to do the same," Pence said Monday in Estonia. "President Trump has made it clear: America is open to a better relationship. But the president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia — a better relationship, and the lifting of sanctions, will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place."

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Pence: Administration policy is 'America first,' not 'America alone'
By Julia Manchester
31 July 2017
Hill

Vice President Mike Pence looked to reassure NATO allies on his trip to Eastern Europe on Sunday, saying President Trump's "America first" policies are not meant to isolate U.S. allies.

"President Trump sent me to eastern Europe with a very simple message, that is America first doesn't mean America alone," Pence said in an interview with Fox News during a stop in Tallinn, Estonia.

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"Our message to the Baltic states, my message when we visit Georgia and Montenegro will be the same. To our allies in Eastern Europe, we are with you, we stand with you on behalf of freedom," he continued.

Pence's visit comes as tensions between NATO member states and Russia continue to rise. He arrived in Estonia on Sunday to showcase support for NATO allies in the Baltic region and Eastern Europe.

It also comes as Trump prepares to sign legislation that would slap brand new sanctions on Russia.

"The president has made it very clear that Russia's destabilizing activities and support for rogue regimes and its activities in Ukraine are unacceptable. The president made it clear that very soon he will sign sanctions from the Congress to reinforce that," Pence said Sunday.

"But at the same time as we make our intentions clear that we expect Russian behavior to change, the president and I remain very hopeful that we'll see very different behavior from the Russian government," he added.

Russia caught the attention of NATO and its allies earlier this month, when when it sent 2,500 troops to the Latvian and Estonian borders as a part of a military drill in the Pskov region.

It's also at the heart of the election meddling investigations that have expanded to include questions about possible Trump campaign contact with Moscow.

The vice president will also make stops in Montenegro, which became a NATO member earlier this year, and Georgia, which has attempted to join the alliance in the past.

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Vice President Mike Pence: Russian 'Aggression' Makes NATO Necessary
By Eoghan Macquire
31 July 2017
NBC News

The "specter of aggression" from Russia makes a strong and united NATO more important now than at any time since the Soviet Union's collapse, Vice President Mike Pence said Monday.

"Russia seeks to redraw international borders by force, undermine democracies of sovereign nations and divide the free nations of Europe," Pence said after meeting the leaders of the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

The three European countries are now members of NATO but were part of the Soviet Union and still feel the pressure of Russian influence after gaining independence in the early 1990s.

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"A strong and united NATO is more necessary today than at any point since the collapse of communism a quarter-century ago and no threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States of America rejects any attempts to use force, threats, intimidation or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies," he added.

Pence made the comments in the Estonian capital, Tallinn, the first stop on a three-day trip that will also take in Georgia and Montenegro.

Some in the Baltic nations have fretted they could be in Russia's sights after its annexation of Crimea and backing of pro-Moscow separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Although Pence stated that U.S. still wanted to foster "better relations" with Russia, he reiterated that the U.S. would continue to adhere to Article 5 of the alliance's charter — a tenet of collective defense.

President Trump had previously caused concern among NATO members by saying the organization was "obsolete" and declining to promise that America would defend fellow members if they did not up their military spending.

No other president since NATO was founded in 1949 had questioned that principle — until Trump, although he recently expressed support for NATO's Article 5.

Pence also stated that "recent diplomatic action" by Russia will not impact American commitments to the security of its NATO allies.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said Sunday that he was ordering the U.S. to reduce its diplomatic staff in the country by 755.

The move came in the wake of new sanctions voted through by the U.S. Congress last week which aim to punish Moscow for interfering in the 2016 presidential election and for its military aggression in Ukraine and Syria.

"Recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter the commitment of the United States of America to our security, the security of our allies and the security of freedom loving nations around the world," Pence said.

"[The U.S.] stands firmly behind our Article 5 pledge of mutual defense and an attack on one of us is an attack on us all," he added.

Estonian president, Kersti Kaljulaid, said the presence of Pence in Tallinn "underlined the credibility of Article 5."

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President Dalia Grybauskaitė of Lithuania, meanwhile, praised the decision of the U.S. Congress to pass new sanctions against Russia, describing it as a "very good message."

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The Testing Ground for Trump's Russia Policy
By Uri Friedman
30 July 2017
Atlantic

At the moment, U.S.-Russian relations could be thought of as a live experiment in the "Great Man" theory of history, which attributes historical change to the actions of exceptional individuals rather than impersonal forces that transcend any man or woman. If it were up to Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump, it seems, Russia and the United States would be teaming up to defeat terrorism, leaving the bitter days of sanctions and election meddling and proxy wars behind them.

The evidence to date, however, suggests it's mostly not up to the two men. Despite all the speculation about the American president cozying up to the Kremlin, the United States under Trump has repeatedly done the opposite. Yes, Trump has echoed Putin talking points, wavered on clearly committing to defend NATO allies, and ended some U.S. funding for rebels fighting Russia's ally in Syria, President Bashar al-Assad. Yet since Trump took office, the U.S. government has also attacked Assad's forces, admitted another country to the NATO military alliance over Russian objections, and advanced new sanctions to punish Russia for interfering in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign.

Many members of Congress and Trump's own administration, including the president's defense secretary and national-security adviser, consider Russia a U.S. adversary. Many Americans, amid investigations into whether the Trump campaign colluded with the Russian government to undermine Hillary Clinton's candidacy, are suspicious of any White House concession to the Kremlin. And so far, these views, as well as the clashing geopolitical goals of the two world powers, have proven stronger than Trump's desire to pursue friendlier relations with Moscow.

In the latest sign of the Russia hawks prevailing over the Russia doves, Vice President Mike Pence departs Sunday for a four-day trip to Eastern Europe, where he'll seek to reassure U.S. allies who see nearby Russia as a threat—and to shore up NATO in particular as a bulwark against that threat.

In Estonia, he'll meet with the leaders of the three Baltic countries, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, who are among NATO's easternmost members. In Georgia, an aspiring NATO member, he'll visit troops involved in a NATO-affiliated military exercise. And in Montenegro, a new NATO member that has never before received such a high-ranking U.S. official, he'll attend a summit of current and potentially future NATO members.

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According to the White House, Pence is making the trip "at the direction of President Trump." And surely there's some truth to that. But the direction of President Trump—especially when it comes to Russia—is far from clear. The countries on Pence's itinerary offer examples for how the administration's perplexing, bifurcated approach to Russia could be poked and prodded in the coming months and years. Small nations such as Estonia, Georgia, and Montenegro, which straddle East and West, literally test the limits of the America-First president's commitment to U.S. allies and to fundamentally changing America's relationship with Russia. And unlike another testing ground for Trump's Russia policy—his response to Russia's alleged intervention in the U.S. election—the one in Eastern Europe will yield results that don't primarily affect Americans. It isn't all about "us."

It's also very much about Estonians and Georgians and Montenegrins: The vice president is visiting a region that is "somewhere in between the EU and NATO and Russia," Vesko Garcevic, a former Montenegrin ambassador to NATO, told me. "Therefore, for Russia, this is really a battleground—a place where Russia can influence countries."

Or consider the view from Moscow: "The Baltic states right now are seen as a U.S./NATO foothold close to Russia's main [power] centers; Georgia is a U.S. ally in the Caucasus and the Black Sea region, a sensitive area in security terms," Dmitri Trenin, the director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, wrote in an email. As the Kremlin sees it, Pence "will be visiting the new U.S. sphere of influence. Russian conventional thinking maintains that the U.S. is supporting the Balts, Georgians, and Ukrainians not because they are democratic or strive for democracy but because they are vehemently anti-Russian and are only too happy to lease their territory to the Pentagon, CIA, et al."

In each country that Pence is visiting, the perceived threat from Russia looks different. In Georgia, which fought a war with neighboring Russia in 2008 that left two Georgian breakaway regions in de facto Russian control, there are fears that the Kremlin could do what it did in Ukraine in 2014: support separatists and seize control of just enough territory to keep the country in Russia's sphere of influence and out of the West's. Moscow currently seems content to nibble around the edges of Georgian territory, in what Georgian officials have condemned as "creeping occupation."

In Montenegro, the threat is more political than military. The former Yugoslav republic joined NATO in June despite Russian vows to retaliate against its onetime ally for taking a "hostile course"—one that would cut the Russian navy off from the Adriatic Sea and reduce Russia's sway in the Balkans. And several Serbian and Russian nationals will soon go on trial in Montenegro for allegedly planning a coup last fall that would have overthrown the nation's pro-West government, brought the pro-Russia opposition to power, and thwarted Montenegro's bid to become part of NATO and eventually the European Union. Montenegrin authorities claim the Russian government was involved in the plot, which the Kremlin denies. Montenegro is a young, fragile democracy, Garcevic observed, and Russia has exploited its "democratic deficiencies" to "gain greater geopolitical influence in the region."

In Estonia, a former Soviet republic that is now a thriving democracy ensconced in NATO and the EU, the main concern is Russia manipulating Estonian politics and policy by, for instance, launching cyberattacks, tampering with energy supplies, engaging in information warfare, or carrying out

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limited military provocations. The present preoccupation involves Russia's plans to stage large-scale military drills, known as Zapad ("West"), in Belarus this fall, ahead of which NATO has rotated troops through the Baltics and Poland. Baltic leaders are now increasing their defense budgets—already among NATO's most robust—and asking the alliance to permanently deploy anti-aircraft weapons in their countries as further deterrents against Russian aggression.

The wide open question, however, is the extent to which Pence's reassurance tour can really reassure these countries.

"People here, politicians, are puzzled with the new administration's position toward Russia," said Garcevic. There are moments when that position "seems to be very friendly and forthcoming to Putin," which suggests the United States is "turning its back to the Balkans," he explained, and other moments when it appears to be a "more traditional American approach" of fully supporting NATO and America's European alliances.

"Sometimes it seems like an unguided missile," Garcevic mused. "You don't know what's going to happen next."

Since Montenegrin officials "are interested in having good relations with the U.S.," they try to "minimize and downplay, water down, what President Trump says, particularly in his tweets," Garcevic added. But when I presented him with a scenario—Pence tells the Montenegrin government everything it wants to hear, only for Trump to complain about NATO on Twitter a couple days later—Garcevic acknowledged the limits of this approach. "If Trump says this, this would be like a cold shower," he responded. "This will cast a shadow over what I'm assuming the vice president will do in the Balkans."

I found Toomas Hendrik Ilves, who left office as Estonia's president shortly before Trump was elected, similarly mystified. "There will be cyber cooperation [between the U.S. and Russia], there won't be cyber cooperation, now there is cyber cooperation," he said. You have Trump and his supporters "trying to dream up some kind of conspiracy on the part of Ukraine against Trump and then you have [Trump's Ukraine envoy] Kurt Volker saying … there are more Russian tanks in Ukraine than there are tanks in Western Europe."

"Were I to be in office right now, the concern would be trying to [determine] what is exactly the [U.S.] policy that we're going to have to count on," Ilves told me. So, I asked, how would he describe that policy?

He laughed. "I don't know. I don't know. I don't think anyone really does."

It's wrong to picture Estonian leaders panicking, Ilves said, but they're probably confused. "How do we proceed?" he asked. "Do we spend more money on [defense]? Do we start pushing for something in the European Union? Do we want NATO to have a shift in focus?"

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It used to be that "when the [American] president says something, it becomes policy," noted Ilves, who served as Estonia's president for 10 years, spanning the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Now he's unsure, especially when it comes to Trump's tweets. "I think that they don't reflect policy," he said.

Trenin, for his part, dismissed the idea behind much of the unease in Eastern European capitals: that Russia is poised to act aggressively against another country in its neighborhood, as it did in Ukraine. The worry is based on the assumption that Russia has some inherent desire to "expand, invade, [and] subjugate others," Trenin argued, and that assumption is mistaken. "From the Kremlin's standpoint, Russia's intervention in Ukraine [after a revolution overthrew Ukraine's pro-Russia President Viktor Yanukovych] was a defensive move. The importance of Ukraine to Russia's security and the Russian psyche can hardly be overestimated."

There "is only one Ukraine," Trenin added.

Nearby countries such as the Baltic nations will remain fearful of Russia, Trenin conceded, but those fears have less to do with Russia itself than with the West, whose leaders failed to protect them during the World War II era. (The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, a 1939 agreement in which Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union secretly staked out spheres of influence in the Baltics and elsewhere in the region, is "the big national scar" for Estonia and the other plundered countries, Ilves told me. From the Estonian perspective, great powers made a deal "about you," he explained. This left a legacy of "paranoia" that "is always a subcurrent" of the public's thinking on Russia-related matters.)

"In 1939-40, Britain and France did not much help [these countries] against the Nazis," Trenin wrote to me. "Now they are not sure whether the United States would defend them against a nuclear superpower. During the Cold War, the unanswered question was whether Washington would REALLY risk losing Chicago for Hamburg. Would it do so now for Tallinn? Since there can be no clear answer, there will always be fears"—whether Donald Trump is in office or not.

As for the Trump administration's contradictory Russia policy, and the latest move in Congress to impose additional sanctions on Russia in legislation that also slaps sanctions on Iran and North Korea, Trenin had this to say: "I think the Kremlin views the U.S. as a dysfunctional polity, with its political class at war with itself and its society deeply divided along cultural fault lines. Under these circumstances one hardly expects a consistent policy."

"The president has to bow to the prevailing anti-Russian consensus in the policy establishment," he continued. "The new sanctions bill, which puts Russia into the same category of U.S. worst enemies as Iran and North Korea, is a very candid statement that virtually nothing positive can be achieved between the U.S. and Russia for a long time to come," despite the hopes of a U.S.-Russian rapprochement that initially followed Trump's election.

"Bad as they are now, U.S.-Russian relations continue to get worse, edging ever closer to a kinetic collision between their armed forces somewhere: in Syria, over the Baltic and Black Seas, or Ukraine," Trenin warned. Putin's decision this week to retaliate against America's retaliation for

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Russian interference in the 2016 election, which included the seizure of U.S. diplomatic properties and a demand that the United States cut its diplomatic staff in the country, "will usher in a new and harsher round of rivalry" between the two countries, he predicted. On Sunday, Mike Pence wades into the territory where that rivalry is fiercest.

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VP Pence: Attack on 1 NATO ally is attack on all
By Jari Tanner
31 July 2017
Associated Press

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence on Monday strongly pledged America's commitment to protecting NATO allies against attacks, including the Baltic states, which have anxiously watched a growing Russian military presence in the region.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States stands firmly behind our Article 5 pledge of mutual defense — an attack on one of us is an attack on us all," Pence told reporters after meeting with the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the Estonian capital of Tallinn.

Mutual defense is a vital issue for the three small former Soviet states that border Russia, which were all occupied for nearly five decades by Soviet troops before regaining their independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The United States never recognized the claim by Soviet leader Josef Stalin on the three countries — which have a combined population of 6 million — allowing Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to maintain independent diplomatic missions and have their national flags stored at the State Department throughout the occupation.

Saying that Trump "knows security is the foundation of our prosperity," Pence said America and the Baltic countries would seek new ways to increase prosperity by increasing two-way trade that currently amounts to $3.5 billion and by increasing their mutual investments.

Earlier, he met Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid, Latvian President Raimonds Vejonis and Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaite at the baroque 18th-century Kadriorg Palace, which was built by the Russian Emperor Peter the Great.

Energy is one way that Washington is seeking to tighten its commercial ties with the Baltic countries. It closed a deal in June to sell liquefied natural gas (LNG) directly from the United States to the region.

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A Lithuanian state-owned gas trading company will receive the first delivery of U.S. imported LNG in August — something that Pence said will "benefit not only our prosperity, but regional security. And I am confident that this deal will only be the first of many."

Pence said he and Trump were pleased with the deal that will help the Baltic states to reduce their reliance on Russian gas.

Later Monday, Pence met with NATO troops from Britain, France and the United States that are stationed in Estonia. The alliance has deployed some 4,000 troops and military hardware in the three Baltic states and Poland to counter Russia's presence in the Baltic Sea region.

Before departing for Georgia, Pence took shovel and planted an English oak outside the headquarters of the Estonian defense forces together with the leaders of Latvia and Lithuania.

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Sunday ordered the U.S. to cut its embassy and consulate staff in Russia by 755 people. On Monday, Pence said America wants to improve bilateral relations with Russia "despite the recent diplomatic action by Moscow."

"We hope for better days and better relations with Russia," Pence told reporters.

Yet Russia's upcoming Zapad 2017 military exercises with 13,000 troops near the Baltic states' borders in September may further strain relations.

Grybauskaite told Lithuanian national radio on Monday that the U.S. would double the number of military jets and increase American troops on her country's soil during the Russian drills to signal that Washington is monitoring the Baltics situation closely.

Estonia — which currently holds the rotating presidency of the 28-nation European Union — is the first leg of Pence's European tour. The U.S. vice president flew later Monday to Georgia, another former Soviet republic, and will also visit new NATO member Montenegro, two countries facing strong pressure from Russia.

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Mike Pence Wants Sanctions to Change Russia's 'Behavior' as Putin Orders Expulsion of Hundreds of U.S. Diplomatic Staff
By Harriet Sinclair
31 July 2017
Newsweek

Vice President Mike Pence said he hopes the decision to place sanctions on Russia will prompt "different behavior" from Moscow, as President Vladimir Putin announced the U.S. would have to cut 755 diplomatic staff from Russia.

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After the White House on Friday confirmed the sanctions on Russia, Putin responded by announcing the cuts, but Pence appears optimistic about the future relationship between the two countries.

Speaking from his European tour on Sunday, Pence said he hoped the sanctions would prompt Moscow to reconsider its position on a number of issues, including North Korea.

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"The President and I remain very hopeful that we'll see different behavior by the Russian government, with regard to Ukraine, with regard to supporting rogue regimes in Iran and North Korea," Pence said in comments reported by Fox News.

"We continue to believe that if Russia will change its behavior, our relationship can change for the good and improve for the interests in both of our countries and the interest of peace and stability in this region and around the world," he said.

Pence also took the opportunity to stress that President Trump does accept the intelligence community's conclusion that Russia attempted to "meddle" in the U.S. election, despite the president previously making contradictory statements on the topic.

"The President has confirmed repeatedly that we believe Russia did meddle in U.S. elections," Pence told Fox News.

"I think he has also said it could have been other actors as well. But he's confirmed his belief and our intelligence that Russia was involved in meddling in US elections and it's part of what inspired the bipartisan action in the Congress to codify the sanctions that our administration has been implementing against Russia and will continue to advance that," he added.

But any U.S. hopes that sanctions would prompt any cooperation from Moscow appear to have been dashed after Putin announced the U.S. would lose diplomatic staff in Russia, and warned about further retaliation over the sanctions.

"We were waiting for quite a long time that maybe something would change for the better, were holding out hope that the situation would change somehow. But it appears that even if it changes someday it will not change soon," Putin said in comments carried by Russian state media.

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Pence pressures China on North Korea, talks Russia sanctions, election meddling
By Deena Zaru
30 July 2017
CNN (Excerpt)

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Pence's visit to Estonia is the first leg of an Eastern European trip that will also take him to Georgia and Montenegro to show US support for them and NATO in the face of what the administration has called Russia's destabilizing activities in Ukraine and elsewhere and its efforts to undermine the alliance. The trip comes amid rising tensions between the US and Russia over a new sanctions bill that easily cleared Congress last week and that the White House says Trump is expected to sign.

Passage of the bill prompted Russia to retaliate by cutting US diplomatic missions by 755 people, which Moscow announced Friday -- an in-kind response to penalties that would be codified by the legislation, including the ejection of Russian diplomatic staff and closure of two Russian compounds in the US, for its alleged meddling in last year's election and aggression in Ukraine.

"We waited a long time for things to perhaps change for the better," Russian state media quoted Russian President Vladimir Putin as saying Sunday. "We had such hope that the situation would change, but judging by the situation that will not be soon."

On taking retaliatory measures, Putin said, "I thought it was time for us to show that we will not leave this without an answer. As for other possible measures, or whether it is a lot or not, this is quite sensible from the point of view of the work of the diplomatic department. ..."

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov threatened further retaliation against the US on Sunday morning, saying that if that US goes through with the sanctions, "we will respond in kind," but he would not specify how Russia plans to respond.

Pence said Sunday that he hopes that slapping new sanctions on Russia would lead Russia to change its behavior with regard to Ukraine and end its support for Iran and North Korea.

"The President and I remain very hopeful that we'll see different behavior by the Russian government, with regard to Ukraine, with regard to supporting rogue regimes in Iran and North Korea," Pence said. "We continue to believe that if Russia will change its behavior, our relationship can change for the good and improve for the interests in both of our countries and the interest of peace and stability in this region and around the world."

Pressed on how to square the purpose of his trip with Trump's position on Russia's alleged efforts to influence last year's election, Pence defended the President. He insisted Trump is in agreement with US intelligence services on Russian meddling despite newly appointed White House communications director Anthony Scaramucci telling CNN last week that Trump is still unsure.

"The President has confirmed repeatedly that we believe Russia did meddle in US elections," Pence said. "I think he has also said it could have been other actors as well. But he's confirmed his belief and our intelligence that Russia was involved in meddling in US elections and it's part of what inspired

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the bipartisan action in the Congress to codify the sanctions that our administration has been implementing against Russia and will continue to advance that."

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Pence vows U.S. resistance to Russia during Estonia visit
By S.A. Miller
31 July 2017
Washington Times

Vice President Mike Pence on a visit to Estonia pledged Monday unwavering support of NATO allies and steadfast resistance to Russia aggression, especially in Baltic states that have been feeling intense pressure from Moscow.

Mr. Pence said he was in Eastern Europe to deliver a message from President Trump that the "the United States of America is with you."

"At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another," Mr. Pence said in a speech after meeting with the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuiana.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States of America rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation, or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies," he said.

The tough talk came amid mounting tension between Washington and Moscow. Russian President Vladimir Putin expelling 755 U.S. diplomats in retaliation for new sanctions legislation Mr. Trump is expected to sign.

"To be clear: We hope for better days, and better relations with Russia, recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, the security of our allies, and the security of freedom-loving nations around the world," Mr. Pence said.

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Pence's tricky trip has Russia hanging over it
By Andrew Hammond
30 July 2017
Gulf News (Opinion)

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US Vice-President Mike Pence started an important Eastern European tour yesterday that will last until tomorrow. The visit, whose subtext is that of the future of United States-Russia relations under US President Donald Trump, will see stops in Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro, and comes in the wake of the US Senate and House of Representatives' landmark votes to impose new sanctions on Moscow, which has already drawn Russian retaliation.

Key agenda items in Pence's tricky trip include a visit to see US and Georgian troops participating in the Noble Partner Nato-related exercise, which also features troops from the United Kingdom, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Armenia, and Slovenia. And the US vice-president will also participate, in Montenegro, with leaders across the Western Balkans in the Adriatic Charter Summit.

The immediate backdrop for Pence's visit is the continuing controversy over Russia and the Trump team. The US Senate and House voted overwhelmingly in recent days to impose sanctions on Moscow, and Trump now has to sign it into law or, in what would be a remarkable move, veto it. The legislation, whose restrictions would include on oil-and-gas projects in Russia, has been condemned by the country's Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergei Ryabkov, who asserts it would plant a "dangerous mine" under bilateral relations that could explode in coming months. Already, Moscow has retaliated to the congressional votes by ordering US diplomatic staff out of Russia and seizing two US diplomatic properties in the country.

The bill, which would also impose sanctions on North Korea and Iran, puts Trump in an awkward position, given his apparent pro-Moscow leanings. The president, who already has congressional and FBI investigations underway into his team's alleged ties with Russia, has only vowed at this stage to "study" the legislation, but is under strong pressure to sign it into law.

Trump's decision on this issue will be watched closely, not just in Moscow, but across Eastern Europe where Pence is visiting. Part of the nervousness that key US allies in Europe have about the Trump's positioning on Russia is what it potentially may mean for US commitments in the region and Nato. Trump has flip-flopped on this issue, describing the military alliance last year as "obsolete", and then this year as "not obsolete", sowing the seeds of confusion over what his true beliefs are.

Already, uncertainty over Trump's Nato policy is spurring the European Union to seek to reverse around a decade of defence spending cuts, totalling around 10 per cent in real terms. Moreover, a new European Defence Action Plan was agreed earlier this year by the EU, which will see greater continental military cooperation too.

For Trump, the key strategic question now on Russia is whether recent developments have destroyed the window of opportunity that may have existed for a warming of relations between Washington and Moscow. The US president has previously given multiple indications that he believes Russia is not a serious threat to America, hinting in January that he could even drop existing economic sanctions if the country "is helpful". Specifically, he appears to believe there were multiple common interests over issues such as preventing Iran from securing nuclear weapons, and combating terrorism.

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Trump's proposed repositioning of relations with Russia now looks, at the least, to have been put on ice. Here it is not only the fact that any new US sanctions will make relations frostier, but also that the Trump team is under significant pressure over the congressional and FBI investigations, and this issue has already claimed the scalp of national security adviser Michael Flynn.

'Complicit' or 'incompetent'

Should Trump be forced to sign the sanctions legislation, it will reassure the allies in Eastern Europe that Pence is visiting. However, it will complicate US foreign policy in other theatres, including potentially the Middle East, where Russian relations are relevant.

Already this year, there were tensions between Moscow and Washington here, which saw US missile strikes targeted at Syria, following an earlier poison gas attack on citizens in a rebel-held town allegedly by the Damascus regime, which killed at least 80 people, including around two dozen children. Russia — highly implausibly, given the nature of the chemicals involved — asserted that they were released inadvertently when Syrian planes struck a terrorist laboratory.

The ratcheting up of tensions has widened differences between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin over the future of Syrian President Bashar Al Assad after they had seemed to be getting closer to an agreement to potentially bring an end to Syria's six-year civil war that has left half a million people dead and triggered floods of refugees, while letting Al Assad stay in power. Rhetorically, at least, Trump appeared to move away from the latter and called for the Syrian president to be ousted, and US Ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, said that the Trump administration was ready to take further military steps in the country if needed.

US Defence Secretary James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson were also forceful in their criticism of Moscow. For instance, Tillerson said that "either Russia has been complicit or simply incompetent" in Syria, referring to Moscow's apparent inability to prevent the Al Assad regime from using chemical weapons, despite a 2013 agreement under which Russia was a guarantor, to remove these stockpiles from the country.

The spike in Washington-Moscow tensions over Syria even saw Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev saying the two countries were "one step away from war" and had "totally ruined" relations. Signs of rising tensions include Moscow's suspension of an agreement with Washington to share communications about US and Russian aircraft conducting missions over Syria. The Admiral Grigorovich, the frigate warship was dispatched from Crimea to the Syrian port of Tartus.

Taken overall, as Pence undertakes his trip to reassure Eastern European allies, Trump now finds himself in a big bind over Russia. Despite his desire for warming of relations between Washington and Moscow, the window of opportunity for that may be narrowing significantly and this could have implications across the world, including in Syria.

(Andrew Hammond is an Associate at LSE IDEAS at the London School of Economics.)

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Vice President Pence's Trip: An Opportunity to Advance U.S. Leadership in Europe
By Luke Coffey, Daniel Kochis
20 July 2017
Heritage Foundation (Opinion)

From July 30 to August 2, Vice President Mike Pence will travel to Estonia, Georgia, and Montenegro. This trip is the perfect follow-up to President Donald Trump's visit to Poland for the "Three Seas" conference—a meeting focused on the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic Seas—in early July. Vice President Pence should use his trip to affirm U.S. commitment to these three important countries, and to strengthen U.S. focus on the key regions in which they reside. While in Europe, it is important for the Vice President to underscore U.S. commitment to NATO, Baltic security, and U.S. engagement in the Balkans and the Black Sea region, while taking a hard line on Russian aggression.

The Baltic Sea

In Estonia, Vice President Pence will meet with Estonian Prime Minister Jüri Ratas as well as the three Baltic leaders, President Kersti Kaljulaid of Estonia, President Raimonds Vējonis of Latvia, and President Dalia Grybauskaitė of Lithuania.

The U.S. has a long history of championing the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Baltic states dating back to the interwar period of the 1920s. After regaining their independence from Russia in the early 1990s, the Baltic states have been staunch supporters of the transatlantic relationship.

Estonia is the regional leader in defense matters and is currently one of only five NATO countries that spend the required 2 percent of gross domestic product on defense. In terms of economic freedom, the Baltic region is a beacon of hope for Europe and the rest of the world. The region is proof that pursuing policies of economic liberalization and growth works. Estonia ranks first in the eurozone, and sixth in the world, in the 2017 Index of Economic Freedom, published by The Heritage Foundation.

The Baltic states face an existential threat from Russia, and are concerned about the upcoming Russian Zapad 17 exercises. In addition to Zapad, the Vice President's arrival will come just as Russia and China will have wrapped up joint exercises in the Baltic Sea.

The keystone of NATO's new deterrence measures are multinational battalions stationed in each of the Baltic countries and Poland to deter Russian aggression. The Alliance has also increased the number of aircraft taking part in Baltic Air Policing. While in Estonia, Vice President Pence should reiterate U.S. commitment to the transatlantic alliance, NATO, and the Article V security guarantee.

The Black Sea

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In Georgia, the Vice President will meet with President Giorgi Margvelashvili and Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili. In addition, he will visit U.S. and Georgian troops participating in the Noble Partner exercise. Vice President Pence's visit provides a perfect opportunity to strengthen the bilateral relationship with Tbilisi.

Georgia is a staunch ally of the United States. Since regaining its independence in 1991, successive Georgian governments have pursued an agenda of liberalizing the economy, cutting bureaucracy, fighting corruption, and embracing democracy—and in doing so, Georgia and its people have shown a firm and unwavering commitment to the transatlantic community.

Georgia is located in a dangerous and important geopolitical neighborhood for NATO. After the Russian invasion in 2008 and the subsequent Russian occupation of 20 percent of Georgia's territory, Georgia has transformed its military and has been steadfast in its support of overseas security operations. Georgia has contributed thousands of troops to Afghanistan (with 870 currently serving there) and Iraq, and hundreds of peacekeepers to the Balkans and in the Central African Republic.

The Adriatic Sea

In Podgorica, Montenegro, the Vice President will meet with Montenegrin President Filip Vujanović and Prime Minister Duško Marković. Vice President Pence will also participate with leaders from across the western Balkans in an Adriatic Charter Summit. Montenegro is the newest member of NATO, and an important U.S. ally in a region that is becoming increasingly unstable due to malign Russian influence, poor economic opportunities, and the rise of Islamist extremism.

The Balkans is home to unfinished business in Europe. In addition to historic, ethnic, religious, and cultural tensions, the Balkans are caught between Russia's destabilizing influence and pockets of Islamist extremism in the region. Montenegro is a poignant example.

Over the past seven years, Montenegro—a U.S. ally—has reformed itself in preparation for NATO membership. Last year, Russia, not happy with Montenegro's decision to join NATO, was suspected of having been behind a failed plot to break into parliament on election day, assassinate the former prime minister, and install a pro-Russian government in Podgorica, the nation's capital.

The U.S. has invested heavily in the Balkans since the end of the Cold War. Tens of thousands of U.S. service members have served in the Balkans, and billions of dollars in aid has been spent there, all in the hope of creating a secure and prosperous region that will someday be part of the transatlantic community. The Administration should articulate why the Balkan region remains important to the United States, and set out a clear policy to counter threats to the region.

The Way Forward

This trip offers a great opportunity to deepen three very important bilateral relations. To make this visit a success, Vice President Pence should:

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Reiterate America's commitment to NATO's Article V. The Vice President should echo President Trump's commitment made in Warsaw to NATO's Article V. The ultimate guarantor of security and stability in the Baltic region is the knowledge that the U.S. stands firmly by its mutual defense commitments as a member of NATO.

Make the case for a permanent military presence in the Baltic region. The U.S. and NATO need to show an enduring commitment to the region by permanently stationing armed forces in the Baltics and maintaining a robust maritime presence in the region.

Forcefully condemn Russian disinformation. Russia's disinformation measures are especially active in the region. In part, Russia has sought to undermine support for NATO's enhanced forward deployments by propagating false stories of abuse by troops serving in the multinational battalions, such as Canadian, British, or German soldiers. U.S. troops stationed in Poland for NATO's enhanced forward presence there have been targeted by similar Russian disinformation. Russia has also sought to delegitimize the Baltic nations as independent countries. The U.S. should forcefully condemn Russian disinformation and consider becoming a sponsoring nation at the NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence in Riga, the Latvian capital.

Empower global free-market energy policy. The U.S. should work immediately and comprehensively to eliminate remaining barriers to U.S. energy exports.

Push back against Nord Stream II. The Nord Stream II pipeline project that would connect Germany with Russia is neither economically necessary, nor is it geopolitically prudent. Vice President Pence should declare U.S. opposition to the pipeline, which in particular threatens allies in Eastern and Central Europe.

Ensure that the U.S. is clear on Georgia's future NATO membership. Vice President Pence should make it clear that Georgia's successful completion of subsequent Annual National Programs, the close relationship through the NATO–Georgia Commission, and the Substantial NATO–Georgia Package are the true markers of progress that will bring Georgia closer to ultimate membership.

Help the Georgians defend themselves. Georgia has the inherent right to self-defense. The U.S. should sell defensive anti-tank and anti-aircraft weaponry to Georgia.

Refer to the Russian military presence in Georgia as an occupation. During his visit, the Vice President should call the presence of several thousand Russian troops in South Ossetia and Abkhazia what it is: an illegal occupation.

Keep a focus on the Balkans. The Balkan nations are facing increased Russian interference and pressure with the aim of regional destabilization. In addition, the threat from Islamist ideology has not abated. The U.S. should look to take on a larger role within the region, and should seek to collaborate with NATO allies in the region to address growing instability.

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Offer political support for the Southern Gas Corridor project. As Europe seeks alternatives to Russian gas, the Southern Gas Corridor, which in part will run through Georgia and the Balkans, will play an important role.

Keep the door open to further NATO enlargement in the Balkans. NATO has helped promote democracy, stability, and security in the Balkans. It has also been a catalyst for reforms within candidate countries. Montenegro is just the latest example of this. The U.S. should ensure the door remains open to deserving Balkan nations, including Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.
Conclusion

Vice President Pence's trip, during which he will visit allies in the Adriatic, Baltic, and Black Sea regions, dovetails with President Trump's recent trip to Warsaw where he took part in the Three Seas conference. While each region faces threats from Russia, each also presents unique challenges, which demand robust attention. Estonia, Georgia, and Montenegro are important U.S. allies with basic common values. The success of the Trump Administration's policy in Europe will rest in large part on its ability to secure these important regions.

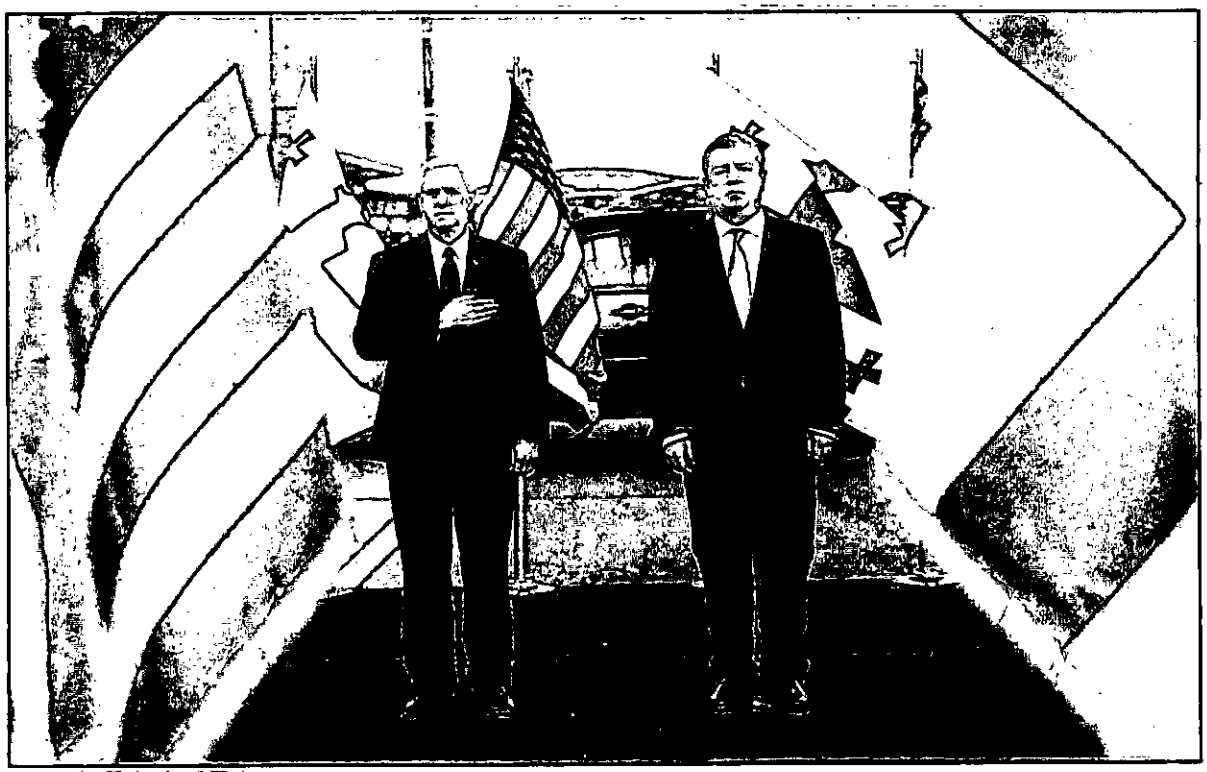
(Luke Coffey is Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation. Daniel Kochis is a Policy Analyst in European Affairs in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, of the Davis Institute)

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Vice President Pence Trip to Georgia Coverage Report for August 1, 2017



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Pence Says U.S. Backs Georgia in NATO Over Russian Objection
By Helena Bedwell
1 August 2017
Bloomberg

Vice President Mike Pence said the U.S. "strongly" supports Georgia's ambition of joining NATO, even as Russia remains hostile to the military alliance expanding its influence in Moscow's former Soviet backyard.

"We see Georgia as a key strategic partner and stand by your territorial integrity and your aspirations to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," Pence said at talks with Prime

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Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, on Tuesday. U.S. President Donald Trump "asked me to extend greetings to you this morning and to say we are with you," Pence said.

The vice president is also attending joint military exercises involving as many as 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops during his visit. The Noble Partner 2017 drills, which also include German, U.K., Turkish, Slovenian, Ukrainian and Armenian forces, are the largest in the Caucasus republic since Georgia fought a brief war with Russia in 2008 over the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Pence arrived in Georgia Monday after delivering a similar message in Estonia to leaders of Baltic nations facing the "specter of aggression" from Russia, which he called the greatest threat to their security as NATO members. Georgia wants to join NATO against opposition from Russia, whose annexation of Crimea and involvement in the conflict in eastern Ukraine has strained ties with the U.S. and Europe the most since the Cold War. Russia accuses NATO of seeking to undermine its security by expanding the alliance's presence near its borders.

Spiraling Tensions

The U.S. is monitoring preparations for major Russian exercises planned on NATO's eastern border amid concerns about the scale of the military buildup, the New York Times reported on Tuesday. Some 13,000 troops are to take part in joint military drills from Sept. 14-20 in Russia and neighboring Belarus, according to the Belarusian Defense Ministry, which said Russia will also send about 280 military vehicles to the Zapad 2017 exercises.

Pence's visits to Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro are taking place amid spiraling tensions with Russia after President Vladimir Putin said the U.S. must slash staff at its diplomatic mission by 755, or nearly two-thirds, in retaliation for new sanctions approved by Congress.

Trump "will sign the Russian sanctions bill soon," Pence said at a news conference later with Kvirikashvili. While the U.S. wants better relations, "Russia has to change its behavior" before this can be achieved, he said.

Kvirikashvili said Georgia's facing "daily provocations" from Russia, which has encroached deeper into its territory in recent weeks by shifting the dividing lines with the breakaway regions established after the war. Russia has stationed thousands of troops in Abkhazia and South Ossetia after recognizing them as independent republics. The international community considers the regions as part of Georgia.

'Important Milestone'

NATO declared at a summit shortly before the 2008 war that Georgia will become a member at some point. While it hasn't agreed to accept Georgia since then, partly out of concern about antagonizing Russia, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said in Tbilisi in September that the alliance is committed to the goal and that "the bonds between NATO and Georgia are stronger than ever."

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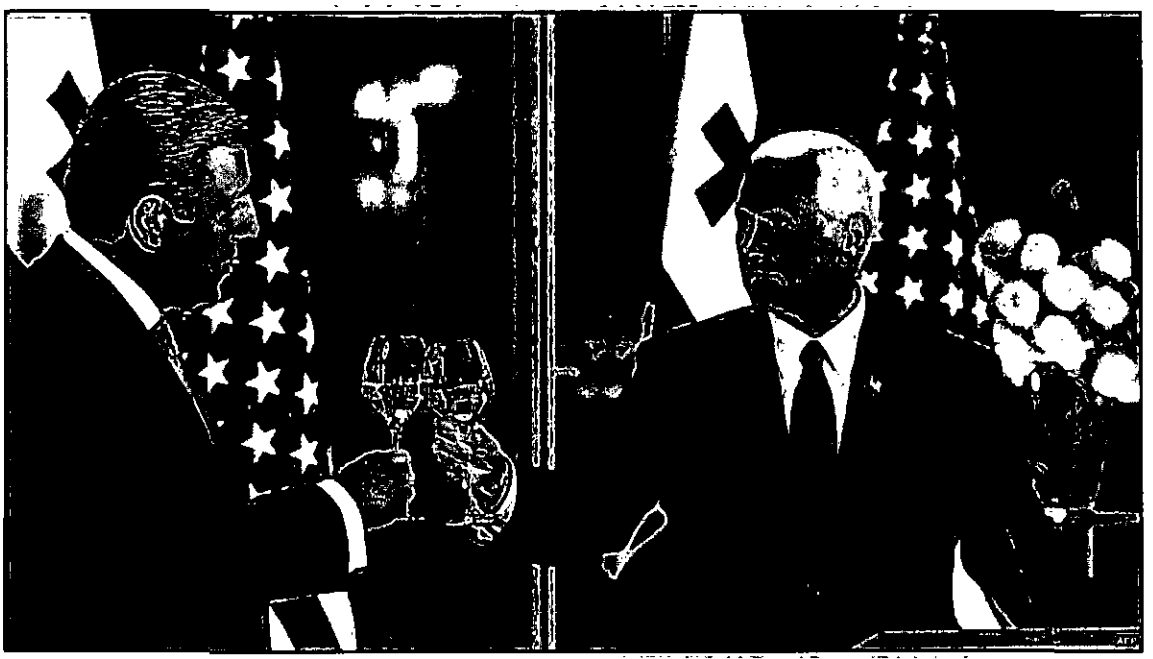
Pence's visit "is an important milestone in the bilateral relationship as we work to further strengthen security, economic, and trade cooperation," Kvirikashvili said Monday after the vice president's arrival.

Two-thirds of Georgians support joining NATO while 23 percent are opposed, according to a survey conducted by the Caucasus Resource Research Centers for the National Democratic Institute. The poll of 2,261 respondents was conducted between June 18 and July 9 with a margin of error of no more than 2.2 percentage points.

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Pence Conveys U.S. Support For Georgia In Visit To Tbilisi

1 August 2017
Radio Free Europe



U.S. Vice President Mike Pence conveyed a message of support from U.S. President Donald Trump to Georgian leaders at an official dinner in Tbilisi late on July 31.

The United States stands with Georgia, Pence said, as he toasted the Caucasus nation for fighting for freedom over the centuries, just as America has.

Pence said America hopes that Georgia prospers and becomes a strong country.

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Pence was greeted by thousands of people when he arrived in Tbilisi, where he will meet on August 1 with Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili, President Giorgi Margvelashvili, Patriarch Ilia II, and representatives of the Georgian opposition.

Pence is also planning to attend joint NATO military exercises being conducted in Georgia. About 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the Noble Partner 2017 drills there.

Pence was greeted at the Tbilisi airport by Kvirikashvili, who said that the visit is "an important milestone in the bilateral relationship as we work to further strengthen security, economic, and trade cooperation between our two countries."

"Vice President Pence's visit sends a strong message about the enduring strength of the relationship between Georgia and the United States," Kvirikashvili said in comments released by the Georgian government.

Pence arrived in the Georgian capital from Estonia, where earlier in the day he reaffirmed Washington's solidarity with the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders" and "undermine democracies."

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions, as have Georgia and the third ally on Pence's itinerary: new NATO member Montenegro.

"No threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said. "At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another."

Article 5 Support

Pence said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty -- the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

In Georgia, officials said Pence will highlight U.S. support for the Caucasus nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity before continuing on to Montenegro.

Georgia has seen Russian encroachment on its territory and has expressed hopes of joining the Western military alliance.

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The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

Margvelashvili said on July 27 that Pence's visit will demonstrate that the United States continues to support Georgia in building a stronger military force.

He highlighted the joint military exercises that will include troops from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, and Armenia.

"The vice president's presence here is definitely showing that this is not only about military exercises, but it is also showing unification with our values, with our foreign policy targets, and showing a clear message that we are together," Margvelashvili said.

On the last stop, Pence will welcome NATO's newest member with his stop in Montenegro, whose accession to the alliance in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica, U.S. officials said.

Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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Pence pledges support for Georgia, condemns Russian moves
By Nataliya Vasilyeva
1 August 2017
Associated Press

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence pledged support Tuesday for the former Soviet republic of Georgia, his second stop on a European trip backing nations that feel threatened by Russian aggression.

Russia and Georgia fought a brief war in 2008, which lead to two breakaway Georgian regions, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, declaring independence. Russia has since been supporting the regions both financially and militarily.

The U.S. "strongly condemns Russia's occupation on Georgian soil," Pence said Tuesday at a joint news conference with the Georgian prime minister in Tbilisi, the Georgian capital. "We will reject any claim at any time by any nation that undermines this enduring principle."

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The visit comes a day after Pence met with the presidents of three NATO countries — Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania — in the Estonian capital of Tallinn and pledged that "an attack on one of us is an attack on us all."

Georgia and the three Baltic nations were all occupied for nearly five decades by Soviet troops before regaining their independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Later on Tuesday Pence will inspect troops taking part in joint U.S.-Georgian military exercises.

Pence's European trip comes several days after the U.S. Senate voted last week to approve the new financial sanctions against Moscow. The legislation bars U.S. President Donald Trump from easing or waiving the penalties on Russia unless Congress agrees.

Pence told reporters on Tuesday that Trump would sign a bill on a new package of U.S. sanctions against Russia, adding the package was "improved significantly."

The bill underwent revisions to address concerns voiced by American oil and natural gas companies that sanctions specific to Russia's energy sector could backfire on them to Moscow's benefit. U.S. lawmakers said they also made adjustments so the sanctions on Russia's energy sector didn't undercut the ability of U.S. allies in Europe to get access to oil and gas resources outside of Russia.

Russia on Friday ordered the U.S. Embassy and three U.S. consulates in Russia to drastically cut its personnel there. President Vladimir Putin said on Sunday that means 755 staffers have to go. Russia also ordered to shut down the U.S. Embassy's recreational compound on the outskirts of Moscow. The Russian leader warned that he has more tricks up his sleeve to hurt the U.S., but he voiced hope that he wouldn't need to use them.

Pence indicated the U.S. was willing to improve ties with Russia but for that to happen "Russia has to change its behavior," he said, referring to Russia's support for separatists in eastern Ukraine and for Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Russia is planning Zapad 2017 military exercises with 13,000 troops near the Baltic states' borders in September, a move that may further strain relations.

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During Whirlwind Week in Washington, VP Pence Comforts East European Allies

By Emily Tamkin
1 August 2017
Foreign Policy

Amid chaos in Washington, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence is in Eastern Europe assuring American allies that the United States is committed to protecting them.

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"We are with you. We stand with the people and nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania — and we always will," Pence said at a joint press availability with the Baltic leaders in Tallinn, even as, back home, President Donald Trump has yet to comment on Russian expulsion of U.S. diplomatic staff.

The vice president participated in a listening session on cyber and innovation with the president of Estonia in Tallinn, and travelled on Tuesday to Tbilisi, where he met with the Georgian prime minister for their third substantive meeting since Pence took office.

"We see Georgia as a key strategic partner and stand by your territorial integrity and your aspirations to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," Pence said at a dinner with Prime Minister Kvirikashvili in Tbilisi. At a joint press conference with Georgia's prime minister, Pence noted that Russia occupies one-fifth of Georgian Territory.

Back in Washington, in the meantime, President Trump has yet to comment personally on a bill that Congress passed imposing tougher sanctions on Russia. The White House press secretary said Friday in a statement that Trump would sign the bill.

Speaking in Tbilisi, Pence said the bill would be signed soon.

From Tbilisi, Pence traveled to the newest NATO member, Montenegro. In May at a NATO summit, President Trump appeared to push Montenegro's prime minister aside during a photo session.

Pence's staid tour abroad is in stark contrast to the roller coaster in Washington this week. On Monday, U.S. President Donald Trump lost a communications director who was brought on roughly a week prior; Jared Kushner, his son in law and advisor, told White House interns the Trump team was too disorganized to have colluded with Russia; and the Washington Post reported the president had dictated a misleading message to his son about a meeting with a Russian lawyer.

Trump's is not the first administration to send a vice president abroad in the president's stead, or to develop relations with diplomats and dignitaries from particular countries — former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden was known as Ukraine's man in Washington.

"Vice President Pence's visit sent a clear message about the enduring strength of the relationship between Georgia and the United States," Georgian Ambassador to the United States David Bakradze told Foreign Policy by email. "This is an important milestone in the bilateral relationship."

The embassies of Estonia and Montenegro did not immediately respond to request for comment.

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VP Pence says Russia's stance must change before ties improve

By Margarita Antidze
1 August 2017
Reuters

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence said on Tuesday that relations with Russia would not improve until Moscow changed its stance on Ukraine and withdrew support for "regimes like Iran and Syria and North Korea".

The U.S. Congress voted last week for new sanctions on Russia and, at a news conference in Georgia's capital Tbilisi, Pence said the "lifting of sanctions will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place".

"Russia's destabilizing activities in Ukraine, their support for rogue regimes like Iran and Syria and North Korea ... their posture has to change," he said at a joint news conference with Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili.

Pence said U.S. President Donald Trump would sign the new sanctions on Russia into law this week and said that Trump and Congress were "speaking with a unified voice".

Keeping to previous U.S. administrations' line, Pence also condemned Russia's presence in Georgia.

Moscow, whose annexation of Crimea in 2014 prompted U.S. and EU sanctions, still has troops stationed in Georgia after a 2008 war over the breakaway region of South Ossetia, backing Georgia's Abkhazia, a region also controlled by pro-Russian separatists.

Pence also said the U.S. was still behind Georgia's application to become a member of NATO.

"We'll continue to work closely with this prime minister and the government of Georgia broadly to advance the policies that will facilitate becoming a NATO member," he said.

NATO promised Georgia membership in 2008, and three ex-Soviet Baltic nations - Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania - are already members. Pence has reassured them during this tour that Washington firmly backs NATO's doctrine of collective defense.

In the Estonian capital of Tallinn on Monday, he assured them of U.S. support if they faced aggression from Russia.

Asked about Pence's visit, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said nations had the right to choose their partners.

"The only problem for us, is when this involves the expanding of various alliances and their infrastructure toward our borders. This is a cause of concern for us," Peskov told reporters on a conference call.

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During his visit, Pence attended Georgian-American military exercises, which began in Georgia on Sunday. About 2,800 soldiers from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, Armenia and Georgia are taking part in the maneuvers, which will last for two weeks.

On Wednesday, Pence visits Montenegro, which joined NATO in June. The tiny Balkan nation won praise from Washington for joining despite pressure against the move from Russia.

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In Georgia, Pence says Trump will back toughened sanctions on Russia
By Allen Cone
1 August 2017
UPI

Vice President Mike Pence on Tuesday pledged U.S. support for Georgia, a former Soviet republic, and said President Donald Trump "very soon" will approve stronger sanctions against Russia.

Georgia, which fought a brief war with Russia in 2008, is among Eastern European nations that feel threatened by the Russian regime, which annexed Crimea from Ukraine in 2014. That aggression led to existing U.S. sanctions against the Kremlin, which Congress moved to strengthen last week.

"At this very moment, just 40 miles from where we stand, Russian tanks stand on occupied territory in South Ossetia," Pence said at a joint news conference in Tbilisi Tuesday, the Georgian capital, with Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili. "Today, Russia continues to occupy one-fifth of Georgian territory.

"So to be clear: The United States of America strongly condemns Russia's occupation on Georgia's soil."

On Monday, Pence met with the presidents of three NATO countries -- Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania -- and said "an attack on one of us is an attack on us all."

The three Baltic nations, along with Georgia, were all occupied for nearly five decades by Soviet troops before regaining independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Pence also met U.S. and Georgian troops taking part in a joint military exercise called "Noble Partner".

"America first does not mean America only," Pence said. "We are here to tell our friends in Georgia, we are with you. We stand with you and will stand with you as you pursue membership in NATO."

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Pence said Trump will sign legislation to "strengthen and codify" U.S. sanctions against Russia. The proposal, overwhelmingly approved by the House and Senate, bars Trump from easing or waiving penalties on Russia unless Congress agrees.

Pence said that legislation "improved significantly" when it moved through Congress, and added the sanctions are stronger but are "giving the president of the United States and our State Department the ability and the flexibility to be able to administer American foreign policy as appropriate."

On Sunday, Russian President Vladimir Putin told the United States it must reduce its diplomatic staff by 755 to match the reduction of Russians in the United States.

"As always, our country prefers a constructive relationship with Russia based on cooperation and common interests," Pence said Tuesday. "But the president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia: A better relationship, the lifting of sanctions will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place.

"We hope for better days, and we hope for better relations with Russia, but the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow I can assure will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, to that of our allies, and to freedom-loving nations around the world like Georgia."

Besides working with Georgia "to reduce your vulnerabilities and counter Russian aggression," the vice president said the United States wants to work with the nation "to deepen our ties of commerce."

Pence next visits Montenegro, also a NATO member.

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Trump Will Sign Russia Sanctions Law 'Very Soon,' Pence Says
By Sewell Chan
1 August 2017
New York Times

President Trump will "very soon" sign a law limiting his ability to lift sanctions against Russia, even though he has "concerns" about the measure, Vice President Mike Pence said on Tuesday.

The announcement during a visit to Tbilisi, Georgia, comes as no surprise, because the Trump administration had signaled it would not stand in the law's way. But it nonetheless carries significance: It is the first time that Congress, with both houses controlled by Mr. Trump's fellow Republicans, has imposed its will on the administration on a major policy matter, and the legislation has helped bring relations between Russia and the United States to one of its lowest points since the Cold War.

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At least in terms of diplomatic policy, the bet Russia might have made when, according to American intelligence agencies, it interfered in last year's presidential election in the United States has backfired in spectacular fashion. The legislation was revised, however, to address concerns by American oil and natural gas companies that do business with Russia's energy sector.

Though he was asked by a reporter about the election interference, Mr. Pence did not explicitly address it, reiterating instead the administration's concerns about Russia's "destabilizing activities," including "efforts to support rogue regimes."

In a brief visit to the Georgian capital, Mr. Pence delivered a message of reassurance to Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili. Russia and Georgia, both former republics of the Soviet Union, fought a brief war in August 2008; since then, Russia has continued to occupy the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in violation of international law.

"In a sign of our commitment, very soon, President Trump will sign legislation to strengthen and codify the United States' sanctions against Russia," Mr. Pence said. "As always, our country prefers a constructive relationship with Russia based on cooperation and common interests."

But, Mr. Pence said, the current state of the relationship between the United States and Russia demanded a different approach. "The president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia," he said. "A better relationship, the lifting of sanctions will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place."

On Sunday, in retaliation for the sanctions legislation, President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia ordered the dismissal of 755 employees from the United States diplomatic missions in the country. Most of the employees will be local Russians working in the embassy in Moscow and consulates in three other cities, but diplomats are bracing for what a former ambassador has called "a shock to the system."

Mr. Pence said on Tuesday that Mr. Putin's actions would not sway the United States, echoing a message he delivered on Monday in Estonia, where he reassured leaders of the three Baltic nations — the others are Lithuania and Latvia — of the American commitment to NATO's collective defense clause, known as Article 5.

"We hope for better days, and we hope for better relations with Russia, but the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow, I can assure, will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, to that of our allies and to freedom-loving nations around the world like Georgia," Mr. Pence said.

While in Georgia, Mr. Pence inspected troops taking part in a joint United States-Georgian military exercise, which Mr. Pence called "a visible sign of our commitment to Georgia's sovereignty and to her internationally recognized borders."

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Mr. Pence also responded to reports that the Russian military was preparing to send as many as 100,000 troops to neighboring Belarus, on the eastern edge of NATO territory, at the end of the summer, as part of a show of force.

"The current Russian exercises, which news reports today suggest will move up to 100,000 Russian troops into Belarus, is simply a confirmation of the importance of clarity within the NATO partnership," Mr. Pence said.

He portrayed the legislation on sanctions as "a very clear message that we mean what we say and say what we mean: that Russia's destabilizing activities in Ukraine, their support for rogue regimes like Iran and Syria and North Korea, that their posture has to change."

Mr. Pence also reiterated criticisms that Mr. Trump had frequently made of his predecessor, President Barack Obama. "It's been a lack of clarity and commitment by the United States that's created much of the instability in the world today," he said.

He then referred to the "red line" warning that Mr. Obama made to Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, in 2012 over the use of chemical weapons. Mr. Assad's forces carried out such an attack the next year in a Damascus suburb, largely without repercussions.

"When in the past America had spoken of red lines and not followed through on red lines, many argue that that emboldened others to act in ways that they would not have," Mr. Pence said.

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Pence Reaffirms U.S. Solidarity With Georgia, Denounces Russian 'Aggression'
1 August 2017
Radio Free Europe

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence has reaffirmed Washington's support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity during a visit to Tbilisi and denounced Russia's "aggression" and "occupation" of Georgian territory.

"America stands with Georgia," Pence said on August 1 at a joint press conference with Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili.

"Today, Russia continues to occupy one-fifth of Georgian territory," Pence said. "So, to be clear -- the United States of America strongly condemns Russia's occupation on Georgia's soil."

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

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"The United States supports Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders," Pence added. "And under President Donald Trump, the United States of America will object to any claim at any time by any nation that undermines this enduring principle."

Pence said Trump will "very soon" sign legislation that would impose additional economic sanctions on Russia.

The sanctions bill was overwhelmingly passed by Congress last week, and in response Moscow demanded that Washington drastically reduce its diplomatic staff in Russia.

"We hope for better relations with Russia," Pence said. "But the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow, I can assure you, will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, that of our allies, and the freedom-loving nations around the world, like Georgia."

The relationship between Washington and Moscow has been badly damaged by Russia's aggression in Ukraine, its role in the war in Syria, and its alleged interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Pence also reiterated that the United States "strongly" supports the Caucasus country's aspirations to become a NATO member.

"I commended the prime minister for Georgia's democratic development, which has brought Georgia closer to unity with Europe and membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," he said. "Further progress on the goals that the prime minister has set will bring Georgia even closer and NATO even closer to your grasp and it will strengthen the bond between our nations."

Pence also met on August 1 with the leaders of the Georgian opposition and addressed troops participating in NATO joint military exercises being conducted in Georgia, saying, "We stand here today in the gap -- on a front line of freedom, a front line compromised by Russian aggression nearly a decade ago."

Pence met earlier on August 1 with the leaders of the Georgian opposition and was also planning to attend NATO joint military exercises being conducted in Georgia. About 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the Noble Partner 2017 drills there.

At an official dinner in the Georgian capital late on July 31, Pence said, "We stand with you, for your freedom and for our shared values."

Kvirikashvili said the United States "has a dedicated friend in Georgia, a stable geopolitical ally, and a strategic partner."

In comments released earlier by the Georgian government, Kvirikashvili described Pence's visit as "an important milestone in the bilateral relationship as we work to further strengthen security, economic, and trade cooperation between our two countries."

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Pence arrived in Tbilisi from Estonia, where he reaffirmed Washington's solidarity with the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders" and "undermine democracies."

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions, as have Georgia and the third ally on Pence's itinerary: new NATO member Montenegro.

"No threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said. "At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another."

Pence also said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty -- the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica, U.S. officials said.

Montenegro accession to NATO in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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In Georgia, Pence Assures Eastern Europe of US Backing
By Nana Sajaia
1 August 2017
Voice of America

On the latest leg of his first official tour of Eastern Europe, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence assured regional allies the United States will stand by their side.

Facing a crowd of Georgian and international journalists at government offices in Tbilisi, Pence, standing alongside his host, Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili, said America first does not mean America alone.

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"President Trump has sent me with the simple message to you and to the people of Georgia, we are with you, we stand with you ... America stands with Georgia," said Pence.

The vice president came to Georgia, the only non-NATO member country on his itinerary, from Estonia; a model of a successful EU-leaning transformation, before heading to Montenegro, NATO's newest member.

Pence is the highest-ranking American official of the current administration to visit Georgia and the larger Caucasus region.

"Thanks to your help, Georgia is no longer a Soviet or a post-Soviet country," said Kvirikashvili at Tuesday's joint press conference. "Today we are a democracy closely associated with the European Union."

Kvirikashvili's comments, in which he touted Georgia's role as "a key strategic partner of America," come amid an ongoing partial Russian occupation.

About 60 kilometers from the news conference, Russian tank units maintain control over 20 percent of Georgian terrain, a holdover from the August 2008 five-day war.

Pence reiterated the U.S. non-recognition policy regarding the Russian-occupied zone, condemning Moscow's presence on Georgian soil, what many observers describe as an evolving, "creeping" occupation.

"President Trump has called on Russia to cease its destabilizing activities," Pence said, adding that President Donald Trump will soon sign sanctions against Russia.

"Our country prefers a constructive relations with Russia, based on cooperation and common interest. But the president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia: a better relationship, lifting of sanctions, will require Russia to reverse actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place."

'Reset' jitters

Former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden visited Georgia about a year after the 2008 war. Biden's visit came shortly after the Obama administration's "reset" policy with Russia, which caused concern among many Europeans that the United States would give Moscow a pass for its invasion of Georgia.

Years later, Russia annexed Crimea and destabilized Eastern Ukraine, which led the West to unilaterally impose sanctions on Russia.

Both Georgia and Ukraine are aspiring NATO members. Some observers argue Georgia's 2008 war and Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea could have been avoided if those countries hadn't been denied Membership Action Plan status at NATO's Bucharest summit in April, 2008.

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"President Trump and I stand by the 2008 NATO Bucharest statement, which made it clear that Georgia, one day, will become a member of NATO," said Pence.

According to recent nationwide polls carried by National Democratic Institute, 66 percent of Georgia's population approves of the government's stated goal to join NATO. Sixty-two percent of Georgians say the country should join the European Union. Both organizations are largely seen as security instruments that would protect Georgia independence and development.

2017 represents the 25th anniversary of U.S.-Georgian diplomatic relations.

George W. Bush is the only U.S. president who has visited Georgia, which he called "a beacon of democracy."

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Mike Pence promises US and NATO support for Georgia in Tbilisi
By Dan Alexe
1 August 2017
New Europe

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence pledged Washington's support to Georgian leaders as he met with Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili in Tbilisi.

"We see Georgia as a key strategic partner and stand by your territorial integrity and your aspirations to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," Pence said.

Georgia has been going through Russian occupation of parts of its territory and has expressed hopes of joining NATO.

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

Kvirikashvili said the United States "has a dedicated friend in Georgia, a stable geopolitical ally, and a strategic partner."

Vice president Pence is also planning to attend the NATO joint military exercises being conducted in Georgia. About 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the Noble Partner 2017 drills there.

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Pence arrived in Tbilisi from Estonia, where he reaffirmed Washington's solidarity with the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders" and "undermine democracies."

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions, as have Georgia and the third ally on Pence's itinerary: new NATO member Montenegro.

Pence said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty — the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

On the last stop, Pence will visit Montenegro, whose accession to NATO in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica.

Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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Pence: Reversing Sanctions Requires Russia to Change
1 August 2017
Voice of America

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence says diplomatic actions taken by Russian in response to fresh sanctions will not deter U.S. commitment to its security and that of its allies.

Speaking Tuesday during a visit to Georgia, Pence said the sanctions bill President Donald Trump will soon sign sends a "very clear message" that with Russia's activities in Ukraine and its support for Iran and Syria, its "posture has to change."

Congress overwhelmingly passed the sanctions bill punishing Russia for interference in the 2016 U.S. election, while also imposing new measures on Iran and North Korea. Russia responded by ordering the U.S. to cut its overall staff of more than 1,200 in Russia by 755 people.

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"The president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia: a better relationship, the lifting of sanctions, will require Russia to reverse the actions that required sanctions to be imposed in the first place," Pence said.

Pence is on a multi-nation tour meant to show U.S. support for its allies in the region.

He said after a meeting with Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili in Tbilisi that the United States will work with Georgia to counter Russian aggression and "seek a peaceful resolution" that restores the country's internationally recognized borders.

In 2008, Russia intervened militarily in Georgia, and later recognized the breakaway republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states. A few other countries also recognize that independence, though the vast majority of nations consider the areas still as part of Georgia.

"The United States supports Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders, and under President Donald Trump the United States of America will reject any claim at any time by any nation that undermines this enduring principle," Pence said.

The vice president is also traveling Tuesday to Montenegro, NATO's newest member.

No response yet to Putin

Russia's retaliation for the U.S. sanctions is believed to be the single largest cut ever imposed on the U.S. embassy in Moscow and consulates elsewhere in Russia, although many of those to be dismissed are likely Russians working in support positions.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said the cuts would leave both Russia and the U.S. with the same number of staff and diplomats in Washington and Moscow, respectively - 455.

President Donald Trump has been silent on the issue since Putin announced his action. Asked about this Monday, White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said, "Right now we are reviewing our options, and when we have something to say on it we will let you know."

The U.S. State Department said the order to reduce the number of American diplomats in Russia was "a regrettable and uncalled for act." A spokesman said U.S. officials are assessing how to respond to Putin.

A Russian analyst, Nikolai Petrov of the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, said the move reflects the Kremlin's disillusionment with President Trump: "These measures are tough, and it is linked to a deep disappointment that came after the euphoria linked to the arrival of Donald Trump [to power], and to the idea that today we will start our relations anew."

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Another Russian analyst, Gleb Pavlovsky, said a return to Cold War-era hostilities with the U.S. will only boost Putin's popularity at home ahead of another likely bid for the Russian presidency next year.

Pavlovsky, a former political consultant for the Kremlin who is now president of the Foundation for Effective Politics in Moscow, explained how U.S. efforts to "punish" Putin may have the opposite effect: "American sanctions naturally are causing a definite mass reaction [in Russia] - an anti-American, pro-Putin reaction." If Putin wished, Pavlovsky added, he could make the American sanctions the centerpiece of his re-election campaign next year.

Russians will feel cutback

Other experts say the vital work of the U.S. embassy in Moscow will continue despite the massive cuts. Steven Pifer, a former U.S. diplomat now with the Brookings Institution, told VOA that Russians also may discover some unintended consequences of their president's crackdown on U.S. diplomacy.

"My assumption is hundreds of Russians are going to lose their jobs now," Pifer said. "And when you're looking at priority functions of the embassy, you know, visa functions are important but they're not as important as other functions. So my guess is that those Russians [who] want to travel to the United States are going to find that visa processing is going to take longer than usual because of reduced staff in the consular section."

Pifer was assigned to the U.S. embassy in Moscow in 1986, at a time when there were several back-and-forth expulsions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. He later served on the National Security Council under former President Bill Clinton, and was ambassador to Ukraine from 1998-2000.

During his time in the Russian capital, Pifer said, American staff were called upon for "all-purpose duty" at times when Russian support staff were unavailable for political reasons.

"So, five or six days out of every seven, I would work on my normal portfolio, which is arms control," Pifer recalled. "And then one day, I'd drive a truck. And the embassy got by. There was actually this incredible spirit in the embassy that we were going to show the Soviets that this kind of action was not going to cramp the embassy."

Pifer said he expects the same determined spirit from U.S. embassy personnel now.

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VP Pence says Trump will sign Russia sanctions soon
1 August 2017
Associated Press

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence says President Donald Trump will sign a bill on a new package of sanctions against Russia.

The Senate voted last week to approve the new financial sanctions against Moscow. The legislation bars Trump from easing or waiving the penalties on Russia unless Congress agrees.

Pence, who is visiting the former Soviet republic of Georgia Tuesday, said the Trump administration "had concerns" about the bill when it was drafted in the Senate, but that Trump will sign it soon.

Russia on Friday ordered the U.S. Embassy and three U.S. consulates in Russia to drastically cut its personnel there. President Vladimir Putin said on Sunday it would mean 755 staffers will have to be dismissed.

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Embassy Reductions Won't Deter U.S., Pence Says
By Michael Shear
31 July 2017
New York Times

Vice President Mike Pence responded aggressively on Monday to the decision by President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia to order the shedding of 755 positions at the United States Embassy in Moscow, even as President Trump remained silent on the escalating diplomatic row.

Traveling in Eastern Europe, Mr. Pence delivered a blunt message for Mr. Putin, noting that "recent diplomatic actions taken by Moscow will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, that of our allies and to freedom-loving nations around the world."

Mr. Pence said that while Mr. Trump remains "open to a better relationship" with Russia, he warned that "the United States rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation or malign influence in the Baltic States or against any of our treaty allies."

Mr. Putin over the weekend ordered that the embassy work force be trimmed by Sept. 1, responding to legislation approved last week by Congress to impose new sanctions on Russia for its meddling in the 2016 presidential election. The legislation also imposes additional sanctions on Iran and North Korea.

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Mr. Trump passed up several public opportunities on Monday to condemn the action, which includes American diplomats and Russian employees. As president, his posture toward Mr. Putin has been closely watched during a congressional inquiry into Russian election meddling and a special counsel investigation on the issue.

"Right now we're reviewing our options, and when we have something to say on it, we'll let you know," said Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the White House press secretary.

Ms. Sanders also declined to say when Mr. Trump planned to sign the sanctions legislation, which passed with overwhelming, veto-proof majorities in both the House and the Senate. On Friday, the White House said the president would sign the bill but had initially suggested it was an improper attempt by Congress to exercise the president's foreign policy powers.

Mr. Trump's silence on the new dispute with Russia struck some veteran foreign policy experts as a sign of weakness as he faces a dramatic diplomatic offense by a major adversary.

"Why is he not denouncing? It's a very weak signal that he's sending," said Michael McFaul, a Stanford University professor who served as ambassador to Russia under former President Barack Obama.

Mr. McFaul said that removing 755 people from the United States Embassy in Moscow — about two-thirds of the personnel in the compound — would severely affect the work that American diplomats do there. That includes processing visa applications for Russians seeking to visit the United States.

He also noted that a statement by the State Department called the Russian action "regrettable and uncalled-for." But Mr. McFaul said that previous administrations would have condemned the expulsion more strenuously and would have made sure the American president responded directly to his counterpart in Russia.

"That he chose not to was striking to me," Mr. McFaul said. "He's on Twitter all the time. If he has something to say, it would take him 10 seconds to say it."

Russian officials said over the weekend that Mr. Putin's diplomatic move was retaliation for the sanctions legislation, promising to go even further if the United States imposed additional economic restrictions in the future.

"This retaliation is long, long overdue," Sergei Ryabkov, Russia's deputy foreign minister, said on ABC's "This Week" on Sunday. Mr. Ryabkov called the sanctions legislation "completely weird and unacceptable" and said that in response to any more moves by the United States, "we will respond in kind."

"We will mirror this," he added. "We will retaliate."

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While Mr. Trump remained silent on Monday, Mr. Pence used his trip to Estonia to underscore a tougher stance for the Baltic nations toward Russia and its aggression in the region. He will visit Georgia and Montenegro later on his trip.

In a speech at Kadriorg Palace in Tallinn, the presidential residence of Estonia, Mr. Pence said he brought a message from Mr. Trump that "we are with you." In the speech, Mr. Pence reiterated the president's call for Russia to end "destabilizing activities in Ukraine and elsewhere."

"The United States will continue to hold Russia accountable for its actions — and we call on our European allies and friends to do the same," Mr. Pence said.

The vice president also explicitly promised that the United States would meet its obligations under NATO's Article 5 mutual defense pledge to come to the aid of a member nation who is attacked. Mr. Trump made a similar statement this summer after earlier refusing to say so directly.

Mr. Pence said that Mr. Trump would sign the sanctions legislation "very soon."

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Vice President Pence in Europe: Georgia
By Office of the Vice President
1 August 2017
The White House

Vice President Mike Pence's next stop on his visit to Eastern Europe was Georgia. Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili and the Vice President met to discuss how the United States, under President Donald Trump, strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgia's soil. Following his meetings, the Vice President and Second Lady Karen Pence toured the Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition, a symbol of the ancient faith that fills Georgia's ancient land, with Patriarch Ilias II and Father Giorgi Zviadadze. Vice President Pence also addressed American and Georgian troops at Exercise Noble Partner where he discussed our shared commitment to promote security and stability across the wider world. Following his speech, the Vice President departed for Montenegro, the last stop of his visit to Eastern Europe.

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Vice President Pence's Trip to Europe

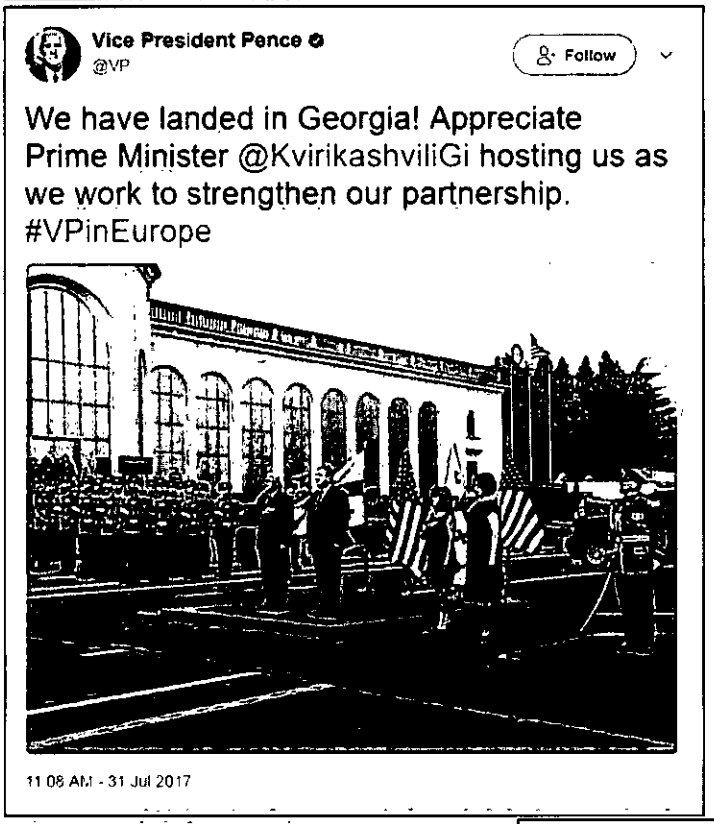
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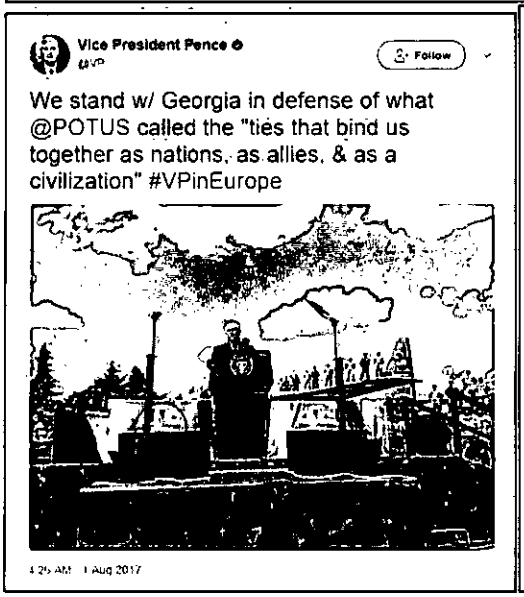


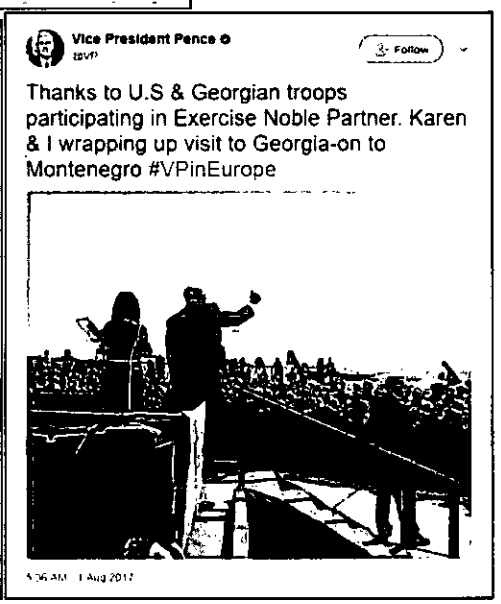
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Prominent Tweets on VP Visit

Mike Pence, Vice President of the United States – 4.08M Followers







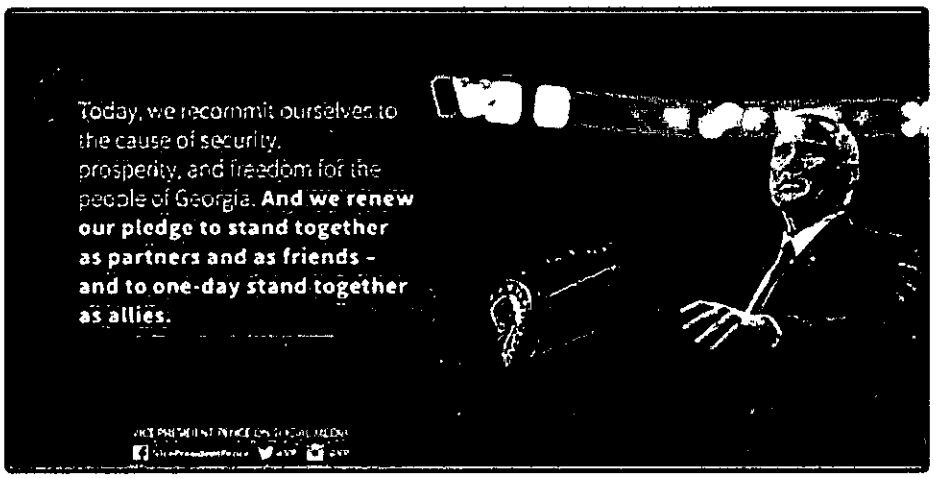
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Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

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Today, we recommit ourselves to the cause of security, prosperity, and freedom for the people of Georgia. #VPinEurope



4:34 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

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A better relationship will require Russia to reverse actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place. #VPinEurope

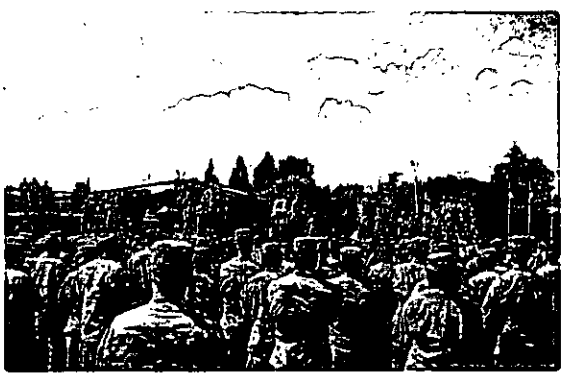


1:32 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
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We stand here today in the gap - on a front line of freedom, compromised by Russian aggression nearly a decade ago. #VPinEurope



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Vice President Pence ✓
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The rise of adversaries new and old requires renewed strength and resolve by all who cherish freedom. #VPinEurope

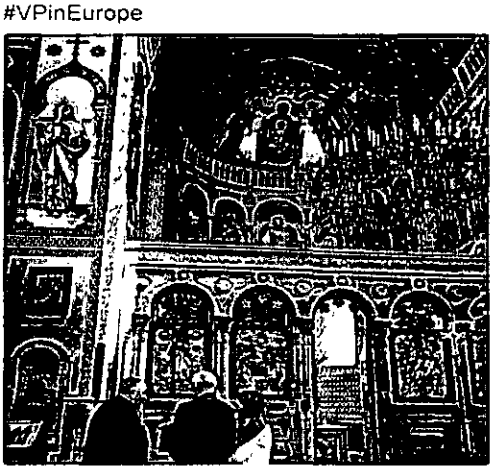


4:31 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

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Karen & I visited Sioni Cathedral a symbol of the faith that fills Georgia's ancient land. Thanks Patriarch Ilia II & Fr Zviadze #VPinEurope

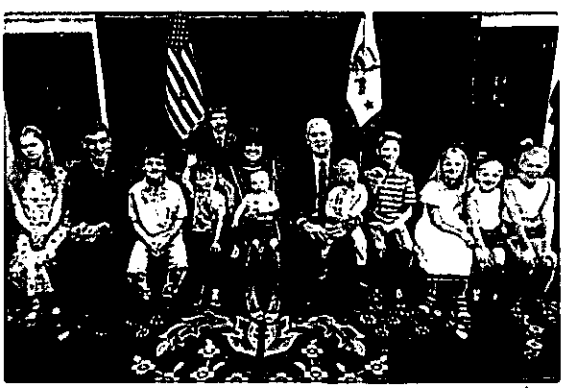


4:01 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

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Karen & I spoke w/ dedicated @EmbassyTbilisi staff members & their families & thanked them for the great work they do for the US #VPinEurope



2:19 AM - 1 Aug 2017

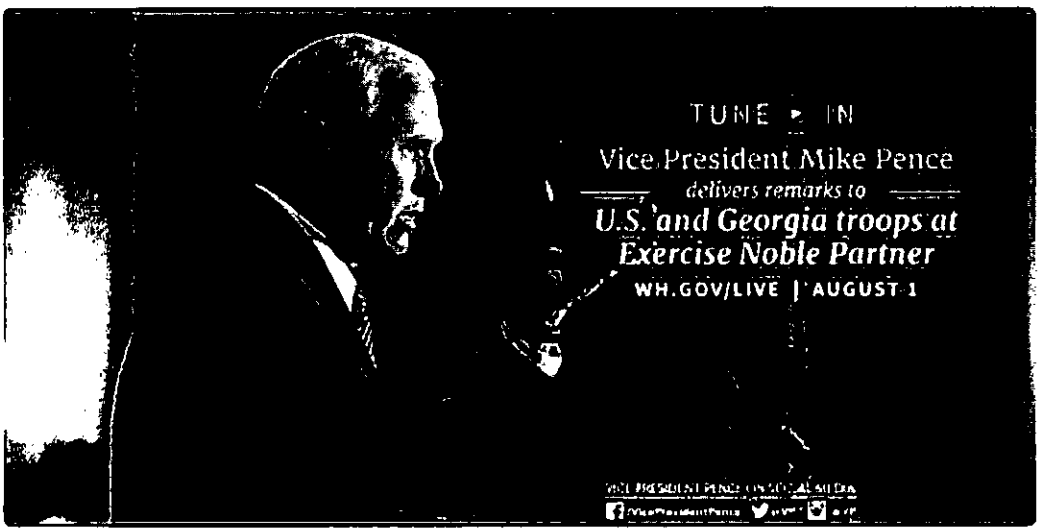
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Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

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TUNE IN! I'm speaking to U.S. and Georgia troops at Exercise Noble Partner: 45.wh.gov/v3dhHa #VPinEurope

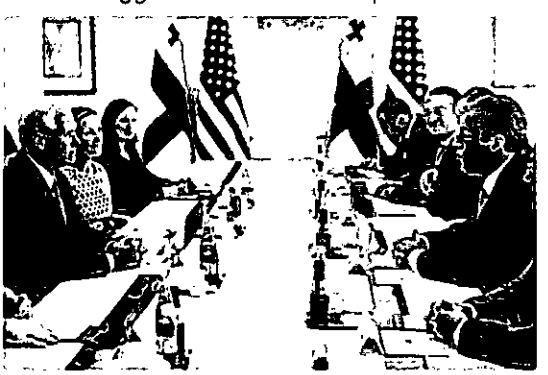


4:14 AM - 1 Aug 2017

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@VP

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The United States will continue to work with Georgia to reduce vulnerabilities and counter Russian aggression. #VPinEurope

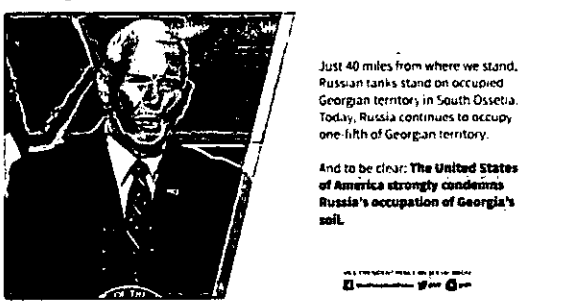


2:16 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

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To be clear: the United States of America strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgia's soil. #VPinEurope



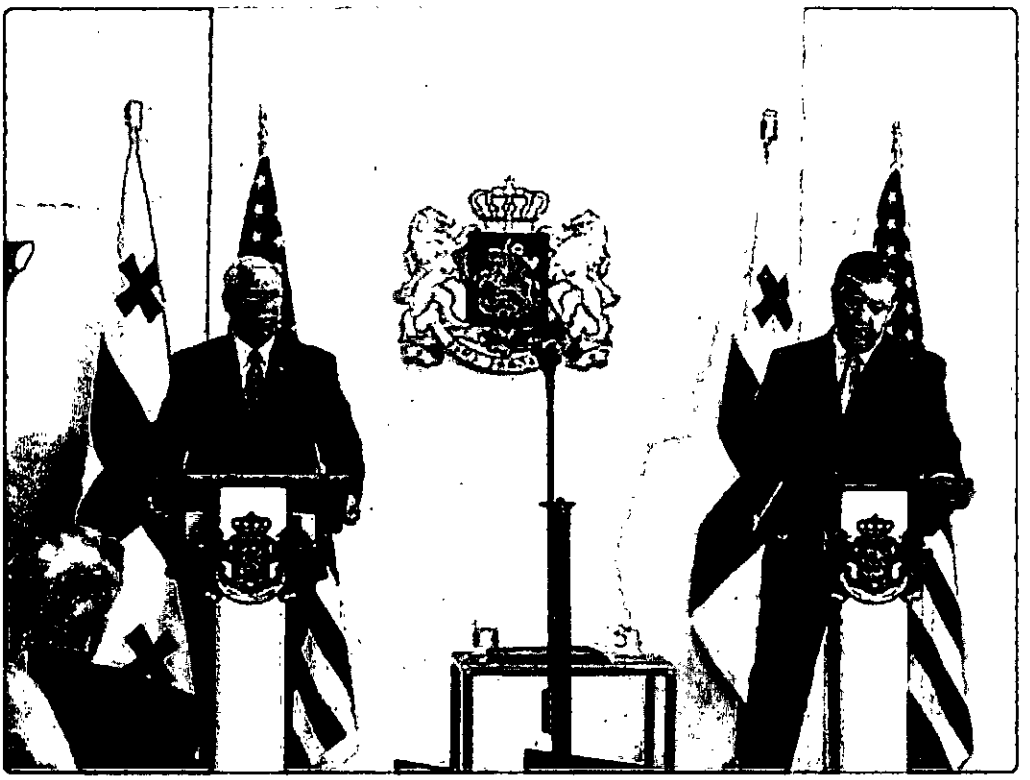
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Vice President Pence @VP · 7h

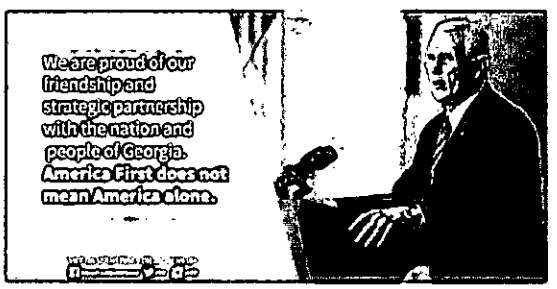
It is heartening to see that Georgia already exceeds NATO's goal of spending two percent of gross domestic product on defense. #VPinEurope



102 433 1.7K

Vice President Pence @VP Follow

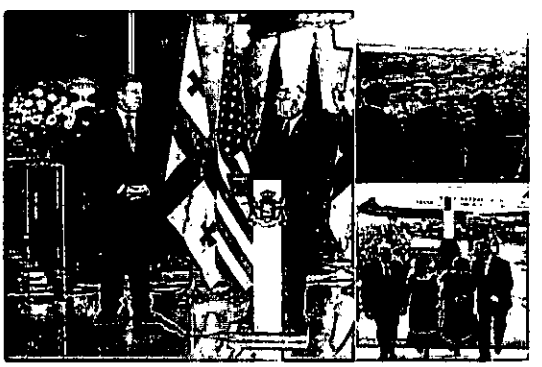
We are proud of our friendship and partnership with the nation and people of Georgia. America First does not mean America alone. #VPinEurope



12:45 AM - 1 Aug 2017

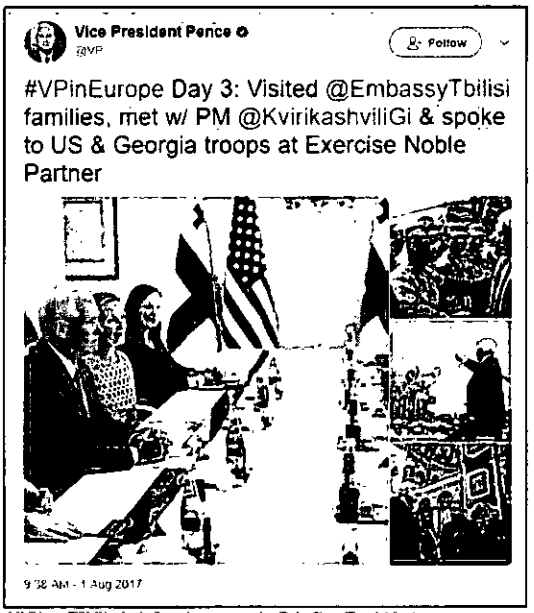
Vice President Pence @VP Follow

Thanks @KvirikashviliGi & Maia for welcoming Karen & I to Georgia yesterday. We enjoyed Tbilisi, looking forward to our meetings #VPinEurope



10:09 PM - 31 Jul 2017

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White House Official Twitter – 15.1M Followers

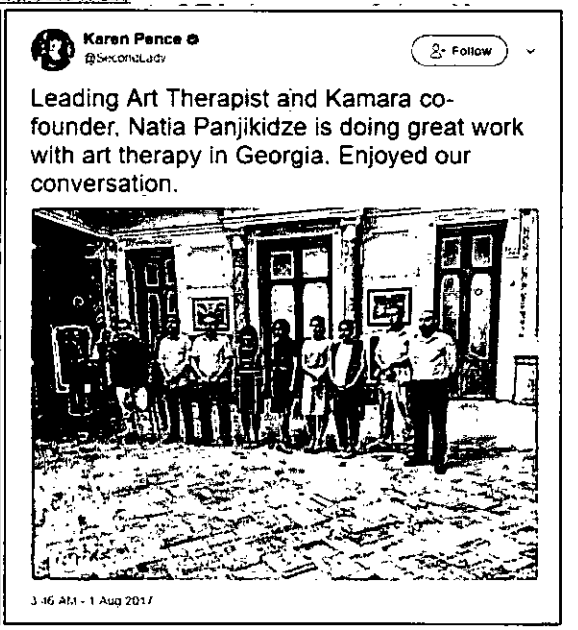


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Karen Pence, Second Lady of the United States – 235K Followers





John McCain, U.S. Senator – 2.39M Followers



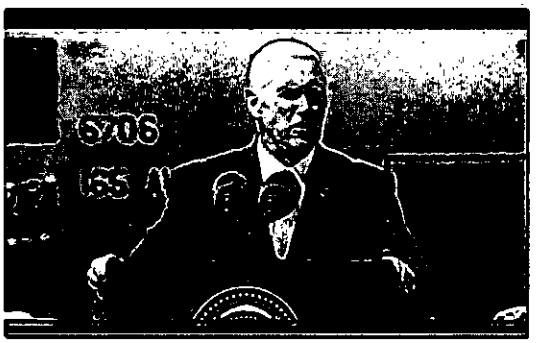
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Mark Knoller, CBS News White House Correspondent – 301K Followers

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@markknoller
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In Tblisi, addressing US and Georgian troops. @VP declares the US "strongly condemns Russian occupation of Georgian soil."



4:35 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Mark Knoller
@markknoller
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Declaring Georgia's "future is in the west," the @VP reaffirmed US support for Georgia's eventual membership in @NATO.



4:38 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Mark Knoller
@markknoller
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Earlier, VP and Mrs Pence visited Tblisi's Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition. They toured, lit candles and spent a moment in prayer.



4:56 AM - 1 Aug 2017

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Government Statements and Releases

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and U.S. Vice President Mike Pence Agree to Further Enhance Georgia-US Security and Economic Cooperation
1 August 2017
Government of Georgia (Press Release)

Readout of Second Lady Karen Pence's Visit to Tbilisi, Georgia
Office of the Second Lady
1 August 2017
White House

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and U.S. Vice President Mike Pence Agree to Further Enhance Georgia-US Security and Economic Cooperation
1 August 2017
Government of Georgia (Press Release)

Tbilisi, 1st August 2017 – Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili today met with United States Vice President Mike Pence to discuss expanding future security and economic cooperation between Georgia and the U.S. Last night, Kvirikashvili hosted Vice President Pence and the American delegation for dinner in Tbilisi.

"Vice President Pence's visit so shortly after taking office bears witness to his and President Trump's great desire to deepen the strategic partnership and friendship with Georgia, for which I am very grateful," stated Prime Minister Kvirikashvili. "The Georgian nation deeply appreciates the American people's friendship, solidarity, and strong support."

During their meeting, Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and Vice President Pence discussed the U.S.-Georgian security partnership in depth. Following the meeting, the Vice President met with Georgian and U.S. soldiers participating in the Noble Partner exercise, a U.S. Army-led exercise to support the training, evaluation and eventual certification of Georgia's second light infantry company contribution to the NATO Response Force (NRF).

"The Vice President's meeting with Georgian and American service members participating in the Noble Partner exercises is an unmistakable demonstration of the strong U.S. support for spurring our country's sovereignty and integration into NATO," affirmed Prime Minister Kvirikashvili. "The special bonds and extraordinary sacrifices of our two militaries -- currently fighting extremism together -- is something to behold. Georgia and the U.S. are truly brothers in arms."

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and Vice President Pence also held productive discussions about furthering the economic partnership between Georgia and the U.S. Georgia's Anaklia Port on the Black Sea, which will become a focal point in trade between Europe and Asia, is being built by an American-Georgian consortium, led by U.S. company Conti. SSA Marine, another U.S. company, will

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operate it. The two leaders also discussed potential steps for moving forward with a bilateral free trade agreement between the two countries.

During the visit, Vice President Pence also reaffirmed U.S. support for continued progress toward Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

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Readout of Second Lady Karen Pence's Visit to Tbilisi, Georgia
Office of the Second Lady
1 August 2017
White House

Second Lady Karen Pence started her day with the Vice President where they participated in a meet-and-greet with U.S. embassy employees and their families. Mrs. Pence continued her day to the National Parliamentary Library where she joined art therapists and patients from Kamara, a pscho-social rehabilitation center and leading provider of art therapy in Georgia. The Second Lady observed the patient's art therapy work before participating in a roundtable discussion with Kamara co-founders and art therapists, Natia Panjikidze and Nino Komakhidze, and art therapist Salome Panjikidze. After the art therapy program visit, the Second Lady enjoyed lunch at the Vinotel Restaurant with United States Marines who represented both the Marine Security Guard Detachment and Marines from the Georgia Deployment Program. After lunch, Mrs. Pence met with Georgian artist, Olesya Tavadze, who works in easel paintings and graphics. Mrs. Tavadze is passionate about American literature, in particular Robert Frost. Mrs. Pence viewed Mrs. Tavadze's exhibit of paintings inspired by Robert Frost's poems at the Tbilisi History Museum Karvasla. Following the museum visit, Mrs. Pence joined the Vice President to tour the Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition. After the tour, Mrs. Pence listened to the Vice President deliver remarks to U.S. and Georgian Noble Partner Participants at the Tbilisi Airport before departing to Podgorica, Montenegro.

"Art therapy is an emerging profession in Georgia with only a few professionally trained art therapists in the country," said Second Lady Karen Pence. "I will cherish my opportunity to meet with the leading art therapists in Georgia who are breaking new ground in the country by offering art therapy as an option for therapeutic treatment. They are doing great work and making a positive difference in Georgia."

Tomorrow, Wednesday, August 2nd, Mrs. Pence will wrap up her Eastern Europe visit with activities in Podgorica, Montenegro. To stay updated on Mrs. Pence's events, follow her on Twitter at, @SecondLady.

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From: Bethany Bassett
Sent: Thursday, August 03, 2017 3:50 PM
To: 'tom.mahr@mail.house.gov'
Subject: Pence/Georgia Trip

Hi Tom-

Hope you are well. We do some work with the Government of Georgia and thought you might be interested in material covering Vice President Pence's recent trip to Georgia.

Let me know if you need anything else.

Thanks much-

Bethany

This material is distributed by Rasky Partners on behalf of the Government of Georgia. Additional information is available at the Department of Justice, Washington, DC.

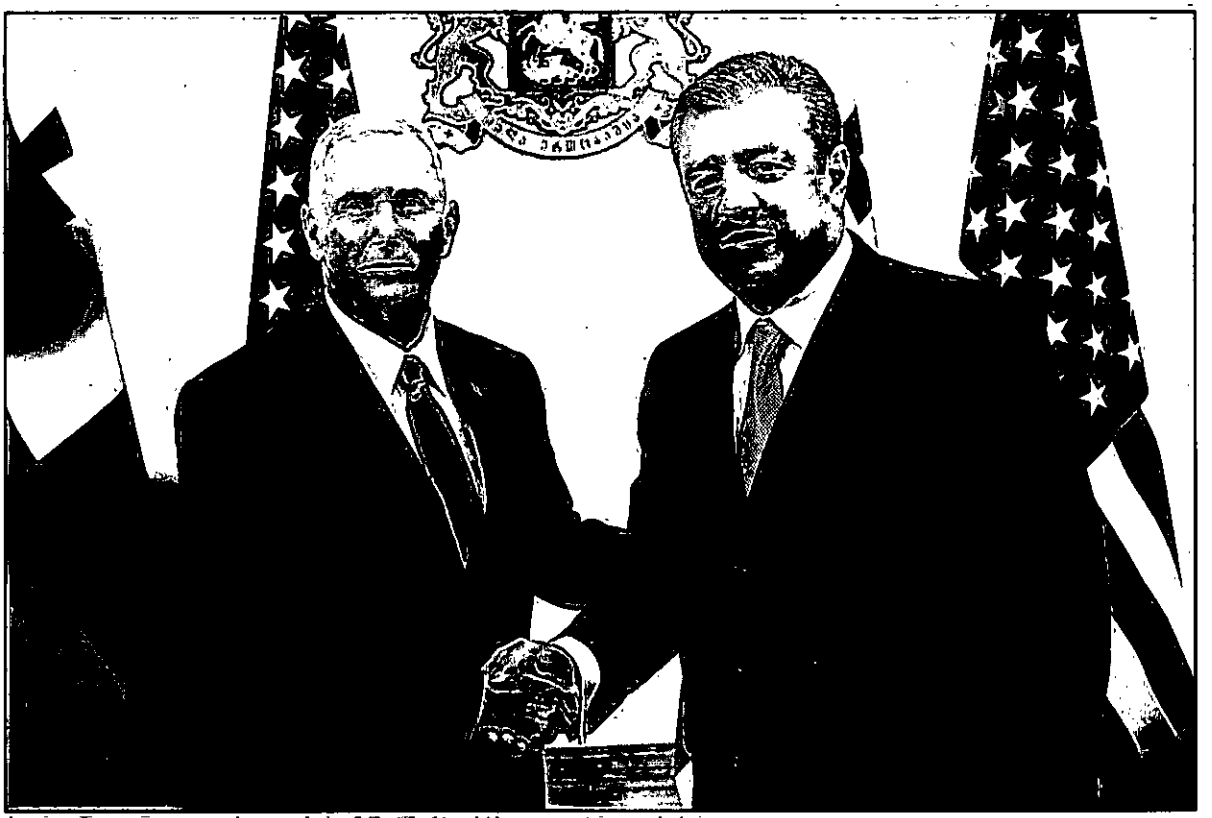
Bethany M. Bassett
Senior Vice President
Rasky Partners, Inc.
D: 202 530 7701
C: 617 458 1302
www.rasky.com

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VICE PRESIDENT MIKE PENCE'S VISIT WITH GOVERNMENT OF GEORGIA

July 31-August 1, 2017



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Transcript of the Press Conference of Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili and US Vice President Mike Pence

PM Kvirikashvili:

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to host in Georgia Mr. Mike Pence, who is not only the Vice President of our country's key strategic partner, the United States of America, but also a great friend whom Georgia has made in such a short period. It is especially exciting that he is visiting Georgia in the company of his spouse.

After our brief introductory meeting in Munich, I was honored to hold meetings in Washington, at the invitation of the Vice President, and today we continue our dialogue in Tbilisi.

Mr. Vice President, your visit very shortly after taking office bears witness to your and President Trump's great desire to deepen your strategic partnership and friendship with Georgia, for which I am very grateful to you.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of our diplomatic relations. Throughout this time, America has played a vital role on our country's path toward democratic and economic development, safeguarding Georgia's sovereignty, and NATO membership.

Thanks to your assistance, today Georgia is neither a Soviet nor post-Soviet country. Today we are an EU associated European democracy. Together with the Americans, we are proudly standing guard protecting global security and making our contribution to regional stability.

The Georgian nation deeply appreciates the American people's friendship, solidarity, and strong support.

Mr. Vice President, today we discussed our strategic partnership further in depth. First, I would like to single out and welcome our defense and security cooperation. Your meeting with Georgian and American service members participating in the Noble Partner exercises is an unmistakable demonstration of the strong US support for spurring our country's sovereignty and integration into NATO alike.

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This year, we adopted the Joint Action Plan that ensures enhancing Georgia's resilience, which is so crucially important for maintaining the stability and sustainability of Georgia and the region.

The United States of America has provided Georgia with significant financial assistance over these 25 years, and today we are happy to be an increasingly attractive country for American businesses. Today we offer one of the best business environments, extremely low corruption and red-tape rates, and equally low taxes, which is the best opportunity for American businesses to benefit.

Our goal is to put in place the best platform in the region suitable for American business interests. Notably, American companies are taking interest in engaging in large-scale regional infrastructural projects implemented in our country. Along with the Conti Group joining the Anaklia Deep Sea Port Consortium, we welcome the signing of the document on cooperation between the Anaklia Deep Sea Port Consortium and SSA Marine, one of the leading American port operators in the world. According to this document, the SSA Marine will operate the container terminal and invest in this most valuable project in the country today. The foregoing reaffirms the growing interest of American businesses and our country's immense potential for becoming the regional hub.

In the past 25 years, we have implemented numerous energy projects in cooperation with the United States. These projects ensure sustainable Euro-Atlantic energy security, and we are committed to continuing our cooperation in this direction as well.

We are a partner ready for high-level trade and investment relations with the USA based on mutual economic benefits.

Georgia is America's important partner in the region, which, among others, stems from our shared values, such as democracy and human rights. America has played an important role in the building of our democratic institutions. Our democratic development, for its part, is a precondition for developing Georgia as a sustainable and stable state that ensures the protection of the rights of every citizen and preserves our cultural uniqueness.

US support is vital in peaceful resolution of Georgia-Russia conflict. We deeply appreciate the US strong and unwavering stance on Georgia's territorial integrity. The decisions made by President Trump, you personally, Mr. Vice President, and the new Administration and the Congress on Georgia's occupied territories have proved unprecedented.

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Today we discussed the serious challenges facing our country as a result of occupation. The US plays a tremendous role in the Geneva International Discussions format. Importantly, through high-level engagement, particular decisions must be sought for ensuring the de-occupation of and security in Georgia's territories, and for political conflict resolution.

In conclusion, I would like to reaffirm that Georgia has always been and will always be by the US' side when it comes to any challenge or threat facing the world. Our strategic partnership focuses equally on strengthening security in Georgia, regionally, and worldwide, on promoting peaceful and democratic development.

Once again, I emphasize the importance of this visit and its outcomes. We appreciate the fact that, despite more than one challenge in different parts of the world, the Vice President is visiting Georgia as part of his first European trip.

I am also thankful to our American colleagues for visiting Georgia and their special contribution to deepening our bilateral cooperation.

I am convinced that our joint efforts will further deepen our strategic partnership. At the same time, we are eager to introduce the Vice President, his spouse, and the American guests to Georgia's culture and historical heritage as the pride and joy of the Georgian nation.

Thank you.

VP Pence:

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili thank you so much for those words and for the hospitality you shown me and my family. It was an honor to welcome you to the White House just a few short months ago. And now it is my honor to be welcomed by you to the beautiful and storied nation of Georgia.

The President of the United States of America, President Donald Trump sent me here with a simple message for you and for the people of Georgia: we are with you; we stand with you; we are proud of our friendship and strategic partnership with the nation and the people of Georgia. In a word, I am here to say: America first does not mean America alone. And America stands with Georgia.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the US diplomatic relationship with Georgia. Yet, this is a nation whose roots stretch back to the amiss of history. Sitting at the crossroads of

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empires and civilizations, where East meets West, where North meets South; Georgia has fostered your own language, your own traditions, your own identity over the millennia. Today the people of Georgia are renowned the world over for your vibrant culture, which, my wife and I enjoyed last night at our first super dinner featuring Georgian cuisine, and a lot of it and traditional song and dance from Abkhazia, South Ossetia and all across Georgia.

We have also been deeply inspired by the rich heritage of faith and my wife and I look forward to visiting the historic Sioni Cathedral and meeting the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church this afternoon. While this may be my first visit to this nation, the enduring courage and spirit of Georgian people have long inspired me. It was only a generation ago that Georgia was still imprisoned in then-Soviet Union. When that brutal regime collapsed, you reclaimed your independence and your freedom. You reached out our hand of friendship to Europe and United States of America and we were proud to reach back.

Today, I commended the Prime Minister for Georgia's democratic development, which has brought Georgia closer to unity with Europe and membership in North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Further progress on the goals that the Prime Minister has set will bring Georgia even closer and NATO even closer to your grasp and it will strengthen the bond between our nations.

Now, nowhere is the bond between our two nations stronger than in our shared effort to promote security and stability across the wider world. Georgia is the key strategic partner of the US. Since 2004, thousands of Georgians have served shoulder to shoulder with Americans in Kosovo, in Iraq and in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan alone, I say with grateful heart, Georgia has provided more troops on a per capita basis than any other country in the world. And 31 brave Georgian soldiers have given their lives for the cause of freedom. American people remember and mourn the sacrifice of your countrymen. They are heroes, all and they and their families will be enshrined in the hearts of American people forever. Later today I will meet with troops participating in the exercise Noble Partner. This initiative has brought together the armed forces of the US, Georgia and many other nations to train together and strengthen Georgia's ability to defend itself. It is only one of many examples of the US' commitment to Georgia's security.

President Trump and I stand by the 2008 NATO Bucharest statement, which made it clear that Georgia will one day become a member of NATO. As I expressed to the Prime Minister, it is heartening to see that Georgia already exceeds the NATO's goal of spending 2 % of its GDP on its national defense. But as we all know, Georgia's investment in defense is an

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investment born of necessity. At this very moment, just 40 miles from where we stand, Russian tanks stand on occupied territories at South Ossetia. Today, Russia continues to occupy one fifth of Georgian territory. So to be clear, the United States of America strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgian soil. The United States support Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders. Under President Trump the United States will reject any claim, at any time, by any nation that undermines this enduring principle. President Trump has called on Russia to seize its destabilizing activities. My purpose here is to reinforce that message to the people of Georgia.

In sign of our commitment President Trump will sign very soon legislation to solid and codify the United States' sanctions against Russia. As always, our country prefers a constructive relationship with Russia, based on cooperation and common interests, but President and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia: a better relationship, lifting of sanctions, will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place. We hope for better days and we hope for better relations with Russia. But the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow, I can assure you, will not deter the United States' commitment to our security, that of our allies and freedom loving nations around the world, like Georgia. The US will continue to work with Georgia to reduce your vulnerabilities and counter Russian aggression and so, too will we work with Georgia to deepen our ties of commerce of which the Prime Minister just spoke.

The United States has a keen interest in expanding our trade and investment relationship with Georgia. And your ongoing reforms Mr. Prime Minister have clearly demonstrated your openness and commitment to the stronger commercial partnership with the west. Today I thank the Prime Minister for his leadership focused on bringing greater economic opportunity to all of Georgian citizens. The Anaklia Deep Sea Port shows the potential of a stronger bilateral relationship between our nations. American companies are investing alongside with Georgian counterparts in this multibillion-dollar project. As we look toward the future of our two nations have untold opportunities to contribute even more to each other's prosperity. The US has stood with Georgia for quarter century and under president Trump we will continue to stand with you as partners, as friends and one day we will stand together as allies. Georgia's future is in the west and as the people of Georgia have long declared, our strength is now and always will be in our unity. So thank you Mr. Prime Minister, thank you for your hospitality here today and thank you for the strong leadership that you provide for this country. We look forward to working with you for the prosperity and the security of the people of Georgia and of our great nation.

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Q&A

Q: Greetings. I am Salome Kokiashvili, Public Broadcaster of Georgia. Mr. Vice President, you said during your visit to the Baltic States that the US always stands strong for freedom. In addition, the US has always been a staunch supporter of Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Given the continuous occupation of Georgia's regions—and we see that the fundamental rights of those living in these territories, of IDPs, are being violated on a daily basis—what steps Georgia can take together with its partners to deal with these problems?

VP Pence:

Well, as I said, the United States of America stands strong for the territorial integrity of Georgia. We have stood on that principle since the time that Russian tanks overtook Abkhazia and Ossetia in 2008. And we will continue to stand strong. The joint military operations that are taking place today, we hope, are a visible sign of our commitment to Georgia's sovereignty and to her internationally recognized borders.

We also believe that, in addition to security partnership, the stronger and more prosperous Georgia will lead to the restoration of a whole and free Georgia. So the United States will continue to look for ways where we can strengthen Georgia not only from the standpoint of its defense and security, but where we can strengthen Georgia economically, creating jobs and opportunity, and prosperity. Strengthening the hand of Georgia so that, one day, Georgia can once again celebrate its historical territorial integrity intact.

PM Kvirikashvili:

Thank you very much for the question. I would like to thank Mr. Vice President for his very clear message and the strong support Georgia enjoys from the US.

As mentioned earlier, our territorial integrity is a deep-rooted problem that requires a consistent approach in terms of Georgia's stability and economic and democratic development, on one hand, and Georgia's crucial defense and security partnership, on the other. I would like to reaffirm that this conflict can be resolved, and territorial integrity can be restored, only peacefully, consistently, through our economic development and with strong support from our strategic partners, especially from the US. Thank you.

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Q: Ashley Parker from the Washington Post. Mr. Vice President, in light of Russia's retaliation against sanctions, as well as Russia sending 100,000 troops to the eastern edge of NATO territory to drill, do you truly believe that better relationship that you and President Trump want with Russia is possible? And if things continue in this direction, can we be headed toward another cold war?

Mr. Prime Minister, you know better than anyone how real the threat of Russian aggression is. The Vice President just said that the US supports Georgia's aspirations into NATO, but what concrete assurances do you have that the US will defend you should Russia attack, as President Putin threatened?

VP Pence:

Thank you for your question. President Trump sent me on this journey to send a very clear message to the Baltic States, to the people of Georgia, and before the end of the day, Montenegro that the United States of America will stand with freedom-loving nations around the world. And that we will do so as Mr. President has said, not merely with words, but with actions. The presence of American forces in Poland, the presence of British forces—with whom I met—in Estonia, at the gathering yesterday, all give material evidence of the commitment of NATO in that region to live up to our Article 5 obligations. The current Russian exercises, which news reports today suggest will move up to 100,000 Russian troops into Belarus, is simply a confirmation of the importance of clarity within the NATO partnership.

President Trump and I believe that better relations with Russia may be possible. But as the President has said, we will see. But negotiations between parties always begin with the recognition of and respect for the position of each party. And with the sanctions President Trump will sign this week, codifying sanction that have been in place by the United States, our country is sending a very clear message and calling on our European allies to join in a very clear message that we mean what we say and say what we mean; that Russia's destabilizing activities in Ukraine, their support for rogue regimes like Iran, Syria, and North Korea, their posture has to change. But we believe by being clear and being strong that we can pursue a dialogue based on mutual understanding. President Trump holds the view that it has been a lack of clarity in the commitment by the US that has created much of the instability in the world today. When, in the past, America has spoken of red lines and not followed through on red lines. Many argue that it emboldened others to act in ways that they would not have. So President Trump believes that we can have peace through strength,

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and strong and clear positions, we believe, can create the foundation where authentic dialogue that may, we hope, result in better relations and in the resolution of long-standing disputes in Ukraine, Georgia, and other areas of the world.

PM Kvirikashvili:

Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Vice President, and thank you for the question. I think that a very clear and string message—we are with you!—tells everything. Georgia faces endless provocations daily along the occupation line, facing challenges of borderization, capturing, kidnapping of ethnic Georgians, and violating basic human rights of ethnic Georgians residing on the occupied territories. But the response to that is even more resolve and consistency, and dedication to the goals we set for ourselves. And integration into NATO is a process which matters for Georgia. Of course, the final goal to join NATO is set by the Georgian population, and we are following this very difficult path of reforming Georgia's military system and developing institutional democracy in Georgia. Believe me, through the consistency and dedication, clearness of our messages, and unity with our important strategic partners, it will be able for Georgia to reach this very important goal, to ensure long-term stability, and it is possible. We Georgians believe that..

Q: Reuters news agency, Margarita Antidze. Mr. Vice-President, what are the red lines Washington's red lines on Russia especially in regard with Georgia. And also you said in Estonia that in case of Russia's aggression against NATO alliance, members of the alliance, the US will intervene. What would be your reaction in case of Russia's aggression against Georgia, against NATO's partners? Thank you very much. Mr. Prime Minister do we have enough patience to wait NATO's partnership? We are waiting, you are waiting, and Georgia is waiting for a while? Thank you.

VP Pence:

Thank you for the question. Well, the essence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is a mutual defense. We agree that attack on one is an attack on all. What President wanted me to communicate as I traveled to the NATO countries, as later today I will visit the newest member of NATO is that the US says what it means and means what it says and we will live

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up our obligation under article 5. With regard to Georgia, we strongly support Georgia's aspiration to become a member of NATO and we will continue to work closely with this Prime Minister and the Government of Georgia broadly to advance the policies that will facilitate becoming a NATO member. We believe that Georgia has made an extraordinary progress not in just last twenty five years but over the last five years. There has been significant progress that we believe will strengthen the application for NATO membership. But with regard to the Russian aggression, which took place in 2008 which has... as we stand here today Russian tanks are parked on Georgian soil forty miles from where we stand. The US will continue to be unambiguous in our commitment to the territorial integrity of Georgia. We will stand for a strong and a whole Georgia, we will continue to provide support for the defense and security of Georgia and we will continue to seek a peaceful resolution that will reestablished internationally recognized borders of this nation.

PM Kvirikashvili:

Thank you Mr. Vice President. Thank you for the question. You said it is about patience, yes, it is about strategic patience, I would say, to stay consistent on the road where we are. Today we have all practical tools to advance toward NATO membership. We have substantial package, we are implementing it very successfully; we have Georgia Defense Readiness Programme jointly with the US, which is complementary to the Substantial Package; and it was said many times by the leaders of our strategic partners, the US first, of course and NATO leadership that no other country has a say to block the membership of Georgia to NATO. It is only NATO members and applicant countries, who decide about their future in NATO. And we have made our own decision. Thank you.

Q: Thank you, it is Peter Nicholas of the Wall Street Journal. Mr. Vice President, you have talked about the new Russian sanction's bill as an example of the US resolve in the face of Russian aggression. But did not the Trump's White House oppose this bill fearing that this bill relinquishes Presidential authority to Congress. What happened in this process that caused the White House to sign on?

Mr. Prime Minister, the US Intelligence community has concluded that Russia tried to interfere in our Presidential election. Living so close to Russia, having dealt with Russian provocations, do you have any advice to the US in how to cope with Russian efforts to intervene in our elections and influence voters in our country?

VP Pence:

Thank you, Peter, thank you. President Trump will sign the Russian sanctions bill soon. Our administration had concerns about this legislation that emerged from the US Senate. The concern was that the bill did not include traditional flexibility that is afforded to the State

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Department or any administration in the conduct of American foreign policy. I am pleased to report that the bill improved significantly as it moved through the House of Representatives and through the legislative process. And this legislation, we believe, will not only codify current Russian sanctions that our administration has upheld, but will also strengthen those sanctions, even while giving the President of the United States and our State Department the ability and a flexibility to be able to administer American foreign policy as appropriate. Let me say that in signing these sanctions, our President and our Congress are speaking in a unified voice that those matters that the President spoke about so eloquently in Warsaw, but Russian destabilizing activities, Russia's efforts to support rogue regimes, has to change. For there to be a change in our relationship with Russia, Russia has to change its behavior. By these sanctions, by my presence here, by the President's powerful affirmation of the objectives and the values of our alliance in the west our hope is for that we will move toward better relations and a better future and a more peaceful world as a result.

PM Kvirikashvili:

Thank you. First of all, let me mention once again how important is strong America for Georgia. We are genuinely interested in the strength of the United States; we want to see the US united, coping with global challenges. I do not think that Georgia is in a position to judge about Russian interference. With our excellent intelligence capabilities, we were not able to detect any interference and we think that American nation has made its decision to elect the President and of course we look for more partnership with the current administration of the US.

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Remarks by the Vice President to Noble Partner Participants

August 1, 2017
Tbilisi International Airport
Tbilisi, Georgia

THE VICE PRESIDENT: President Margvelashvili, Prime Minister Kvrikashvili, Minister Izoria, General Chachibaya, members of the armed forces of the United States of America and Georgia, to all our distinguished guests, it is an honor to join you here today to address the men and women of Exercise Noble Partner. (Applause.)

And to all of you, I bring greetings from the leader of the free world, the President of the United States of America -- President Donald Trump. (Applause.)

The President sent me here to this place, at this time simply to thank all -- thank you for stepping up to serve your nations, for standing in the gap on this great frontier -- united in the defense of freedom.

You are the best of us -- heroes all.

And you are here, the Americans among you so far away from home, because the United States and Georgia are bound together by the abiding oath of friendship and by our shared commitment to the cause of freedom.

Under President Trump, the policy of the United States is to place the security and the prosperity of America first. But as the President has made clear, and as our presence here today demonstrates, America First does not mean America alone.

We are here today, with the steadfast assurance of the United States of America to tell our friends in Georgia: We are with you. (Applause.)

We stand with the nation and the people of Georgia, and we will stand with you as you pursue membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. And the United States of America stands with Georgia in defense of what President Trump in Warsaw called "the priceless ties that bind us together as nations, as allies, and as a civilization." And those ties are freedom, democracy, and the rule of law.

The roots of the nation and people of Georgia stretch back into the mists of history. Sitting here at the crossroads of empires and civilizations -- where East meets West, where North meets South -- Georgia has fostered a vibrant culture and a rich heritage of faith.

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And through all the millennia, none have been able to deprive you of your identity. The people and culture of Georgia have stood the test of time. (Applause.)

It was only a generation ago that Georgia was still imprisoned inside the Soviet Union. That Communist regime personified everything that free peoples reject, and it sought to crush you in its heartless, inhuman embrace. The Soviet Union sought to eradicate your history -- even the very essence of who you are, the cherished ties of culture and faith.

But when the Soviet Union collapsed, Georgia reclaimed its liberty. You reached out your hand in friendship to the free nations of Europe and the United States, and the United States of America proudly reached back. (Applause.)

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the diplomatic relations between the United States and Georgia, and we marvel at your progress -- the progress you've made since you regained your independence. Georgia's future is in the West.

For many years, Georgia has been a key strategic partner of the United States. Since 2004, thousands of brave Georgians have served with their American brothers-and-sisters-in-arms in Kosovo, in Iraq, and in Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan alone, Georgia has provided more troops on a per-capita basis than any other country in the world. (Applause.)

And today we remember 31 Georgian soldiers who've given their lives in the cause of freedom in that land. The American people remember their sacrifice and their families on this day. They are heroes. And let me assure you and their families that they will be enshrined in the hearts of the American people forever.

The strategic partnership between the United States and Georgia is stronger now than ever before, and this joint exercise is a tangible sign of our commitment to each other to make it stronger still.

Exercise Noble Partner brings together the Armed Forces of the United States, of Georgia, and many other nations to train together and execute complex operations.

Noble Partner will strengthen Georgia's ability to defend itself in the years ahead. It will prepare Georgian soldiers to join NATO's Response Force in the future.

This exercise is a testament to your professionalism, to the high value that the United States and our

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NATO allies place on Georgia's security. But our commitment to your security doesn't stop there.

American advisors will continue to work alongside your leaders to improve Georgia's military readiness. And along with all our NATO allies, the United States is contributing to the Substantial Package for Georgia, to strengthen Georgia's resilience, and to bring Georgia ever closer to your goal of membership in NATO. (Applause.)

And to be clear, President Trump and the United States stand firmly behind the 2008 NATO Bucharest statement, which made it clear that Georgia will someday become a member of the most successful military alliance in the history of the world. (Applause.)

Georgia has already taken important steps toward this goal -- especially in terms of security. Georgia has long exceeded NATO's own goal of spending 2 percent of gross domestic product on defense. Your commitment is a model for many current NATO members, many of which have not fulfilled their obligations to our common defense. And so I want to congratulate and thank Georgia for your strong commitment and your strong example of national leadership on national defense. (Applause.)

And to those here in the uniform of the United States, be assured your Commander-in-Chief is busy making the strongest fighting force in the history of the world stronger still.

As President Trump said just a few days ago, in his words, "American might is second to none -- and we're getting bigger, and better, and stronger every day."

The President has already signed the largest increase in military spending in nearly 10 years. And we're calling on Congress to pass one of the largest investments in defense since the days of the Cold War.

Our investments in our defense, like Georgia's, are borne of necessity. The rise of adversaries new and old requires renewed strength and renewed resolve by all who cherish freedom.

We stand here today in the gap, on a frontline of freedom, a frontline compromised by Russian aggression nearly a decade ago. At this very moment, just 40 miles from where we stand, Russian tanks sit on Georgian land in South Ossetia. Today, Russia continues to occupy one-fifth of Georgian territory.

The United States strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgia's soil. (Applause.)

Be assured: The United States will continue to support Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity

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within its internationally recognized borders.

The United States of America, under President Donald Trump, will reject any claim, at any time, by any nation that undermines this enduring principle.

To that end, President Trump has called on Russia recently, here and elsewhere, to "cease its destabilizing activities," and we will continue to work with Georgia to reduce your vulnerabilities and counter potential Russian aggression.

And in a further sign of our commitment, very soon, President Trump will sign legislation to strengthen and codify the United States' sanctions against Russia.

The United States prefers a constructive relationship with Russia based on mutual cooperation and common interests. But the President and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia -- a better relationship, the lifting of sanctions will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused the sanctions to be imposed in the first place. And not before. (Applause.)

We hope for better days, for better relations with Russia, but the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow I can assure you will not deter this President or the commitment of the United States to our security, that of our allies, and freedom-loving nations around the world like the freedom-loving people of Georgia.
The United States has stood with Georgia since your independence, and under President Trump, we will continue to stand shoulder-to-shoulder and work hand-in-hand with you to fortify your defense, to strengthen your democracy, and to deepen your ties of friendship with Europe and the United States.

We stand with you because we know the wisdom of that ancient Georgian saying there is -- "strength is in unity." (Applause.)

So in unity, together, we will be strong in arms. In unity, together, we will be strong in resolve. And in unity, together, we will be strong in faith -- faith in freedom, and faith in Him from whom our freedom springs.

Earlier today, my wife and I visited the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church at the Sioni Cathedral; that soaring temple, whose foundations stretch back more than 1,500 years, is deeply inspiring. It's a symbol of the ancient faith that fills this land.

As I walked beneath its painted dome, I could not help but think of an ancient truth from the sacred scriptures, one which we'd do well to reflect on in these challenging times. As we train, as we

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prepare, as we promote commerce and mutual prosperity, we do well to remember those words: "Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."

Today, we recommit ourselves to the cause of security, prosperity, and liberty for the people of Georgia. We renew our pledge to stand together in unity as partners and as friends, and to one day stand together as allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (Applause.)

And we do so with confidence and with faith -- faith in the courage of all of you who wear the uniform, faith and confidence in the strength and resilience of the proud people of this ancient land, confident in the leadership of our Commander-in-Chief, President Donald Trump, and your leadership in Georgia, and with faith in the blessings and protection of God above, I know the United States and Georgia will embrace a future of freedom in unity together.

Thank you. God bless you. God bless Georgia. And God bless the United States of America. (Applause.)

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PRESS RELEASE: Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and U.S. Vice President Mike Pence Agree to Further Enhance Georgia-US Security and Economic Cooperation

Tbilisi, 1st August 2017 – Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili today met with United States Vice President Mike Pence to discuss expanding future security and economic cooperation between Georgia and the U.S. Last night, Kvirikashvili hosted Vice President Pence and the American delegation for dinner in Tbilisi.

"Vice President Pence's visit so shortly after taking office bears witness to his and President Trump's great desire to deepen the strategic partnership and friendship with Georgia, for which I am very grateful," stated Prime Minister Kvirikashvili. "The Georgian nation deeply appreciates the American people's friendship, solidarity, and strong support."

During their meeting, Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and Vice President Pence discussed the U.S.-Georgian security partnership in depth. Following the meeting, the Vice President met with Georgian and U.S. soldiers participating in the Noble Partner exercise, a U.S. Army-led exercise to support the training, evaluation and eventual certification of Georgia's second light infantry company contribution to the NATO Response Force (NRF).

"The Vice President's meeting with Georgian and American service members participating in the Noble Partner exercises is an unmistakable demonstration of the strong U.S. support for spurring our country's sovereignty and integration into NATO," affirmed Prime Minister Kvirikashvili. "The special bonds and extraordinary sacrifices of our two militaries -- currently fighting extremism together -- is something to behold. Georgia and the U.S. are truly brothers in arms."

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and Vice President Pence also held productive discussions about furthering the economic and trade partnership between Georgia and the U.S. Georgia's Anaklia Deep Sea Port on the Black Sea, which will become a focal point in trade between Europe and Asia, is being built by an American-Georgian consortium, led by U.S. company Conti. SSA Marine, another U.S. company, will operate it.

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During the visit, Vice President Pence also reaffirmed U.S. support for continued progress toward Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

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For more information contact:

Levan Karumidze

Media Adviser

Department of Public Relations

Administration of the Government of Georgia

Phone: +995 599 969610

E-mail: lkarumidze@geo.gov.ge ; levankarumi@gmail.com

Address: 7, Ingorokva str. 0114 Tbilisi, Georgia

www.government.gov.ge

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Vice President Pence Trip to Georgia Coverage Report for July 31, 2017



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Pence Arrives In Georgia In Bid To Reassure U.S. Allies
31 July 2017
Radio Free Europe

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence arrived in Georgia on July 31 for the second leg of his three-day trip aimed at reassuring allies in Eastern Europe in the face of what the United States calls Russia's efforts to destabilize the region.

Pence was greeted at the Tbilisi airport by Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili just hours after the U.S. vice president reaffirmed Washington's solidarity with the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders" and "undermine democracies."

"We stand with the people and nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and we always will," Pence said in Tallinn, where he met with the three Baltic presidents -- Kersti Kaljulaid, Raimonds Vejonis, and Dalia Grybauskaite, respectively.

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions, as have Georgia and the third ally on Pence's itinerary: new NATO member Montenegro.

"No threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said. "At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another."

The United States "rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation, or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies," he also said.

Article 5

Pence said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty -- the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

He also pledged that the United States would not be deterred from its goals by Moscow's demand for drastic cuts in staff levels at U.S. diplomatic facilities in Russia.

"Recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter commitment of the United States to our security, the security of our allies, and the security of freedom-loving nations around the world," he said.

After Pence began his visit to Estonia on July 30, Prime Minister Juri Ratas said the U.S. vice president raised the possibility of deploying the Patriot antimissile defense system in the country.

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"We spoke about it today, but we didn't talk about a date or time," Ratas told state broadcaster ERR.

The U.S. Patriot defense system is a mobile, ground-based system designed to intercept missiles and warplanes.

Ratas also said the two leaders talked about the upcoming Russian military maneuvers planned for near the Estonian border, "and how Estonia, the United States, and NATO should monitor them and exchange information."

'Very Clear' Message

Estonian Foreign Minister Sven Mikser told Current Time TV, the Russian-language network run by RFE/RL in cooperation with Voice of America (VOA), that Pence's visit was "an extremely important event."

"The message from the vice president was very clear: The U.S. stands by all its allied obligations and commitments, and the U.S. is truly committed to being there for us, for all of its NATO allies," Mikser said.

Pence planted an English oak before departing Tallinn aboard Air Force Two en route to Georgia's capital, Tbilisi, where he was greeted at the airport by Prime Minister Giorgi Kvrikashvili later on July 31.

Officials said Pence will highlight U.S. support for the Caucasus nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity before continuing on to Montenegro, the newest NATO member.

Georgia, which has expressed hopes of joining the Western alliance, has seen Russian encroachment on its territory.

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili said on July 27 that Pence's visit will demonstrate that the United States continues to support Georgia in building a stronger military force.

During Pence's visit, 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the previously planned Noble Partner 2017 exercises.

Troops from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, and Armenia were taking part.

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"The vice president's presence here is definitely showing that this is not only about military exercises, but it is also showing unification with our values, with our foreign policy targets, and showing a clear message that we are together," Margvelashvili said.

Pence was to participate in an official dinner hosted by Kvrikashvili. State media in Georgia reported that Margvelashvili was expected to join them.

On the last stop, Pence will welcome NATO's newest member with his stop in Montenegro, whose accession to the alliance in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica, U.S. officials said.

Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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Pence to Visit Estonia, Georgia, Montenegro on NATO, Russia
By Laurie Kellman
28 July 2017
Associated Press

Vice President Mike Pence visits three countries in Russia's neighborhood beginning Monday to signal support for them and NATO while drawing a line against aggression.

Pence's trip to Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro is viewed as a follow-up to President Donald Trump's visit to Europe earlier this month. Then, Trump used stops in Poland and Germany to try to pull off a tricky balancing act of improving ties with Moscow while also presenting the U.S. as a check against Russia's moves in the region.

Pence's mission will be encouraging those countries to continue to ally with the West and resist Russia's attempts to splinter the NATO alliance.

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson have previously been dispatched to try to allay the concerns of countries near Russia that the U.S. really will stand behind NATO and support the sovereignty of non-member former Soviet republics.

The concerns stem from Trump's suggestion during the campaign that the U.S. might not defend NATO allies and his apparent desire for closer relations with Russia. Trump received criticism on his

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first European trip for passing up the chance to affirm the NATO mutual defense commitment clause known as Article 5, which frames an attack on one as an attack on all. Trump did affirm U.S. support for Article 5 on his second trip to Europe.

The vice president is expected to deliver a message of support for U.S. trade and investment with the countries while underscoring the U.S. commitment to the security of the three nations, according to senior administration officials who briefed reporters about the trip on the condition that they not be identified by name. Pence also will stress the values of freedom of speech, democracy and religious tolerance.

In Estonia, Pence is expected to highlight bilateral ties with the U.S., particularly on trade, investment and cyber issues. Pence also is expected to thank Estonian officials for their approach to "burden-sharing," diplomatic speak for agreeing to spend a full share of 2 percent of their GDP on defense, the administration officials said.

The vice president also is expected to underscore the U.S. commitment to NATO, which sees Russia as a security threat and offers protection to concerned member states near Russia's borders.

In Georgia, Pence is expected to highlight U.S. support for its sovereignty and territorial integrity, the officials said. Georgia is the only country on the trip that is not a NATO member and, like Ukraine, has seen Russian encroachment on its territory. The administration officials said the U.S. is encouraging Georgia to continue to make reforms to its judiciary and expand anti-corruption efforts.

In Montenegro, Pence will celebrate that nation as the newest NATO ally.

On Wednesday, he'll attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Podgorica, Montenegro, to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and underscore the importance of good governance, political reforms and rule of law. Also expected to attend are the leaders of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia.

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VP Pence, in the Baltics, voices support for mutual defense in NATO
By David Mardiste, Andrius Sytas
31 July 2017
Reuters

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence on Monday assured the Baltic states of U.S. support if they faced aggression from Russia, telling them that Washington firmly backs NATO's doctrine of collective defense.

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Pence's comments to the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, ahead of Russian war games on their doorstep, were clearly intended to reassure following Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine and U.S. President Donald Trump's early lukewarm support for NATO.

During a visit to NATO's Brussels headquarters in May, Trump jarred allies by not restating U.S. support for a critical portion of the alliance's charter and instead berated some members for not spending enough on defense.

Trump has since said he supports the NATO charter's Article 5, the requirement that each member of the alliance defend each other if they come under attack.

"A strong and united NATO is more necessary today than at any point since the collapse of communism a quarter-century ago and no threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said at news conference with the three Baltic presidents.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States stands firmly behind our Article 5 pledge of mutual defense. An attack on one of us is an attack on us all."

Russia is scheduled next month to hold large-scale military maneuvers with its ally Belarus. The U.S. army's top general in Europe said this month that the Zapad war games could be a "Trojan horse" resulting in military equipment being left in Belarus.

He warned that Russia continues to "seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine democracies of sovereign nations and divide the free nations of Europe, one against another".

Lithuania's President Dalia Grybauskaite told Lithuanian radio that NATO's air-policing missions would be doubled during the Russian-led Zapad exercise.

Pence is also due to visit Montenegro, the alliance's newest member, and make a stop in Georgia, an aspiring member, which fought a brief war with Russia in 2008.

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Pence: Baltic States' Greatest Threat Comes from Russian Aggression
31 July 2017
Voice of America

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence said Monday there is no larger threat to Baltic states than the "specter of aggression" by Russia, as he pledged support for NATO allies Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

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Pence met in Tallinn with the presidents of all the Baltic states — Estonia's Kersti Kaljulaid, Latvia's Raimonds Vejonis and Lithuania's Dalia Grybauskaite — and afterward summarized the U.S. position on Russia's "destabilizing" activities:

"At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine democracies of sovereign nations and divide the free nations of Europe one against another. Under President Donald Trump, the United States of America rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies."

During his public remarks in Estonia's capital, the U.S. vice president also expressed hope for improved relations with Russia. He said the Kremlin decree this week ordering most American diplomats to leave their posts in Moscow will not deter the U.S. commitment to its allies' security.

Pence praised Estonia for meeting the NATO alliance target for defense spending of at least 2 percent of its gross domestic product, and he noted Latvia and Lithuania would hit that level by the end of next year. Trump has repeatedly called on NATO members to boost defense spending.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania all have asked for tangible demonstrations of U.S. military support. Concerns about Russian expansionism have increased sharply in the Baltic region since Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine three years ago.

From Estonia, Pence traveled later Monday to Georgia, where troops from the United States and other NATO partners are conducting military exercises that began Sunday.

Welcoming him to Tbilisi, Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili said, "Vice President Pence's visit sends a strong message about the enduring strength of the relationship between Georgia and the United States."

Pence praised the Georgian people for their strong "commitment to independence and freedom." He and Kvirikashvili dined together Monday and will hold talks Tuesday.

Following his visit to Georgia, Pence's three-nation tour of Eastern Europe will conclude in Montenegro, NATO's newest member.

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Pence Says U.S. Will 'Always Stand' With Baltic Nations
31 July 2017
Radio Free Europe

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence has reaffirmed Washington's support for the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders " and "undermine democracies."

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"We stand with the people and nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and we always will," Pence said on July 31 in the Estonian capital, Tallinn, where he met with the three Baltic presidents -- Kersti Kaljulaid, Raimonds Vejonis, and Dalia Grybauskaite.

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries and other allies in Eastern Europe have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions in their respective regions.

"No threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said. "At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another."

The United States "rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation, or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies," he also said.

Pence said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty -- the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

He also pledged that the United States would not be deterred from its goals by Moscow's demand for drastic cuts in staff levels at U.S. diplomatic facilities in Russia.

"Recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter commitment of the United States to our security, the security of our allies, and the security of freedom-loving nations around the world," he said.

After Pence began his visit to Estonia on July 30, Prime Minister Juri Ratas said the U.S. vice president raised the possibility of deploying the Patriot antimissile defense system in the country.

"We spoke about it today, but we didn't talk about a date or time," Ratas told state broadcaster ERR.

The U.S. Patriot defense system is a mobile, ground-based system designed to intercept missiles and warplanes.

Ratas also said the two leaders talked about the upcoming Russian military maneuvers planned for near the Estonian border, "and how Estonia, the United States, and NATO should monitor them and exchange information."

Estonian Foreign Minister Sven Mikser told Current Time TV, the Russian-language network run by RFE/RL in cooperation with Voice of America (VOA), that Pence's visit was "an extremely important event."

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"The message from the vice president was very clear: The U.S. stands by all its allied obligations and commitments, and the U.S. is truly committed to being there for us, for all of its NATO allies," Mikser said.

Pence planted an English oak before departing Tallinn aboard Air Force Two later on July 31, en route to Georgia's capital, Tbilisi, for the second leg of his trip.

Officials said Pence will highlight U.S. support for the Caucasus nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity before continuing on to visit the newest NATO member, Montenegro.

Georgia, which has expressed hopes of joining the Western alliance, has seen Russian encroachment on its territory.

Georgia, which has expressed hopes of joining the Western alliance, has seen Russian encroachment on its territory.

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili said on July 27 that Pence's visit will demonstrate that the United States continues to support Georgia in building a stronger military force.

During Pence's visit, 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the previously planned Noble Partner 2017 exercises.

Troops from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, and Armenia were taking part.

"The vice president's presence here is definitely showing that this is not only about military exercises, but it is also showing unification with our values, with our foreign policy targets, and showing a clear message that we are together," Margvelashvili said.

Pence was due to arrive in Tbilisi in the evening of July 31 and participate in an official dinner hosted by Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvrikashvili.

On the last stop, Pence will welcome NATO's newest member with his stop in Montenegro, whose accession to the alliance in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica, U.S. officials said.

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Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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Georgia begins U.S.-led military exercise a day before Vice President Pence visit
By Margarita Antidze
30 July 2017
Reuters

The Georgian army began two weeks of military exercises with the United States and other partner countries on Sunday, a day before U.S. Vice President Mike Pence visits the ex-Soviet nation.

About 2,800 soldiers from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, Armenia and Georgia were taking part in the maneuvers, with Washington dispatching an entire mechanized company including several Bradley infantry fighting vehicles and M1A2 Abrams main battle tanks.

Georgia's Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili said the drills were an important event for the South Caucasus republic.

"These exercises will help Georgia to get closer to NATO standards and to strengthen stability in the whole region," Kvirikashvili said at the opening ceremony on Sunday.

The "Noble Partner" exercises are being held in Georgia for the third time. Russian officials had not commented on the event yet, but in previous years Moscow warned that drills could destabilize the region, a charge denied by Georgian officials and U.S. diplomats.

"This exercise is not directed against any country. It's about to help Georgia to grow its capacity to interoperate in international operations," U.S. Ambassador Ian Kelly told Reuters.

Russia and Georgia fought a war in August 2008 over the breakaway Georgian region of South Ossetia. Moscow continues to garrison troops there and to support another breakaway region, Abkhazia.

The exercises were being run out of the Vaziani military base near Georgia's capital, Tbilisi.

Russian forces used to be based there until they withdrew at the start of the last decade under the terms of a European arms reduction agreement.

Pence plans to attend the drills and address participants on Tuesday.

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The United States has spoken favorably of the idea that Georgia might one day join NATO, something Russia firmly opposes.

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U.S. backing of Georgian military sends strong message to Russia: Margvelashvili
By Margarita Antidze
27 July 2017
Reuters

The United States has continued to support Georgia in building more resilient military forces, training and equipping its army, Georgian president Giorgi Margvelashvili said on Thursday.

He added that these issues would be "one of the main" topics discussed during U.S. Vice President Mike Pence's visit to the ex-Soviet country.

Margvelashvili also said the Georgian army will start two weeks of military exercises with the United States and other partner countries on Sunday, the day before Pence's visit to Tbilisi, to send an important message to Russia about their common values and political targets.

"The vice-president's presence here is definitely showing that this is not only about military exercises, but it is also showing unification with our values, with our foreign policy targets and showing a clear message that we are together," Margvelashvili told a news conference.

Russia defeated Georgia in a short war in 2008 over the breakaway Georgian region of South Ossetia, and Moscow continues to station troops there and to support another breakaway region, Abkhazia.

"This is an important message especially in the environment when (Russia's) training and exercises going on the occupied territories of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region (South Ossetia)," Margvelashvili added.

Pence plans to visit Georgia as a part of his trip to Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro.

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U.S., U.K., Ukraine, Others Begin Massive Military Drills In Georgia
30 July 2017
Radio Free Europe

Some 2,800 troops from host Georgia, the United States, and six other countries have begun a major military exercise in the South Caucasus nation.

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Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili and other leaders on July 30 said they see the event as a substantial step toward their goal of one day joining NATO.

"These exercises will help Georgia to get closer to NATO standards and to strengthen stability in the whole region," Kvirikashvili said at the opening ceremonies at the Vaziani military base near the capital, Tbilisi.

Georgia's defense minister, Levan Izoria, called the scale of exercises "unprecedented" and said they "make clear the support for Georgia by the NATO member states, especially the U.S."

U.S. officials in the past have spoken favorably toward Georgian hopes of eventually joining NATO, a move Russia vehemently opposes.

At a 2008 summit in Bucharest, NATO leaders made a formal pledge that Georgia "will become a NATO member," but alliance leaders have moved warily toward that goal in the face of Moscow's opposition.

About 1,600 U.S. troops and 800 Georgian soldiers are taking part in the two-week exercises, dubbed Noble Partner.

Troops from Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, and Armenia are also participating, with the United States deploying a mechanized company, including several Bradley infantry fighting vehicles and M1A2 Abrams battle tanks.

It is the third time the exercises have been held in Georgia, a country that has seen much-larger rival Russian encroach on its territory since its independence from the Soviet Union.

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway areas of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008, and Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

In previous years, Moscow warned that the drills could destabilize the region, a notion that Georgia and the United States have dismissed.

"This exercise is not directed against any country. It's about to help Georgia to grow its capacity to interoperate in international operations," U.S. Ambassador Ian Kelly told Reuters news agency, citing missions such as the current one in Afghanistan.

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence is scheduled to visit Georgia on July 31 after a stop in Estonia to meet with Baltic leaders also concerned about Russia's intensions in their region. He will meet with U.S. troops on August 1.

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During his stop in Tallinn, Pence said, "Our message to the Baltic states -- my message when we visit Georgia and Montenegro -- will be the same: To our allies here in Eastern Europe, we are with you, we stand with you on behalf of freedoms."

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US and Georgia hold military drills, as Russia shows off naval strength
30 July 2017
BBC

The US and Georgia have launched their biggest ever joint military exercises, as the Caucasus nation seeks to push its bid to join Nato.

US Vice-President Mike Pence will visit this week and is expected to back the plan, which Russia strongly opposes.

Georgia and Russia have had fractious relations over two breakaway republics and fought a brief war in 2008.

Russia staged its own show of force on Sunday with President Putin joining a naval display in St Petersburg.

The US-Georgia military drills, dubbed Noble Partner, involve some 1,600 US and 800 Georgian troops.

The US has also deployed M1A2 Abrams main battle tanks and M2 Bradley infantry vehicles for the exercises, which will go on until 12 August.

A number of other nations, including the UK, are involved.

Georgian Defence Minister Levan Izoria said the "unprecedented" exercises would "make clear the support for Georgia by the Nato member states, especially the US".

Although Georgia is not a member of Nato, it does voluntarily contribute to the Nato Response Force (NRF), the multinational force of land, air, navy and special operations units the alliance can deploy quickly when needed.

The Russo-Georgian War in August 2008 led to Moscow occupying the Russian-backed self-proclaimed republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Meanwhile on Sunday, President Vladimir Putin attended a show of might on Russia's annual Navy Day.

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Some 50 warships and submarines were on displayed in the Gulf of Finland and on the Neva river around St Petersburg.

He said in an address: "The navy is not only dealing with its traditional tasks but also responding with merit to new challenges, making a significant contribution to the fight against terrorism and piracy."

There were other displays around the country, and Russia also showed off its naval hardware at its Syrian base of Tartus.

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Mike Pence arrives in Estonia, kicking off Eastern Europe trip
By David Caplan
30 July 2017
ABC News

Vice President Mike Pence and second lady Karen Pence arrived in Estonia Sunday afternoon, kicking off a three-country visit of Eastern Europe.

The Pences, who left from Joint Base Andrews in Maryland Saturday night, were greeted at the Tallinn airport by U.S. ambassador to Estonia James D. Melville and Estonian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sven Mikser. The group shook hands and spoke briefly before the vice president's motorcade headed to the Pences' hotel.

"On behalf of @POTUS, arrived in Tallinn, Estonia with @SecondLady to meet w/ leaders of Baltic States on security & prosperity #VPinEurope," Pence tweeted upon his arrival.

In explaining the purpose of the trip, a senior Trump administration official told reporters last week, "This builds upon the administration's engagement. The Secretary of Defense had been there recently, and it builds upon the Vice President's trip when we addressed some of these leaders at the Munich Security Conference when he met with the three Baltic Presidents then. And he has since hosted the Prime Minister of Georgia here at the White House, as did the President. And then on Montenegro's accession into NATO, we also hosted leadership here in the White House."

The office of Estonian Prime Minister Juri Ratas said in a press release Saturday that Ratas and Pence will meet at 5:30 p.m. local time, to "discuss cooperation in defence, digital issues and cyber defence, as well as cooperation between the US and the EU in connection with the Estonia Presidency of the Council of the European Union."

Ratas said in a statement, "The contribution of the US to the security of the Baltic States and also the whole of Europe is vital, and I certainly wish to thank the Vice President for that. Besides that, we plan to speak about the Estonian digital solutions that are of interest to the US, and developing

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cooperation in cyber defence at our meeting. Another important topic that will be on the table, is the cooperation between the EU and the US."

A senior White House administration official told reporters last week that while in Estonia, Pence "will highlight our strong bilateral ties, including by trade and investment. And particularly with Estonia, successes in the cyber realm, and their current partnership on cyber issues, and their leading not only in that region, but globally."

On Thursday, Karen Pence expressed her enthusiasm for the trip, tweeting "Looking forward to our visit to Eastern Europe where I highlight my iniative, art therapy. What an honor!"

According to the second lady's office, she will tour a medical center in Tallinn, and participate in a roundtable discussion with art therapists.

The senior administration official said in Georgia, the vice president will "highlight our commitment to the U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership, our strong support Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity ... and its internationally recognized borders, and our support for Georgia and their Euro-Atlantic aspirations."

While in Georgia, Karen Pence will visit with patients of an art therapy program in Tbilisi.

On Wednesday, Pence will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Podgorica, Montenegro, to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and underscore the importance of good governance, political reforms and rule of law. Also expected to attend are the leaders of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia.

In Podgorica, Montenegro, the second lady will tour a honey farm, where she will learn about a local family's beekeeping business.

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Pence travels to Baltic states to reassure allies and send message to Russia
By Ashley Parker
31 July 2017
Washington Post

Vice President Pence touched down in Estonia on Sunday on the eve of President Trump's expected signing of legislation to impose broad sanctions against Russia, and said he came bearing a message from the president: "Russia's destabilizing activities, its support for rogue regimes, its activities in Ukraine, are unacceptable."

Speaking briefly with reporters in Town Hall Square here in Tallinn's old town, Pence reaffirmed the president's decision to sign the sanctions bill but also held out the possibility that the implementation

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of the penalties — for which Russia has already retaliated — might actually improve relations between the two countries, saying he and Trump "expect Russian behavior to change."

"The president and I remain very hopeful that we'll see different behavior by the Russian government, with regard to Ukraine, with regard to supporting rogue regimes in Iran and North Korea," Pence said. "We continue to believe that if Russia will change its behavior, our relationship can change for the good and improve for the interests in both of our countries and the interest of peace and stability in this region and around the world."

Russia has rejected the idea that the sanctions will in any way improve relations, with its U.S. embassy tweeting on Saturday: "Washington still doesn't get the fact that pressure never works against @Russia, bilateral relations can hardly be improved by sanctions."

Russian President Vladi-mir Putin said Sunday that the U.S. diplomatic missions in Russia will have to reduce their staffs by 755 people.

Pence's long-planned, 3½-day trip to Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro was originally intended to reaffirm the United States' commitment to NATO — Estonia is one of five countries meeting its defense spending commitment — and touch on the United States' commitment to the security of the Baltic states. All three countries have been the targets of Russian aggression.

But in the wake of Trump's decision to sign the legislation — which passed the Senate on Thursday on an overwhelming 98 to 2 vote — the vice president's trip has taken on a clear Russia focus, senior administration officials said. Nearly all of Pence's remarks and speeches are likely to address the challenges Russia poses in this part of the world.

But Pence's rhetoric abroad so far seems slightly out of sync with some of his boss's previous comments and actions on the topics of both Russia and NATO.

Despite the firm conclusion of his own intelligence community that Russia interfered in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Trump has repeatedly refused to fully accept that determination. When he has acknowledged that Russia did meddle, he has played down Moscow's role, saying other state or individual actors could have played a role as well.

When asked how the Baltic states can accept Pence's reassurances that the United States will support them against Russian aggression and interference in their domestic politics when Trump has frequently taken a softer line, the vice president said, "The president has confirmed repeatedly that we believe Russia did meddle in U.S. elections. I think he has also said it could have been other actors as well."

His message throughout Eastern Europe, Pence added, is a simple one. "While our policy is America-first, it's not America-alone, and that our allies in Eastern Europe can be confident that the United States of America stands with them," he said. "We are committed to NATO, we are committed to our common defense."

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Trump's comments and actions have at times raised questions about his commitment to the alliance, despite statements of strong support from Pence and other administration officials.

While attending a ceremony at NATO headquarters in Brussels in May on his first trip abroad, Trump delivered a speech from which he specifically removed a roughly 20-word section intended to reaffirm U.S. support for the treaty's Article 5, which says an attack on one member is an attack on all members. He later committed to NATO's collective defense ideal, which is the cornerstone of the treaty, but the earlier omission worried European leaders.

Pence on Sunday again tried to play down the president's previous uncertainty on Article 5, arguing Trump has never wavered in his commitment.

"From the time the president sent me to speak at the Munich Security Conference, we made it clear that the policy of our administration is to stand firmly with our NATO allies and to stand firmly behind our Article 5 commitment that an attack on one is an attack on all," Pence said. "The president has made it clear from the outset of our administration and will continue to make it clear to all our allies in the region."

Trump was initially reluctant to accept the Russia sanctions legislation, which curbs his ability to lift them on his own without consent from Congress. But he finally agreed to sign it after revisions, which also include sanctions on Iran and North -Korea.

In many ways, the president had no choice. Trump would have encountered a fierce political backlash — as well as faced the threat of a veto override from a Republican-controlled Congress — had he refused to sign the bill. Rejecting the legislation also would have raised further questions about his seeming reluctance to confront Putin.

Pence's trip also comes as Trump is facing growing scrutiny at home over Russia, in the form of special counsel Robert S. Mueller III's widening investigation. In addition to looking into whether Trump's associates colluded with Russians in the 2016 election, Mueller's probe has grown to include questions about the finances of Trump and his family, as well as possible attempts to obstruct the investigation.

Michael McFaul, the ambassador to Russia under former president Barack Obama, said that Pence's tough-on-Russia message will be "welcome" in each of the countries he's visiting — but may disguise a deeper uncertainty about what the Trump administration's true policy is toward Moscow.

"It will be easy for him to have positive bilateral meetings when he goes there," McFaul said. "But of course he has a very convoluted message on what they're doing on Russia."

All three countries have struggled for years with Russian aggression. In 2007, Estonia faced a cyberattack that hobbled dozens of corporate and government websites — an attack for which it blames Russia, though the Kremlin denies the charge. In 2008, Russia invaded Georgia, and

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Montenegro has accused Russian agents of an attempted coup in 2016, aimed at preventing the nation from joining NATO.

"Most certainly all three of these countries have felt the influence — the coercive influence — of Russia on their domestic politics, so from my point of view, that's an interesting and positive set of countries for him to go to, with the caveat that I don't know what their Russia policy is," McFaul said. "I follow it pretty closely, and I could not tell you what the strategy is."

But Sunday afternoon, in the sun-soaked town square, Pence seemed to only have one overarching message — that he and the president are in policy lockstep, and that he is just a humble emissary spreading Trump's greetings abroad.

The vice president stopped to shake hands with a few of the people who had gathered to watch the spectacle, many of them — like Pence — tourists in Estonia. As each individual introduced themselves, Pence often tied their comments back to Trump, telling a man from Paris, "The president was just in Paris for Bastille Day," and telling a couple from Poland, "The president was just in Warsaw."

Then, he ducked into his motorcade and pulled away.

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Pence Delivers Tough Speech on 'Unpredictable' Russia
By Peter Nicholas
31 July 2017
Wall Street Journal

Vice President Mike Pence issued one of the Trump administration's toughest attacks to date on Russia, coming to a nation on Russia's border to warn against aggression from the "unpredictable neighbor to the east."

Mr. Pence said Monday that President Donald Trump would sign a bill passed by Congress that imposes new sanctions on Russia, despite earlier reservations from the White House and a promise from Moscow to expel hundreds of U.S. diplomats in return.

Mr. Pence said the Russia must be held accountable for its actions, saying the U.S. wouldn't lift sanctions until it sees as a reversal of "the actions that caused the sanctions in the first place."

"At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe one against another," he said.

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Mr. Pence is in the midst of a three-day overseas trip that includes stops in two other countries that Moscow has seen as its traditional sphere of influence: the former Soviet state of Georgia and the Balkan state of Montenegro. His repeated message is that the U.S. won't abandon allies living in Russia's shadow.

The vice president delivered his remarks outside Estonia's defense headquarters, surrounded by symbols of military resolve. Flanking him were armored tanks and standing in front of the stage were hundreds of U.S., British, French and Estonian troops, hands clasped behind their backs.

Moscow has accused the U.S. of threatening Russia by pushing for the expansion of NATO up to its borders through the admittance of the Baltic states and the inclusion of Ukraine and Georgia.

Before the speech, Mr. Pence and the presidents of the three Baltic states, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, received a private military briefing that opened with an officer referencing the "eastern flank of NATO."

Mr. Pence praised Estonia for being one of just five in the NATO alliance to devote 2% of its gross domestic product to defense. The country of 1.3 million has pushed for more U.S. air cover for the region, but NATO officials say its 183-mile border with Russia would be hard to defend against a determined Russian assault. A Rand Corp. study last year showed that Russia could beat back NATO forces reach the outskirts of Tallinn, the capital, in just a few days.

In his 2016 presidential campaign, Mr. Trump often spoke of more cooperative dealings with Russia, and described NATO as obsolete. But he has since toughened his line on Russia, and Mr. Pence's remarks signaled again that the U.S. supported NATO's common-defense provision, known as Article 5.

"The United States rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation or malign influence in the Baltic States or against any of our treaty allies—and under President Donald Trump, the United States of America will stand firmly behind our (NATO) Article 5 pledge of mutual defense—and the presence of U.S. Armed Forces here today proves it," Mr. Pence said.

Mr. Trump in recent months has described relations with Russia at an all-time low point. After insisting he didn't believe Russia interfered in the 2016 presidential race, he has said Russia was "probably" involved, though he has also said China and other actors could have been. Russia has denied interfering in the election.

Mr. Pence, talking to reporters during a visit to Old Town Square, said that Mr. Trump's feelings on the matter are clear.

"The president has confirmed repeatedly that we believe Russia did meddle in U.S. elections." Mr. Pence said. "I think he has also said it could have been other actors as well. But he's confirmed his belief and our intelligence that Russia was involved in meddling in U.S. elections."

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Having chided Russia for its actions, Mr. Pence held open the possibility of a thaw. "President Trump has made it clear: America is open to a better relationship with Russia," he said.

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The Latest: US VP Wants Better Relations With Russia
31 July 2017
Associated Press

The Latest on U.S-Russian tensions (all times local):

2:50 p.m.

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence says that despite what the State Department described as "a regrettable and uncalled-for act" when the Kremlin ordered the U.S. to cut embassy and consulate staff in Russia, America wants to improve relations with Moscow.

Pence told reporters during a visit to Estonia that "we hope for better days, and better relations with Russia."

Speaking to the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania — all former Soviet republics bordering Russia — he said Monday that "the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, the security of our allies, and the security of freedom-loving nations around the world."

Pence was speaking on the first leg of a European tour that continues to Georgia and Montenegro.

On Sunday, Russian President Vladimir Putin said the U.S. would have to cut 755 of its embassy and consulate staff in Russia — a sweeping reduction that he described as a response to new U.S. sanctions.

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1:10 p.m.

The Kremlin says Washington needs to show "political will" for Russia-U.S. relations to recover.

President Vladimir Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said Monday that it will take time for the U.S. to rid itself of what he called "political schizophrenia." He added that Russia remains interested in constructive cooperation with the U.S.

On Sunday, Putin said the U.S. would have to cut 755 of its embassy and consulate staff in Russia — a sweeping reduction which he described as a response to new U.S. sanctions. The Russian Foreign

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Ministry also announced closing down a U.S. recreational retreat on the outskirts of Moscow as well as warehouse facilities.

Moscow's move showed that its earlier hopes for an improvement in Russia-U.S. ties after Donald Trump's victory in the U.S. presidential election have withered.

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12 noon

Russian President Vladimir Putin has demanded that United States cut its embassy and consulate staff in Russia by 755 people, heightening tensions between Washington and Moscow three days after the U.S. Congress approved sanctions against Russia.

The U.S. State Department called Putin's move "a regrettable and uncalled-for act."

The announcement Sunday also came hours after U.S. Vice President Mike Pence landed in Estonia, which borders Russia, for talks with the country that holds the rotating European Union presidency.

Russian's Foreign Ministry on Friday first ordered a reduction by Sept. 1 in U.S. diplomatic personnel in Russia to 455 people in response to a new package of American sanctions.

The sanctions seek to punish Moscow for meddling in the 2016 U.S. election and for its aggression in Ukraine and Syria.

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Pence: We will 'hold Russia accountable for its actions'
By Louis Nelson
31 July 2017
Politico

Amid a fresh wave of sanctions and renewed tension between the United States and Russia, Vice President Mike Pence reassured NATO's Baltic member states that the U.S. stands firmly behind its mutual-defense commitment in the face of stepped-up aggression from Moscow.

"The United States stands with the nations and people of the Baltic States — and we always will. We stand with our NATO allies in our commitment to your security," Pence said Monday in remarks at the headquarters of Estonia's defense forces. "Today we stand where East meets West — on a great frontier of freedom. No threat looms larger in the Baltic States than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east."

Pence's remarks came before members of the U.S., French, British and Estonian militaries and followed a meeting between the vice president and the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

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Pence offered optimism that the U.S.-Russia relationship might improve but said that any warming would come with a shift in Moscow's behavior. The vice president reaffirmed President Donald Trump's commitment to signing sanction legislation targeting Russia passed overwhelmingly last week by Congress.

In response to the forthcoming sanctions measure, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the U.S. to reduce the number of diplomats stationed in Russia by more than 700. The dueling diplomatic maneuvers marked a new low in already frosty relations for the former Cold War rivals.

Trump's presidency brought with it the possibility of improved relations with Russia after the president spent much of the 2016 campaign speaking warmly of Putin and expressing optimism that he would be able to build a strong relationship with the Kremlin. Instead, relations have worsened amid investigations into Russia's efforts to interfere in last year's election, continued Russian military activity in Ukraine as well as Moscow's support for Syrian dictator Bashar Assad.

Trump, too, has shifted his rhetoric in regards to Russia, drawing a relatively tougher line even if some critics would prefer him to take an even more aggressive approach. And after characterizing NATO as "obsolete" and questioning the U.S.'s willingness to comply with the treaty's all-for-one, one-for-all defense agreement, Trump has more recently reaffirmed his nation's commitment while also urging member states to increase their defense spending.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States will continue to hold Russia accountable for its actions — and we call on our European allies and friends to do the same," Pence said Monday in Estonia. "President Trump has made it clear: America is open to a better relationship. But the president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia — a better relationship, and the lifting of sanctions, will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place."

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Pence: Administration policy is 'America first,' not 'America alone'
By Julia Manchester
31 July 2017
Hill

Vice President Mike Pence looked to reassure NATO allies on his trip to Eastern Europe on Sunday, saying President Trump's "America first" policies are not meant to isolate U.S. allies.

"President Trump sent me to eastern Europe with a very simple message, that is America first doesn't mean America alone," Pence said in an interview with Fox News during a stop in Tallinn, Estonia.

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"Our message to the Baltic states, my message when we visit Georgia and Montenegro will be the same. To our allies in Eastern Europe, we are with you, we stand with you on behalf of freedom," he continued.

Pence's visit comes as tensions between NATO member states and Russia continue to rise. He arrived in Estonia on Sunday to showcase support for NATO allies in the Baltic region and Eastern Europe.

It also comes as Trump prepares to sign legislation that would slap brand new sanctions on Russia.

"The president has made it very clear that Russia's destabilizing activities and support for rogue regimes and its activities in Ukraine are unacceptable. The president made it clear that very soon he will sign sanctions from the Congress to reinforce that," Pence said Sunday.

"But at the same time as we make our intentions clear that we expect Russian behavior to change, the president and I remain very hopeful that we'll see very different behavior from the Russian government," he added.

Russia caught the attention of NATO and its allies earlier this month, when when it sent 2,500 troops to the Latvian and Estonian borders as a part of a military drill in the Pskov region.

It's also at the heart of the election meddling investigations that have expanded to include questions about possible Trump campaign contact with Moscow.

The vice president will also make stops in Montenegro, which became a NATO member earlier this year, and Georgia, which has attempted to join the alliance in the past.

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Vice President Mike Pence: Russian 'Aggression' Makes NATO Necessary
By Eoghan Macquire
31 July 2017
NBC News

The "specter of aggression" from Russia makes a strong and united NATO more important now than at any time since the Soviet Union's collapse, Vice President Mike Pence said Monday.

"Russia seeks to redraw international borders by force, undermine democracies of sovereign nations and divide the free nations of Europe," Pence said after meeting the leaders of the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

The three European countries are now members of NATO but were part of the Soviet Union and still feel the pressure of Russian influence after gaining independence in the early 1990s.

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"A strong and united NATO is more necessary today than at any point since the collapse of communism a quarter-century ago and no threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States of America rejects any attempts to use force, threats, intimidation or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies," he added.

Pence made the comments in the Estonian capital, Tallinn, the first stop on a three-day trip that will also take in Georgia and Montenegro.

Some in the Baltic nations have fretted they could be in Russia's sights after its annexation of Crimea and backing of pro-Moscow separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Although Pence stated that U.S. still wanted to foster "better relations" with Russia, he reiterated that the U.S. would continue to adhere to Article 5 of the alliance's charter — a tenet of collective defense.

President Trump had previously caused concern among NATO members by saying the organization was "obsolete" and declining to promise that America would defend fellow members if they did not up their military spending.

No other president since NATO was founded in 1949 had questioned that principle — until Trump, although he recently expressed support for NATO's Article 5.

Pence also stated that "recent diplomatic action" by Russia will not impact American commitments to the security of its NATO allies.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said Sunday that he was ordering the U.S. to reduce its diplomatic staff in the country by 755.

The move came in the wake of new sanctions voted through by the U.S. Congress last week which aim to punish Moscow for interfering in the 2016 presidential election and for its military aggression in Ukraine and Syria.

"Recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter the commitment of the United States of America to our security, the security of our allies and the security of freedom loving nations around the world," Pence said.

"[The U.S.] stands firmly behind our Article 5 pledge of mutual defense and an attack on one of us is an attack on us all," he added.

Estonian president, Kersti Kaljulaid, said the presence of Pence in Tallinn "underlined the credibility of Article 5."

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President Dalia Grybauskaitė of Lithuania, meanwhile, praised the decision of the U.S. Congress to pass new sanctions against Russia, describing it as a "very good message."

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The Testing Ground for Trump's Russia Policy
By Uri Friedman
30 July 2017
Atlantic

At the moment, U.S.-Russian relations could be thought of as a live experiment in the "Great Man" theory of history, which attributes historical change to the actions of exceptional individuals rather than impersonal forces that transcend any man or woman. If it were up to Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump, it seems, Russia and the United States would be teaming up to defeat terrorism, leaving the bitter days of sanctions and election meddling and proxy wars behind them.

The evidence to date, however, suggests it's mostly not up to the two men. Despite all the speculation about the American president cozying up to the Kremlin, the United States under Trump has repeatedly done the opposite. Yes, Trump has echoed Putin talking points, wavered on clearly committing to defend NATO allies, and ended some U.S. funding for rebels fighting Russia's ally in Syria, President Bashar al-Assad. Yet since Trump took office, the U.S. government has also attacked Assad's forces, admitted another country to the NATO military alliance over Russian objections, and advanced new sanctions to punish Russia for interfering in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign.

Many members of Congress and Trump's own administration, including the president's defense secretary and national-security adviser, consider Russia a U.S. adversary. Many Americans, amid investigations into whether the Trump campaign colluded with the Russian government to undermine Hillary Clinton's candidacy, are suspicious of any White House concession to the Kremlin. And so far, these views, as well as the clashing geopolitical goals of the two world powers, have proven stronger than Trump's desire to pursue friendlier relations with Moscow.

In the latest sign of the Russia hawks prevailing over the Russia doves, Vice President Mike Pence departs Sunday for a four-day trip to Eastern Europe, where he'll seek to reassure U.S. allies who see nearby Russia as a threat—and to shore up NATO in particular as a bulwark against that threat.

In Estonia, he'll meet with the leaders of the three Baltic countries, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, who are among NATO's easternmost members. In Georgia, an aspiring NATO member, he'll visit troops involved in a NATO-affiliated military exercise. And in Montenegro, a new NATO member that has never before received such a high-ranking U.S. official, he'll attend a summit of current and potentially future NATO members.

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According to the White House, Pence is making the trip "at the direction of President Trump." And surely there's some truth to that. But the direction of President Trump—especially when it comes to Russia—is far from clear. The countries on Pence's itinerary offer examples for how the administration's perplexing, bifurcated approach to Russia could be poked and prodded in the coming months and years. Small nations such as Estonia, Georgia, and Montenegro, which straddle East and West, literally test the limits of the America-First president's commitment to U.S. allies and to fundamentally changing America's relationship with Russia. And unlike another testing ground for Trump's Russia policy—his response to Russia's alleged intervention in the U.S. election—the one in Eastern Europe will yield results that don't primarily affect Americans. It isn't all about "us."

It's also very much about Estonians and Georgians and Montenegrins: The vice president is visiting a region that is "somewhere in between the EU and NATO and Russia," Vesko Garcevic, a former Montenegrin ambassador to NATO, told me. "Therefore, for Russia, this is really a battleground—a place where Russia can influence countries."

Or consider the view from Moscow: "The Baltic states right now are seen as a U.S./NATO foothold close to Russia's main [power] centers; Georgia is a U.S. ally in the Caucasus and the Black Sea region, a sensitive area in security terms," Dmitri Trenin, the director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, wrote in an email. As the Kremlin sees it, Pence "will be visiting the new U.S. sphere of influence. Russian conventional thinking maintains that the U.S. is supporting the Balts, Georgians, and Ukrainians not because they are democratic or strive for democracy but because they are vehemently anti-Russian and are only too happy to lease their territory to the Pentagon, CIA, et al."

In each country that Pence is visiting, the perceived threat from Russia looks different. In Georgia, which fought a war with neighboring Russia in 2008 that left two Georgian breakaway regions in de facto Russian control, there are fears that the Kremlin could do what it did in Ukraine in 2014: support separatists and seize control of just enough territory to keep the country in Russia's sphere of influence and out of the West's. Moscow currently seems content to nibble around the edges of Georgian territory, in what Georgian officials have condemned as "creeping occupation."

In Montenegro, the threat is more political than military. The former Yugoslav republic joined NATO in June despite Russian vows to retaliate against its onetime ally for taking a "hostile course"—one that would cut the Russian navy off from the Adriatic Sea and reduce Russia's sway in the Balkans. And several Serbian and Russian nationals will soon go on trial in Montenegro for allegedly planning a coup last fall that would have overthrown the nation's pro-West government, brought the pro-Russia opposition to power, and thwarted Montenegro's bid to become part of NATO and eventually the European Union. Montenegrin authorities claim the Russian government was involved in the plot, which the Kremlin denies. Montenegro is a young, fragile democracy, Garcevic observed, and Russia has exploited its "democratic deficiencies" to "gain greater geopolitical influence in the region."

In Estonia, a former Soviet republic that is now a thriving democracy ensconced in NATO and the EU, the main concern is Russia manipulating Estonian politics and policy by, for instance, launching cyberattacks, tampering with energy supplies, engaging in information warfare, or carrying out

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limited military provocations. The present preoccupation involves Russia's plans to stage large-scale military drills, known as Zapad ("West"), in Belarus this fall, ahead of which NATO has rotated troops through the Baltics and Poland. Baltic leaders are now increasing their defense budgets—already among NATO's most robust—and asking the alliance to permanently deploy anti-aircraft weapons in their countries as further deterrents against Russian aggression.

The wide open question, however, is the extent to which Pence's reassurance tour can really reassure these countries.

"People here, politicians, are puzzled with the new administration's position toward Russia," said Garcevic. There are moments when that position "seems to be very friendly and forthcoming to Putin," which suggests the United States is "turning its back to the Balkans," he explained, and other moments when it appears to be a "more traditional American approach" of fully supporting NATO and America's European alliances.

"Sometimes it seems like an unguided missile," Garcevic mused. "You don't know what's going to happen next."

Since Montenegrin officials "are interested in having good relations with the U.S.," they try to "minimize and downplay, water down, what President Trump says, particularly in his tweets," Garcevic added. But when I presented him with a scenario—Pence tells the Montenegrin government everything it wants to hear, only for Trump to complain about NATO on Twitter a couple days later—Garcevic acknowledged the limits of this approach. "If Trump says this, this would be like a cold shower," he responded. "This will cast a shadow over what I'm assuming the vice president will do in the Balkans."

I found Toomas Hendrik Ilves, who left office as Estonia's president shortly before Trump was elected, similarly mystified. "There will be cyber cooperation [between the U.S. and Russia], there won't be cyber cooperation, now there is cyber cooperation," he said. You have Trump and his supporters "trying to dream up some kind of conspiracy on the part of Ukraine against Trump and then you have [Trump's Ukraine envoy] Kurt Volker saying ... there are more Russian tanks in Ukraine than there are tanks in Western Europe."

"Were I to be in office right now, the concern would be trying to [determine] what is exactly the [U.S.] policy that we're going to have to count on," Ilves told me. So, I asked, how would he describe that policy?

He laughed. "I don't know. I don't know. I don't think anyone really does."

It's wrong to picture Estonian leaders panicking, Ilves said, but they're probably confused. "How do we proceed?" he asked. "Do we spend more money on [defense]? Do we start pushing for something in the European Union? Do we want NATO to have a shift in focus?"

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It used to be that "when the [American] president says something, it becomes policy," noted Ilves, who served as Estonia's president for 10 years, spanning the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Now he's unsure, especially when it comes to Trump's tweets. "I think that they don't reflect policy," he said.

Trenin, for his part, dismissed the idea behind much of the unease in Eastern European capitals: that Russia is poised to act aggressively against another country in its neighborhood, as it did in Ukraine. The worry is based on the assumption that Russia has some inherent desire to "expand, invade, [and] subjugate others," Trenin argued, and that assumption is mistaken. "From the Kremlin's standpoint, Russia's intervention in Ukraine [after a revolution overthrew Ukraine's pro-Russia President Viktor Yanukovych] was a defensive move. The importance of Ukraine to Russia's security and the Russian psyche can hardly be overestimated."

There "is only one Ukraine," Trenin added.

Nearby countries such as the Baltic nations will remain fearful of Russia, Trenin conceded, but those fears have less to do with Russia itself than with the West, whose leaders failed to protect them during the World War II era. (The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, a 1939 agreement in which Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union secretly staked out spheres of influence in the Baltics and elsewhere in the region, is "the big national scar" for Estonia and the other plundered countries, Ilves told me. From the Estonian perspective, great powers made a deal "about you," he explained. This left a legacy of "paranoia" that "is always a subcurrent" of the public's thinking on Russia-related matters.)

"In 1939-40, Britain and France did not much help [these countries] against the Nazis," Trenin wrote to me. "Now they are not sure whether the United States would defend them against a nuclear superpower. During the Cold War, the unanswered question was whether Washington would REALLY risk losing Chicago for Hamburg. Would it do so now for Tallinn? Since there can be no clear answer, there will always be fears"—whether Donald Trump is in office or not.

As for the Trump administration's contradictory Russia policy, and the latest move in Congress to impose additional sanctions on Russia in legislation that also slaps sanctions on Iran and North Korea, Trenin had this to say: "I think the Kremlin views the U.S. as a dysfunctional polity, with its political class at war with itself and its society deeply divided along cultural fault lines. Under these circumstances one hardly expects a consistent policy."

"The president has to bow to the prevailing anti-Russian consensus in the policy establishment," he continued. "The new sanctions bill, which puts Russia into the same category of U.S. worst enemies as Iran and North Korea, is a very candid statement that virtually nothing positive can be achieved between the U.S. and Russia for a long time to come," despite the hopes of a U.S.-Russian rapprochement that initially followed Trump's election.

"Bad as they are now, U.S.-Russian relations continue to get worse, edging ever closer to a kinetic collision between their armed forces somewhere: in Syria, over the Baltic and Black Seas, or Ukraine," Trenin warned. Putin's decision this week to retaliate against America's retaliation for

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Russian interference in the 2016 election, which included the seizure of U.S. diplomatic properties and a demand that the United States cut its diplomatic staff in the country, "will usher in a new and harsher round of rivalry" between the two countries, he predicted. On Sunday, Mike Pence wades into the territory where that rivalry is fiercest.

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VP Pence: Attack on 1 NATO ally is attack on all
By Jari Tanner
31 July 2017
Associated Press

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence on Monday strongly pledged America's commitment to protecting NATO allies against attacks, including the Baltic states, which have anxiously watched a growing Russian military presence in the region.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States stands firmly behind our Article 5 pledge of mutual defense — an attack on one of us is an attack on us all," Pence told reporters after meeting with the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the Estonian capital of Tallinn.

Mutual defense is a vital issue for the three small former Soviet states that border Russia, which were all occupied for nearly five decades by Soviet troops before regaining their independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The United States never recognized the claim by Soviet leader Josef Stalin on the three countries — which have a combined population of 6 million — allowing Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to maintain independent diplomatic missions and have their national flags stored at the State Department throughout the occupation.

Saying that Trump "knows security is the foundation of our prosperity," Pence said America and the Baltic countries would seek new ways to increase prosperity by increasing two-way trade that currently amounts to $3.5 billion and by increasing their mutual investments.

Earlier, he met Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid, Latvian President Raimonds Vejonis and Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaite at the baroque 18th-century Kadriorg Palace, which was built by the Russian Emperor Peter the Great.

Energy is one way that Washington is seeking to tighten its commercial ties with the Baltic countries. It closed a deal in June to sell liquefied natural gas (LNG) directly from the United States to the region.

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A Lithuanian state-owned gas trading company will receive the first delivery of U.S. imported LNG in August — something that Pence said will "benefit not only our prosperity, but regional security. And I am confident that this deal will only be the first of many."

Pence said he and Trump were pleased with the deal that will help the Baltic states to reduce their reliance on Russian gas.

Later Monday, Pence met with NATO troops from Britain, France and the United States that are stationed in Estonia. The alliance has deployed some 4,000 troops and military hardware in the three Baltic states and Poland to counter Russia's presence in the Baltic Sea region.

Before departing for Georgia, Pence took shovel and planted an English oak outside the headquarters of the Estonian defense forces together with the leaders of Latvia and Lithuania.

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Sunday ordered the U.S. to cut its embassy and consulate staff in Russia by 755 people. On Monday, Pence said America wants to improve bilateral relations with Russia "despite the recent diplomatic action by Moscow."

"We hope for better days and better relations with Russia," Pence told reporters.

Yet Russia's upcoming Zapad 2017 military exercises with 13,000 troops near the Baltic states' borders in September may further strain relations.

Grybauskaite told Lithuanian national radio on Monday that the U.S. would double the number of military jets and increase American troops on her country's soil during the Russian drills to signal that Washington is monitoring the Baltics situation closely.

Estonia — which currently holds the rotating presidency of the 28-nation European Union — is the first leg of Pence's European tour. The U.S. vice president flew later Monday to Georgia, another former Soviet republic, and will also visit new NATO member Montenegro, two countries facing strong pressure from Russia.

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Mike Pence Wants Sanctions to Change Russia's 'Behavior' as Putin Orders Expulsion of Hundreds of U.S. Diplomatic Staff
By Harriet Sinclair
31 July 2017
Newsweek

Vice President Mike Pence said he hopes the decision to place sanctions on Russia will prompt "different behavior" from Moscow, as President Vladimir Putin announced the U.S. would have to cut 755 diplomatic staff from Russia.

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After the White House on Friday confirmed the sanctions on Russia, Putin responded by announcing the cuts, but Pence appears optimistic about the future relationship between the two countries.

Speaking from his European tour on Sunday, Pence said he hoped the sanctions would prompt Moscow to reconsider its position on a number of issues, including North Korea.

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"The President and I remain very hopeful that we'll see different behavior by the Russian government, with regard to Ukraine, with regard to supporting rogue regimes in Iran and North Korea," Pence said in comments reported by Fox News.

"We continue to believe that if Russia will change its behavior, our relationship can change for the good and improve for the interests in both of our countries and the interest of peace and stability in this region and around the world," he said.

Pence also took the opportunity to stress that President Trump does accept the intelligence community's conclusion that Russia attempted to "meddle" in the U.S. election, despite the president previously making contradictory statements on the topic.

"The President has confirmed repeatedly that we believe Russia did meddle in U.S. elections," Pence told Fox News.

"I think he has also said it could have been other actors as well. But he's confirmed his belief and our intelligence that Russia was involved in meddling in US elections and it's part of what inspired the bipartisan action in the Congress to codify the sanctions that our administration has been implementing against Russia and will continue to advance that," he added.

But any U.S. hopes that sanctions would prompt any cooperation from Moscow appear to have been dashed after Putin announced the U.S. would lose diplomatic staff in Russia, and warned about further retaliation over the sanctions.

"We were waiting for quite a long time that maybe something would change for the better, were holding out hope that the situation would change somehow. But it appears that even if it changes someday it will not change soon," Putin said in comments carried by Russian state media.

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Pence pressures China on North Korea, talks Russia sanctions, election meddling
By Deena Zaru
30 July 2017
CNN (Excerpt)

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Pence's visit to Estonia is the first leg of an Eastern European trip that will also take him to Georgia and Montenegro to show US support for them and NATO in the face of what the administration has called Russia's destabilizing activities in Ukraine and elsewhere and its efforts to undermine the alliance. The trip comes amid rising tensions between the US and Russia over a new sanctions bill that easily cleared Congress last week and that the White House says Trump is expected to sign.

Passage of the bill prompted Russia to retaliate by cutting US diplomatic missions by 755 people, which Moscow announced Friday -- an in-kind response to penalties that would be codified by the legislation, including the ejection of Russian diplomatic staff and closure of two Russian compounds in the US, for its alleged meddling in last year's election and aggression in Ukraine.

"We waited a long time for things to perhaps change for the better," Russian state media quoted Russian President Vladimir Putin as saying Sunday. "We had such hope that the situation would change, but judging by the situation that will not be soon."

On taking retaliatory measures, Putin said, "I thought it was time for us to show that we will not leave this without an answer. As for other possible measures, or whether it is a lot or not, this is quite sensible from the point of view of the work of the diplomatic department. ..."

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov threatened further retaliation against the US on Sunday morning, saying that if that US goes through with the sanctions, "we will respond in kind," but he would not specify how Russia plans to respond.

Pence said Sunday that he hopes that slapping new sanctions on Russia would lead Russia to change its behavior with regard to Ukraine and end its support for Iran and North Korea.

"The President and I remain very hopeful that we'll see different behavior by the Russian government, with regard to Ukraine, with regard to supporting rogue regimes in Iran and North Korea," Pence said. "We continue to believe that if Russia will change its behavior, our relationship can change for the good and improve for the interests in both of our countries and the interest of peace and stability in this region and around the world."

Pressed on how to square the purpose of his trip with Trump's position on Russia's alleged efforts to influence last year's election, Pence defended the President. He insisted Trump is in agreement with US intelligence services on Russian meddling despite newly appointed White House communications director Anthony Scaramucci telling CNN last week that Trump is still unsure.

"The President has confirmed repeatedly that we believe Russia did meddle in US elections," Pence said. "I think he has also said it could have been other actors as well. But he's confirmed his belief and our intelligence that Russia was involved in meddling in US elections and it's part of what inspired

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the bipartisan action in the Congress to codify the sanctions that our administration has been implementing against Russia and will continue to advance that."

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Pence vows U.S. resistance to Russia during Estonia visit
By S.A. Miller
31 July 2017
Washington Times

Vice President Mike Pence on a visit to Estonia pledged Monday unwavering support of NATO allies and steadfast resistance to Russia aggression, especially in Baltic states that have been feeling intense pressure from Moscow.

Mr. Pence said he was in Eastern Europe to deliver a message from President Trump that the "the United States of America is with you."

"At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another," Mr. Pence said in a speech after meeting with the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuiana.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States of America rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation, or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies," he said.

The tough talk came amid mounting tension between Washington and Moscow. Russian President Vladimir Putin expelling 755 U.S. diplomats in retaliation for new sanctions legislation Mr. Trump is expected to sign.

"To be clear: We hope for better days, and better relations with Russia, recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, the security of our allies, and the security of freedom-loving nations around the world," Mr. Pence said.

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Pence's tricky trip has Russia hanging over it
By Andrew Hammond
30 July 2017
Gulf News (Opinion)

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US Vice-President Mike Pence started an important Eastern European tour yesterday that will last until tomorrow. The visit, whose subtext is that of the future of United States-Russia relations under US President Donald Trump, will see stops in Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro, and comes in the wake of the US Senate and House of Representatives' landmark votes to impose new sanctions on Moscow, which has already drawn Russian retaliation.

Key agenda items in Pence's tricky trip include a visit to see US and Georgian troops participating in the Noble Partner Nato-related exercise, which also features troops from the United Kingdom, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Armenia, and Slovenia. And the US vice-president will also participate, in Montenegro, with leaders across the Western Balkans in the Adriatic Charter Summit.

The immediate backdrop for Pence's visit is the continuing controversy over Russia and the Trump team. The US Senate and House voted overwhelmingly in recent days to impose sanctions on Moscow, and Trump now has to sign it into law or, in what would be a remarkable move, veto it. The legislation, whose restrictions would include on oil-and-gas projects in Russia, has been condemned by the country's Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergei Ryabkov, who asserts it would plant a "dangerous mine" under bilateral relations that could explode in coming months. Already, Moscow has retaliated to the congressional votes by ordering US diplomatic staff out of Russia and seizing two US diplomatic properties in the country.

The bill, which would also impose sanctions on North Korea and Iran, puts Trump in an awkward position, given his apparent pro-Moscow leanings. The president, who already has congressional and FBI investigations underway into his team's alleged ties with Russia, has only vowed at this stage to "study" the legislation, but is under strong pressure to sign it into law.

Trump's decision on this issue will be watched closely, not just in Moscow, but across Eastern Europe where Pence is visiting. Part of the nervousness that key US allies in Europe have about the Trump's positioning on Russia is what it potentially may mean for US commitments in the region and Nato. Trump has flip-flopped on this issue, describing the military alliance last year as "obsolete", and then this year as "not obsolete", sowing the seeds of confusion over what his true beliefs are.

Already, uncertainty over Trump's Nato policy is spurring the European Union to seek to reverse around a decade of defence spending cuts, totalling around 10 per cent in real terms. Moreover, a new European Defence Action Plan was agreed earlier this year by the EU, which will see greater continental military cooperation too.

For Trump, the key strategic question now on Russia is whether recent developments have destroyed the window of opportunity that may have existed for a warming of relations between Washington and Moscow. The US president has previously given multiple indications that he believes Russia is not a serious threat to America, hinting in January that he could even drop existing economic sanctions if the country "is helpful". Specifically, he appears to believe there were multiple common interests over issues such as preventing Iran from securing nuclear weapons, and combating terrorism.

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Trump's proposed repositioning of relations with Russia now looks, at the least, to have been put on ice. Here it is not only the fact that any new US sanctions will make relations frostier, but also that the Trump team is under significant pressure over the congressional and FBI investigations, and this issue has already claimed the scalp of national security adviser Michael Flynn.

'Complicit' or 'incompetent'

Should Trump be forced to sign the sanctions legislation, it will reassure the allies in Eastern Europe that Pence is visiting. However, it will complicate US foreign policy in other theatres, including potentially the Middle East, where Russian relations are relevant.

Already this year, there were tensions between Moscow and Washington here, which saw US missile strikes targeted at Syria, following an earlier poison gas attack on citizens in a rebel-held town allegedly by the Damascus regime, which killed at least 80 people, including around two dozen children. Russia — highly implausibly, given the nature of the chemicals involved — asserted that they were released inadvertently when Syrian planes struck a terrorist laboratory.

The ratcheting up of tensions has widened differences between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin over the future of Syrian President Bashar Al Assad after they had seemed to be getting closer to an agreement to potentially bring an end to Syria's six-year civil war that has left half a million people dead and triggered floods of refugees, while letting Al Assad stay in power. Rhetorically, at least, Trump appeared to move away from the latter and called for the Syrian president to be ousted, and US Ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, said that the Trump administration was ready to take further military steps in the country if needed.

US Defence Secretary James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson were also forceful in their criticism of Moscow. For instance, Tillerson said that "either Russia has been complicit or simply incompetent" in Syria, referring to Moscow's apparent inability to prevent the Al Assad regime from using chemical weapons, despite a 2013 agreement under which Russia was a guarantor, to remove these stockpiles from the country.

The spike in Washington-Moscow tensions over Syria even saw Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev saying the two countries were "one step away from war" and had "totally ruined" relations. Signs of rising tensions include Moscow's suspension of an agreement with Washington to share communications about US and Russian aircraft conducting missions over Syria. The Admiral Grigorovich, the frigate warship was dispatched from Crimea to the Syrian port of Tartus.

Taken overall, as Pence undertakes his trip to reassure Eastern European allies, Trump now finds himself in a big bind over Russia. Despite his desire for warming of relations between Washington and Moscow, the window of opportunity for that may be narrowing significantly and this could have implications across the world, including in Syria.

(Andrew Hammond is an Associate at LSE IDEAS at the London School of Economics.)

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Vice President Pence's Trip: An Opportunity to Advance U.S. Leadership in Europe
By Luke Coffey, Daniel Kochis
20 July 2017
Heritage Foundation (Opinion)

From July 30 to August 2, Vice President Mike Pence will travel to Estonia, Georgia, and Montenegro. This trip is the perfect follow-up to President Donald Trump's visit to Poland for the "Three Seas" conference—a meeting focused on the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic Seas—in early July. Vice President Pence should use his trip to affirm U.S. commitment to these three important countries, and to strengthen U.S. focus on the key regions in which they reside. While in Europe, it is important for the Vice President to underscore U.S. commitment to NATO, Baltic security, and U.S. engagement in the Balkans and the Black Sea region, while taking a hard line on Russian aggression.

The Baltic Sea

In Estonia, Vice President Pence will meet with Estonian Prime Minister Jüri Ratas as well as the three Baltic leaders, President Kersti Kaljulaid of Estonia, President Raimonds Vējonis of Latvia, and President Dalia Grybauskaitė of Lithuania.

The U.S. has a long history of championing the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Baltic states dating back to the interwar period of the 1920s. After regaining their independence from Russia in the early 1990s, the Baltic states have been staunch supporters of the transatlantic relationship.

Estonia is the regional leader in defense matters and is currently one of only five NATO countries that spend the required 2 percent of gross domestic product on defense. In terms of economic freedom, the Baltic region is a beacon of hope for Europe and the rest of the world. The region is proof that pursuing policies of economic liberalization and growth works. Estonia ranks first in the eurozone, and sixth in the world, in the 2017 Index of Economic Freedom, published by The Heritage Foundation.

The Baltic states face an existential threat from Russia, and are concerned about the upcoming Russian Zapad 17 exercises. In addition to Zapad, the Vice President's arrival will come just as Russia and China will have wrapped up joint exercises in the Baltic Sea.

The keystone of NATO's new deterrence measures are multinational battalions stationed in each of the Baltic countries and Poland to deter Russian aggression. The Alliance has also increased the number of aircraft taking part in Baltic Air Policing. While in Estonia, Vice President Pence should reiterate U.S. commitment to the transatlantic alliance, NATO, and the Article V security guarantee.

The Black Sea

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In Georgia, the Vice President will meet with President Giorgi Margvelashvili and Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili. In addition, he will visit U.S. and Georgian troops participating in the Noble Partner exercise. Vice President Pence's visit provides a perfect opportunity to strengthen the bilateral relationship with Tbilisi.

Georgia is a staunch ally of the United States. Since regaining its independence in 1991, successive Georgian governments have pursued an agenda of liberalizing the economy, cutting bureaucracy, fighting corruption, and embracing democracy—and in doing so, Georgia and its people have shown a firm and unwavering commitment to the transatlantic community.

Georgia is located in a dangerous and important geopolitical neighborhood for NATO. After the Russian invasion in 2008 and the subsequent Russian occupation of 20 percent of Georgia's territory, Georgia has transformed its military and has been steadfast in its support of overseas security operations. Georgia has contributed thousands of troops to Afghanistan (with 870 currently serving there) and Iraq, and hundreds of peacekeepers to the Balkans and in the Central African Republic.

The Adriatic Sea

In Podgorica, Montenegro, the Vice President will meet with Montenegrin President Filip Vujanović and Prime Minister Duško Marković. Vice President Pence will also participate with leaders from across the western Balkans in an Adriatic Charter Summit. Montenegro is the newest member of NATO, and an important U.S. ally in a region that is becoming increasingly unstable due to malign Russian influence, poor economic opportunities, and the rise of Islamist extremism.

The Balkans is home to unfinished business in Europe. In addition to historic, ethnic, religious, and cultural tensions, the Balkans are caught between Russia's destabilizing influence and pockets of Islamist extremism in the region. Montenegro is a poignant example.

Over the past seven years, Montenegro—a U.S. ally—has reformed itself in preparation for NATO membership. Last year, Russia, not happy with Montenegro's decision to join NATO, was suspected of having been behind a failed plot to break into parliament on election day, assassinate the former prime minister, and install a pro-Russian government in Podgorica, the nation's capital.

The U.S. has invested heavily in the Balkans since the end of the Cold War. Tens of thousands of U.S. service members have served in the Balkans, and billions of dollars in aid has been spent there, all in the hope of creating a secure and prosperous region that will someday be part of the transatlantic community. The Administration should articulate why the Balkan region remains important to the United States, and set out a clear policy to counter threats to the region.

The Way Forward

This trip offers a great opportunity to deepen three very important bilateral relations. To make this visit a success, Vice President Pence should:

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Reiterate America's commitment to NATO's Article V. The Vice President should echo President Trump's commitment made in Warsaw to NATO's Article V. The ultimate guarantor of security and stability in the Baltic region is the knowledge that the U.S. stands firmly by its mutual defense commitments as a member of NATO.

Make the case for a permanent military presence in the Baltic region. The U.S. and NATO need to show an enduring commitment to the region by permanently stationing armed forces in the Baltics and maintaining a robust maritime presence in the region.

Forcefully condemn Russian disinformation. Russia's disinformation measures are especially active in the region. In part, Russia has sought to undermine support for NATO's enhanced forward deployments by propagating false stories of abuse by troops serving in the multinational battalions, such as Canadian, British, or German soldiers. U,S. troops stationed in Poland for NATO's enhanced forward presence there have been targeted by similar Russian disinformation. Russia has also sought to delegitimize the Baltic nations as independent countries. The U.S. should forcefully condemn Russian disinformation and consider becoming a sponsoring nation at the NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence in Riga, the Latvian capital.

Empower global free-market energy policy. The U.S. should work immediately and comprehensively to eliminate remaining barriers to U.S. energy exports.

Push back against Nord Stream II. The Nord Stream II pipeline project that would connect Germany with Russia is neither economically necessary, nor is it geopolitically prudent. Vice President Pence should declare U.S. opposition to the pipeline, which in particular threatens allies in Eastern and Central Europe.

Ensure that the U.S. is clear on Georgia's future NATO membership. Vice President Pence should make it clear that Georgia's successful completion of subsequent Annual National Programs, the close relationship through the NATO–Georgia Commission, and the Substantial NATO–Georgia Package are the true markers of progress that will bring Georgia closer to ultimate membership.

Help the Georgians defend themselves. Georgia has the inherent right to self-defense. The U.S. should sell defensive anti-tank and anti-aircraft weaponry to Georgia.

Refer to the Russian military presence in Georgia as an occupation. During his visit, the Vice President should call the presence of several thousand Russian troops in South Ossetia and Abkhazia what it is: an illegal occupation.

Keep a focus on the Balkans. The Balkan nations are facing increased Russian interference and pressure with the aim of regional destabilization. In addition, the threat from Islamist ideology has not abated. The U.S. should look to take on a larger role within the region, and should seek to collaborate with NATO allies in the region to address growing instability.

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Offer political support for the Southern Gas Corridor project. As Europe seeks alternatives to Russian gas, the Southern Gas Corridor, which in part will run through Georgia and the Balkans, will play an important role.

Keep the door open to further NATO enlargement in the Balkans. NATO has helped promote democracy, stability, and security in the Balkans. It has also been a catalyst for reforms within candidate countries. Montenegro is just the latest example of this. The U.S. should ensure the door remains open to deserving Balkan nations, including Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.
Conclusion

Vice President Pence's trip, during which he will visit allies in the Adriatic, Baltic, and Black Sea regions, dovetails with President Trump's recent trip to Warsaw where he took part in the Three Seas conference. While each region faces threats from Russia, each also presents unique challenges, which demand robust attention. Estonia, Georgia, and Montenegro are important U.S. allies with basic common values. The success of the Trump Administration's policy in Europe will rest in large part on its ability to secure these important regions.

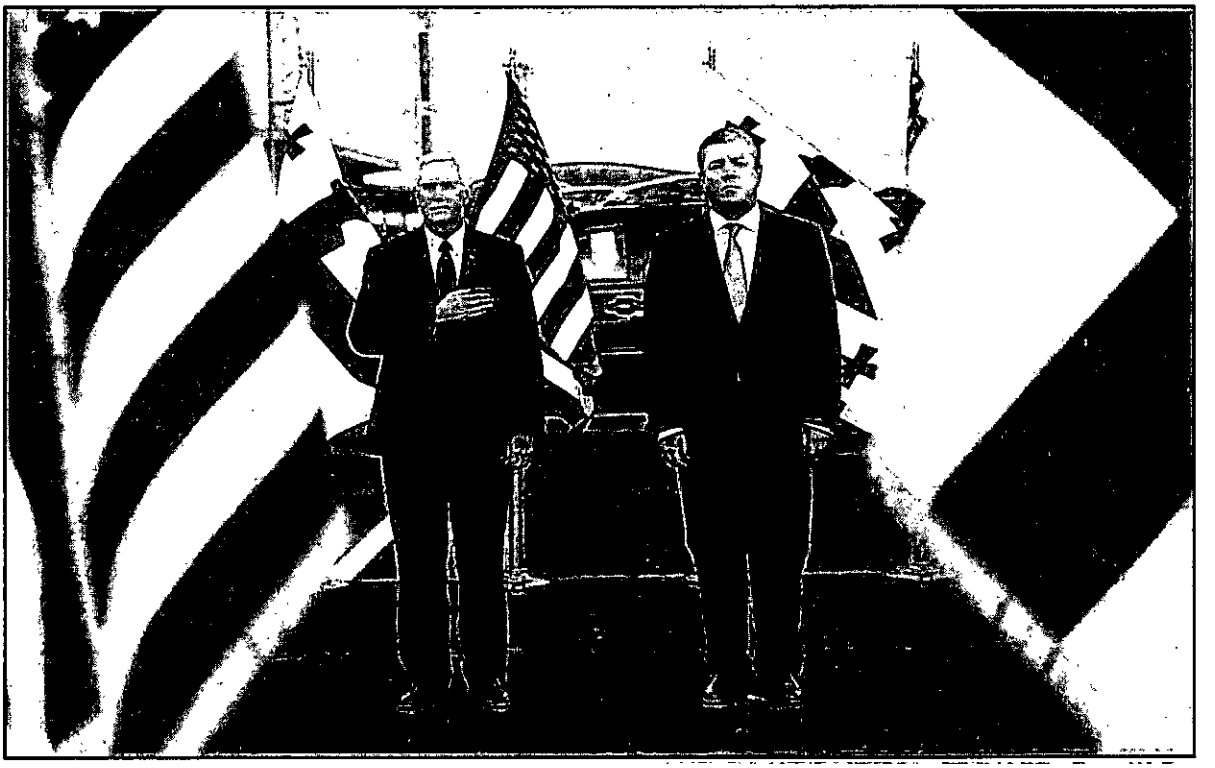
(Luke Coffey is Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation. Daniel Kochis is a Policy Analyst in European Affairs in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, of the Davis Institute)

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Vice President Pence Trip to Georgia Coverage Report for August 1, 2017



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Pence Says U.S. Backs Georgia in NATO Over Russian Objection
By Helena Bedwell
1 August 2017
Bloomberg

Vice President Mike Pence said the U.S. "strongly" supports Georgia's ambition of joining NATO, even as Russia remains hostile to the military alliance expanding its influence in Moscow's former Soviet backyard.

"We see Georgia as a key strategic partner and stand by your territorial integrity and your aspirations to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," Pence said at talks with Prime

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Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, on Tuesday. U.S. President Donald Trump "asked me to extend greetings to you this morning and to say we are with you," Pence said.

The vice president is also attending joint military exercises involving as many as 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops during his visit. The Noble Partner 2017 drills, which also include German, U.K., Turkish, Slovenian, Ukrainian and Armenian forces, are the largest in the Caucasus republic since Georgia fought a brief war with Russia in 2008 over the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Pence arrived in Georgia Monday after delivering a similar message in Estonia to leaders of Baltic nations facing the "specter of aggression" from Russia, which he called the greatest threat to their security as NATO members. Georgia wants to join NATO against opposition from Russia, whose annexation of Crimea and involvement in the conflict in eastern Ukraine has strained ties with the U.S. and Europe the most since the Cold War. Russia accuses NATO of seeking to undermine its security by expanding the alliance's presence near its borders.

Spiraling Tensions

The U.S. is monitoring preparations for major Russian exercises planned on NATO's eastern border amid concerns about the scale of the military buildup, the New York Times reported on Tuesday. Some 13,000 troops are to take part in joint military drills from Sept. 14-20 in Russia and neighboring Belarus, according to the Belarusian Defense Ministry, which said Russia will also send about 280 military vehicles to the Zapad 2017 exercises.

Pence's visits to Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro are taking place amid spiraling tensions with Russia after President Vladimir Putin said the U.S. must slash staff at its diplomatic mission by 755, or nearly two-thirds, in retaliation for new sanctions approved by Congress.

Trump "will sign the Russian sanctions bill soon," Pence said at a news conference later with Kvirikashvili. While the U.S. wants better relations, "Russia has to change its behavior" before this can be achieved, he said.

Kvirikashvili said Georgia's facing "daily provocations" from Russia, which has encroached deeper into its territory in recent weeks by shifting the dividing lines with the breakaway regions established after the war. Russia has stationed thousands of troops in Abkhazia and South Ossetia after recognizing them as independent republics. The international community considers the regions as part of Georgia.

'Important Milestone'

NATO declared at a summit shortly before the 2008 war that Georgia will become a member at some point. While it hasn't agreed to accept Georgia since then, partly out of concern about antagonizing Russia, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said in Tbilisi in September that the alliance is committed to the goal and that "the bonds between NATO and Georgia are stronger than ever."

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Pence's visit "is an important milestone in the bilateral relationship as we work to further strengthen security, economic, and trade cooperation," Kvirikashvili said Monday after the vice president's arrival.

Two-thirds of Georgians support joining NATO while 23 percent are opposed, according to a survey conducted by the Caucasus Resource Research Centers for the National Democratic Institute. The poll of 2,261 respondents was conducted between June 18 and July 9 with a margin of error of no more than 2.2 percentage points.

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Pence Conveys U.S. Support For Georgia In Visit To Tbilisi

1 August 2017
Radio Free Europe



U.S. Vice President Mike Pence conveyed a message of support from U.S. President Donald Trump to Georgian leaders at an official dinner in Tbilisi late on July 31.

The United States stands with Georgia, Pence said, as he toasted the Caucasus nation for fighting for freedom over the centuries, just as America has.

Pence said America hopes that Georgia prospers and becomes a strong country.

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Pence was greeted by thousands of people when he arrived in Tbilisi, where he will meet on August 1 with Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili, President Giorgi Margvelashvili, Patriarch Ilia II, and representatives of the Georgian opposition.

Pence is also planning to attend joint NATO military exercises being conducted in Georgia. About 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the Noble Partner 2017 drills there.

Pence was greeted at the Tbilisi airport by Kvirikashvili, who said that the visit is "an important milestone in the bilateral relationship as we work to further strengthen security, economic, and trade cooperation between our two countries."

"Vice President Pence's visit sends a strong message about the enduring strength of the relationship between Georgia and the United States," Kvirikashvili said in comments released by the Georgian government.

Pence arrived in the Georgian capital from Estonia, where earlier in the day he reaffirmed Washington's solidarity with the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders" and "undermine democracies."

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions, as have Georgia and the third ally on Pence's itinerary: new NATO member Montenegro.

"No threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said. "At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another."

Article 5 Support

Pence said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty -- the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

In Georgia, officials said Pence will highlight U.S. support for the Caucasus nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity before continuing on to Montenegro.

Georgia has seen Russian encroachment on its territory and has expressed hopes of joining the Western military alliance.

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The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

Margvelashvili said on July 27 that Pence's visit will demonstrate that the United States continues to support Georgia in building a stronger military force.

He highlighted the joint military exercises that will include troops from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, and Armenia.

"The vice president's presence here is definitely showing that this is not only about military exercises, but it is also showing unification with our values, with our foreign policy targets, and showing a clear message that we are together," Margvelashvili said.

On the last stop, Pence will welcome NATO's newest member with his stop in Montenegro, whose accession to the alliance in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica, U.S. officials said.

Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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Pence pledges support for Georgia, condemns Russian moves
By Nataliya Vasilyeva
1 August 2017
Associated Press

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence pledged support Tuesday for the former Soviet republic of Georgia, his second stop on a European trip backing nations that feel threatened by Russian aggression.

Russia and Georgia fought a brief war in 2008, which lead to two breakaway Georgian regions, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, declaring independence. Russia has since been supporting the regions both financially and militarily.

The U.S. "strongly condemns Russia's occupation on Georgian soil," Pence said Tuesday at a joint news conference with the Georgian prime minister in Tbilisi, the Georgian capital. "We will reject any claim at any time by any nation that undermines this enduring principle."

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The visit comes a day after Pence met with the presidents of three NATO countries — Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania — in the Estonian capital of Tallinn and pledged that "an attack on one of us is an attack on us all."

Georgia and the three Baltic nations were all occupied for nearly five decades by Soviet troops before regaining their independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Later on Tuesday Pence will inspect troops taking part in joint U.S.-Georgian military exercises.

Pence's European trip comes several days after the U.S. Senate voted last week to approve the new financial sanctions against Moscow. The legislation bars U.S. President Donald Trump from easing or waiving the penalties on Russia unless Congress agrees.

Pence told reporters on Tuesday that Trump would sign a bill on a new package of U.S. sanctions against Russia, adding the package was "improved significantly."

The bill underwent revisions to address concerns voiced by American oil and natural gas companies that sanctions specific to Russia's energy sector could backfire on them to Moscow's benefit. U.S. lawmakers said they also made adjustments so the sanctions on Russia's energy sector didn't undercut the ability of U.S. allies in Europe to get access to oil and gas resources outside of Russia.

Russia on Friday ordered the U.S. Embassy and three U.S. consulates in Russia to drastically cut its personnel there. President Vladimir Putin said on Sunday that means 755 staffers have to go. Russia also ordered to shut down the U.S. Embassy's recreational compound on the outskirts of Moscow. The Russian leader warned that he has more tricks up his sleeve to hurt the U.S., but he voiced hope that he wouldn't need to use them.

Pence indicated the U.S. was willing to improve ties with Russia but for that to happen "Russia has to change its behavior," he said, referring to Russia's support for separatists in eastern Ukraine and for Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Russia is planning Zapad 2017 military exercises with 13,000 troops near the Baltic states' borders in September, a move that may further strain relations.

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During Whirlwind Week in Washington, VP Pence Comforts East European Allies

By Emily Tamkin
1 August 2017
Foreign Policy

Amid chaos in Washington, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence is in Eastern Europe assuring American allies that the United States is committed to protecting them.

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"We are with you. We stand with the people and nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania — and we always will," Pence said at a joint press availability with the Baltic leaders in Tallinn, even as, back home, President Donald Trump has yet to comment on Russian expulsion of U.S. diplomatic staff.

The vice president participated in a listening session on cyber and innovation with the president of Estonia in Tallinn, and travelled on Tuesday to Tbilisi, where he met with the Georgian prime minister for their third substantive meeting since Pence took office.

"We see Georgia as a key strategic partner and stand by your territorial integrity and your aspirations to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," Pence said at a dinner with Prime Minister Kvirikashvili in Tbilisi. At a joint press conference with Georgia's prime minister, Pence noted that Russia occupies one-fifth of Georgian Territory.

Back in Washington, in the meantime, President Trump has yet to comment personally on a bill that Congress passed imposing tougher sanctions on Russia. The White House press secretary said Friday in a statement that Trump would sign the bill.

Speaking in Tbilisi, Pence said the bill would be signed soon.

From Tbilisi, Pence traveled to the newest NATO member, Montenegro. In May at a NATO summit, President Trump appeared to push Montenegro's prime minister aside during a photo session.

Pence's staid tour abroad is in stark contrast to the roller coaster in Washington this week. On Monday, U.S. President Donald Trump lost a communications director who was brought on roughly a week prior; Jared Kushner, his son in law and advisor, told White House interns the Trump team was too disorganized to have colluded with Russia; and the Washington Post reported the president had dictated a misleading message to his son about a meeting with a Russian lawyer.

Trump's is not the first administration to send a vice president abroad in the president's stead, or to develop relations with diplomats and dignitaries from particular countries — former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden was known as Ukraine's man in Washington.

"Vice President Pence's visit sent a clear message about the enduring strength of the relationship between Georgia and the United States," Georgian Ambassador to the United States David Bakradze told Foreign Policy by email. "This is an important milestone in the bilateral relationship."

The embassies of Estonia and Montenegro did not immediately respond to request for comment.

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VP Pence says Russia's stance must change before ties improve
By Margarita Antidze
1 August 2017
Reuters

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence said on Tuesday that relations with Russia would not improve until Moscow changed its stance on Ukraine and withdrew support for "regimes like Iran and Syria and North Korea".

The U.S. Congress voted last week for new sanctions on Russia and, at a news conference in Georgia's capital Tbilisi, Pence said the "lifting of sanctions will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place".

"Russia's destabilizing activities in Ukraine, their support for rogue regimes like Iran and Syria and North Korea ... their posture has to change," he said at a joint news conference with Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili.

Pence said U.S. President Donald Trump would sign the new sanctions on Russia into law this week and said that Trump and Congress were "speaking with a unified voice".

Keeping to previous U.S. administrations' line, Pence also condemned Russia's presence in Georgia.

Moscow, whose annexation of Crimea in 2014 prompted U.S. and EU sanctions, still has troops stationed in Georgia after a 2008 war over the breakaway region of South Ossetia, backing Georgia's Abkhazia, a region also controlled by pro-Russian separatists.

Pence also said the U.S. was still behind Georgia's application to become a member of NATO.

"We'll continue to work closely with this prime minister and the government of Georgia broadly to advance the policies that will facilitate becoming a NATO member," he said.

NATO promised Georgia membership in 2008, and three ex-Soviet Baltic nations - Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania - are already members. Pence has reassured them during this tour that Washington firmly backs NATO's doctrine of collective defense.

In the Estonian capital of Tallinn on Monday, he assured them of U.S. support if they faced aggression from Russia.

Asked about Pence's visit, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said nations had the right to choose their partners.

"The only problem for us, is when this involves the expanding of various alliances and their infrastructure toward our borders. This is a cause of concern for us," Peskov told reporters on a conference call.

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During his visit, Pence attended Georgian-American military exercises, which began in Georgia on Sunday. About 2,800 soldiers from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, Armenia and Georgia are taking part in the maneuvers, which will last for two weeks.

On Wednesday, Pence visits Montenegro, which joined NATO in June. The tiny Balkan nation won praise from Washington for joining despite pressure against the move from Russia.

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In Georgia, Pence says Trump will back toughened sanctions on Russia
By Allen Cone
1 August 2017
UPI

Vice President Mike Pence on Tuesday pledged U.S. support for Georgia, a former Soviet republic, and said President Donald Trump "very soon" will approve stronger sanctions against Russia.

Georgia, which fought a brief war with Russia in 2008, is among Eastern European nations that feel threatened by the Russian regime, which annexed Crimea from Ukraine in 2014. That aggression led to existing U.S. sanctions against the Kremlin, which Congress moved to strengthen last week.

"At this very moment, just 40 miles from where we stand, Russian tanks stand on occupied territory in South Ossetia," Pence said at a joint news conference in Tbilisi Tuesday, the Georgian capital, with Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili. "Today, Russia continues to occupy one-fifth of Georgian territory.

"So to be clear: The United States of America strongly condemns Russia's occupation on Georgia's soil."

On Monday, Pence met with the presidents of three NATO countries -- Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania -- and said "an attack on one of us is an attack on us all."

The three Baltic nations, along with Georgia, were all occupied for nearly five decades by Soviet troops before regaining independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Pence also met U.S. and Georgian troops taking part in a joint military exercise called "Noble Partner".

"America first does not mean America only," Pence said. "We are here to tell our friends in Georgia, we are with you. We stand with you and will stand with you as you pursue membership in NATO."

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Pence said Trump will sign legislation to "strengthen and codify" U.S. sanctions against Russia. The proposal, overwhelmingly approved by the House and Senate, bars Trump from easing or waiving penalties on Russia unless Congress agrees.

Pence said that legislation "improved significantly" when it moved through Congress, and added the sanctions are stronger but are "giving the president of the United States and our State Department the ability and the flexibility to be able to administer American foreign policy as appropriate."

On Sunday, Russian President Vladimir Putin told the United States it must reduce its diplomatic staff by 755 to match the reduction of Russians in the United States.

"As always, our country prefers a constructive relationship with Russia based on cooperation and common interests," Pence said Tuesday. "But the president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia: A better relationship, the lifting of sanctions will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place.

"We hope for better days, and we hope for better relations with Russia, but the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow I can assure will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, to that of our allies, and to freedom-loving nations around the world like Georgia."

Besides working with Georgia "to reduce your vulnerabilities and counter Russian aggression," the vice president said the United States wants to work with the nation "to deepen our ties of commerce."

Pence next visits Montenegro, also a NATO member.

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Trump Will Sign Russia Sanctions Law 'Very Soon,' Pence Says
By Sewell Chan
1 August 2017
New York Times

President Trump will "very soon" sign a law limiting his ability to lift sanctions against Russia, even though he has "concerns" about the measure, Vice President Mike Pence said on Tuesday.

The announcement during a visit to Tbilisi, Georgia, comes as no surprise, because the Trump administration had signaled it would not stand in the law's way. But it nonetheless carries significance: It is the first time that Congress, with both houses controlled by Mr. Trump's fellow Republicans, has imposed its will on the administration on a major policy matter, and the legislation has helped bring relations between Russia and the United States to one of its lowest points since the Cold War.

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At least in terms of diplomatic policy, the bet Russia might have made when, according to American intelligence agencies, it interfered in last year's presidential election in the United States has backfired in spectacular fashion. The legislation was revised, however, to address concerns by American oil and natural gas companies that do business with Russia's energy sector.

Though he was asked by a reporter about the election interference, Mr. Pence did not explicitly address it, reiterating instead the administration's concerns about Russia's "destabilizing activities," including "efforts to support rogue regimes."

In a brief visit to the Georgian capital, Mr. Pence delivered a message of reassurance to Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili. Russia and Georgia, both former republics of the Soviet Union, fought a brief war in August 2008; since then, Russia has continued to occupy the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in violation of international law.

"In a sign of our commitment, very soon, President Trump will sign legislation to strengthen and codify the United States' sanctions against Russia," Mr. Pence said. "As always, our country prefers a constructive relationship with Russia based on cooperation and common interests."

But, Mr. Pence said, the current state of the relationship between the United States and Russia demanded a different approach. "The president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia," he said. "A better relationship, the lifting of sanctions will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place."

On Sunday, in retaliation for the sanctions legislation, President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia ordered the dismissal of 755 employees from the United States diplomatic missions in the country. Most of the employees will be local Russians working in the embassy in Moscow and consulates in three other cities, but diplomats are bracing for what a former ambassador has called "a shock to the system."

Mr. Pence said on Tuesday that Mr. Putin's actions would not sway the United States, echoing a message he delivered on Monday in Estonia, where he reassured leaders of the three Baltic nations — the others are Lithuania and Latvia — of the American commitment to NATO's collective defense clause, known as Article 5.

"We hope for better days, and we hope for better relations with Russia, but the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow, I can assure, will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, to that of our allies and to freedom-loving nations around the world like Georgia," Mr. Pence said.

While in Georgia, Mr. Pence inspected troops taking part in a joint United States-Georgian military exercise, which Mr. Pence called "a visible sign of our commitment to Georgia's sovereignty and to her internationally recognized borders."

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Mr. Pence also responded to reports that the Russian military was preparing to send as many as 100,000 troops to neighboring Belarus, on the eastern edge of NATO territory, at the end of the summer, as part of a show of force.

"The current Russian exercises, which news reports today suggest will move up to 100,000 Russian troops into Belarus, is simply a confirmation of the importance of clarity within the NATO partnership," Mr. Pence said.

He portrayed the legislation on sanctions as "a very clear message that we mean what we say and say what we mean: that Russia's destabilizing activities in Ukraine, their support for rogue regimes like Iran and Syria and North Korea, that their posture has to change."

Mr. Pence also reiterated criticisms that Mr. Trump had frequently made of his predecessor, President Barack Obama. "It's been a lack of clarity and commitment by the United States that's created much of the instability in the world today," he said.

He then referred to the "red line" warning that Mr. Obama made to Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, in 2012 over the use of chemical weapons. Mr. Assad's forces carried out such an attack the next year in a Damascus suburb, largely without repercussions.

"When in the past America had spoken of red lines and not followed through on red lines, many argue that that emboldened others to act in ways that they would not have," Mr. Pence said.

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Pence Reaffirms U.S. Solidarity With Georgia, Denounces Russian 'Aggression'
1 August 2017
Radio Free Europe

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence has reaffirmed Washington's support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity during a visit to Tbilisi and denounced Russia's "aggression" and "occupation" of Georgian territory.

"America stands with Georgia," Pence said on August 1 at a joint press conference with Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili.

"Today, Russia continues to occupy one-fifth of Georgian territory," Pence said. "So, to be clear -- the United States of America strongly condemns Russia's occupation on Georgia's soil."

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

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"The United States supports Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders," Pence added. "And under President Donald Trump, the United States of America will object to any claim at any time by any nation that undermines this enduring principle."

Pence said Trump will "very soon" sign legislation that would impose additional economic sanctions on Russia.

The sanctions bill was overwhelmingly passed by Congress last week, and in response Moscow demanded that Washington drastically reduce its diplomatic staff in Russia.

"We hope for better relations with Russia," Pence said. "But the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow, I can assure you, will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, that of our allies, and the freedom-loving nations around the world, like Georgia."

The relationship between Washington and Moscow has been badly damaged by Russia's aggression in Ukraine, its role in the war in Syria, and its alleged interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Pence also reiterated that the United States "strongly" supports the Caucasus country's aspirations to become a NATO member.

"I commended the prime minister for Georgia's democratic development, which has brought Georgia closer to unity with Europe and membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," he said. "Further progress on the goals that the prime minister has set will bring Georgia even closer and NATO even closer to your grasp and it will strengthen the bond between our nations."

Pence also met on August 1 with the leaders of the Georgian opposition and addressed troops participating in NATO joint military exercises being conducted in Georgia, saying, "We stand here today in the gap -- on a front line of freedom, a front line compromised by Russian aggression nearly a decade ago."

Pence met earlier on August 1 with the leaders of the Georgian opposition and was also planning to attend NATO joint military exercises being conducted in Georgia. About 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the Noble Partner 2017 drills there.

At an official dinner in the Georgian capital late on July 31, Pence said, "We stand with you, for your freedom and for our shared values."

Kvirikashvili said the United States "has a dedicated friend in Georgia, a stable geopolitical ally, and a strategic partner."

In comments released earlier by the Georgian government, Kvirikashvili described Pence's visit as "an important milestone in the bilateral relationship as we work to further strengthen security, economic, and trade cooperation between our two countries."

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Pence arrived in Tbilisi from Estonia, where he reaffirmed Washington's solidarity with the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders" and "undermine democracies."

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions, as have Georgia and the third ally on Pence's itinerary: new NATO member Montenegro.

"No threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said. "At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another."

Pence also said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty -- the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica, U.S. officials said.

Montenegro accession to NATO in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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In Georgia, Pence Assures Eastern Europe of US Backing
By Nana Sajaia
1 August 2017
Voice of America

On the latest leg of his first official tour of Eastern Europe, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence assured regional allies the United States will stand by their side.

Facing a crowd of Georgian and international journalists at government offices in Tbilisi, Pence, standing alongside his host, Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili, said America first does not mean America alone.

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"President Trump has sent me with the simple message to you and to the people of Georgia, we are with you, we stand with you ... America stands with Georgia," said Pence.

The vice president came to Georgia, the only non-NATO member country on his itinerary, from Estonia, a model of a successful EU-leaning transformation, before heading to Montenegro, NATO's newest member.

Pence is the highest-ranking American official of the current administration to visit Georgia and the larger Caucasus region.

"Thanks to your help, Georgia is no longer a Soviet or a post-Soviet country," said Kvirikashvili at Tuesday's joint press conference. "Today we are a democracy closely associated with the European Union."

Kvirikashvili's comments, in which he touted Georgia's role as "a key strategic partner of America," come amid an ongoing partial Russian occupation.

About 60 kilometers from the news conference, Russian tank units maintain control over 20 percent of Georgian terrain, a holdover from the August 2008 five-day war.

Pence reiterated the U.S. non-recognition policy regarding the Russian-occupied zone, condemning Moscow's presence on Georgian soil, what many observers describe as an evolving, "creeping" occupation.

"President Trump has called on Russia to cease its destabilizing activities," Pence said, adding that President Donald Trump will soon sign sanctions against Russia.

"Our country prefers a constructive relations with Russia, based on cooperation and common interest. But the president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia: a better relationship, lifting of sanctions, will require Russia to reverse actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place."

'Reset' jitters

Former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden visited Georgia about a year after the 2008 war. Biden's visit came shortly after the Obama administration's "reset" policy with Russia, which caused concern among many Europeans that the United States would give Moscow a pass for its invasion of Georgia.

Years later, Russia annexed Crimea and destabilized Eastern Ukraine, which led the West to unilaterally impose sanctions on Russia.

Both Georgia and Ukraine are aspiring NATO members. Some observers argue Georgia's 2008 war and Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea could have been avoided if those countries hadn't been denied Membership Action Plan status at NATO's Bucharest summit in April, 2008.

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"President Trump and I stand by the 2008 NATO Bucharest statement, which made it clear that Georgia, one day, will become a member of NATO," said Pence.

According to recent nationwide polls carried by National Democratic Institute, 66 percent of Georgia's population approves of the government's stated goal to join NATO. Sixty-two percent of Georgians say the country should join the European Union. Both organizations are largely seen as security instruments that would protect Georgia independence and development.

2017 represents the 25th anniversary of U.S.-Georgian diplomatic relations.

George W. Bush is the only U.S. president who has visited Georgia, which he called "a beacon of democracy."

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Mike Pence promises US and NATO support for Georgia in Tbilisi
By Dan Alexe
1 August 2017
New Europe

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence pledged Washington's support to Georgian leaders as he met with Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili in Tbilisi.

"We see Georgia as a key strategic partner and stand by your territorial integrity and your aspirations to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," Pence said.

Georgia has been going through Russian occupation of parts of its territory and has expressed hopes of joining NATO.

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

Kvirikashvili said the United States "has a dedicated friend in Georgia, a stable geopolitical ally, and a strategic partner."

Vice president Pence is also planning to attend the NATO joint military exercises being conducted in Georgia. About 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the Noble Partner 2017 drills there.

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Pence arrived in Tbilisi from Estonia, where he reaffirmed Washington's solidarity with the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders" and "undermine democracies."

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions, as have Georgia and the third ally on Pence's itinerary: new NATO member Montenegro.

Pence said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty — the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

On the last stop, Pence will visit Montenegro, whose accession to NATO in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica.

Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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Pence: Reversing Sanctions Requires Russia to Change
1 August 2017
Voice of America

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence says diplomatic actions taken by Russian in response to fresh sanctions will not deter U.S. commitment to its security and that of its allies.

Speaking Tuesday during a visit to Georgia, Pence said the sanctions bill President Donald Trump will soon sign sends a "very clear message" that with Russia's activities in Ukraine and its support for Iran and Syria, its "posture has to change."

Congress overwhelmingly passed the sanctions bill punishing Russia for interference in the 2016 U.S. election, while also imposing new measures on Iran and North Korea. Russia responded by ordering the U.S. to cut its overall staff of more than 1,200 in Russia by 755 people.

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"The president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia: a better relationship, the lifting of sanctions, will require Russia to reverse the actions that required sanctions to be imposed in the first place," Pence said.

Pence is on a multi-nation tour meant to show U.S. support for its allies in the region.

He said after a meeting with Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili in Tbilisi that the United States will work with Georgia to counter Russian aggression and "seek a peaceful resolution" that restores the country's internationally recognized borders.

In 2008, Russia intervened militarily in Georgia, and later recognized the breakaway republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states. A few other countries also recognize that independence, though the vast majority of nations consider the areas still as part of Georgia.

"The United States supports Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders, and under President Donald Trump the United States of America will reject any claim at any time by any nation that undermines this enduring principle," Pence said.

The vice president is also traveling Tuesday to Montenegro, NATO's newest member.

No response yet to Putin

Russia's retaliation for the U.S. sanctions is believed to be the single largest cut ever imposed on the U.S. embassy in Moscow and consulates elsewhere in Russia, although many of those to be dismissed are likely Russians working in support positions.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said the cuts would leave both Russia and the U.S. with the same number of staff and diplomats in Washington and Moscow, respectively - 455.

President Donald Trump has been silent on the issue since Putin announced his action. Asked about this Monday, White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said, "Right now we are reviewing our options, and when we have something to say on it we will let you know."

The U.S. State Department said the order to reduce the number of American diplomats in Russia was "a regrettable and uncalled for act." A spokesman said U.S. officials are assessing how to respond to Putin.

A Russian analyst, Nikolai Petrov of the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, said the move reflects the Kremlin's disillusionment with President Trump: "These measures are tough, and it is linked to a deep disappointment that came after the euphoria linked to the arrival of Donald Trump [to power], and to the idea that today we will start our relations anew."

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Another Russian analyst, Gleb Pavlovsky, said a return to Cold War-era hostilities with the U.S. will only boost Putin's popularity at home ahead of another likely bid for the Russian presidency next year.

Pavlovsky, a former political consultant for the Kremlin who is now president of the Foundation for Effective Politics in Moscow, explained how U.S. efforts to "punish" Putin may have the opposite effect: "American sanctions naturally are causing a definite mass reaction [in Russia] - an anti-American, pro-Putin reaction." If Putin wished, Pavlovsky added, he could make the American sanctions the centerpiece of his re-election campaign next year.

Russians will feel cutback

Other experts say the vital work of the U.S. embassy in Moscow will continue despite the massive cuts. Steven Pifer, a former U.S. diplomat now with the Brookings Institution, told VOA that Russians also may discover some unintended consequences of their president's crackdown on U.S. diplomacy.

"My assumption is hundreds of Russians are going to lose their jobs now," Pifer said. "And when you're looking at priority functions of the embassy, you know, visa functions are important but they're not as important as other functions. So my guess is that those Russians [who] want to travel to the United States are going to find that visa processing is going to take longer than usual because of reduced staff in the consular section."

Pifer was assigned to the U.S. embassy in Moscow in 1986, at a time when there were several back-and-forth expulsions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. He later served on the National Security Council under former President Bill Clinton, and was ambassador to Ukraine from 1998-2000.

During his time in the Russian capital, Pifer said, American staff were called upon for "all-purpose duty" at times when Russian support staff were unavailable for political reasons.

"So, five or six days out of every seven, I would work on my normal portfolio, which is arms control," Pifer recalled. "And then one day, I'd drive a truck. And the embassy got by. There was actually this incredible spirit in the embassy that we were going to show the Soviets that this kind of action was not going to cramp the embassy."

Pifer said he expects the same determined spirit from U.S. embassy personnel now.

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VP Pence says Trump will sign Russia sanctions soon
1 August 2017
Associated Press

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence says President Donald Trump will sign a bill on a new package of sanctions against Russia.

The Senate voted last week to approve the new financial sanctions against Moscow. The legislation bars Trump from easing or waiving the penalties on Russia unless Congress agrees.

Pence, who is visiting the former Soviet republic of Georgia Tuesday, said the Trump administration "had concerns" about the bill when it was drafted in the Senate, but that Trump will sign it soon.

Russia on Friday ordered the U.S. Embassy and three U.S. consulates in Russia to drastically cut its personnel there. President Vladimir Putin said on Sunday it would mean 755 staffers will have to be dismissed.

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Embassy Reductions Won't Deter U.S., Pence Says
By Michael Shear
31 July 2017
New York Times

Vice President Mike Pence responded aggressively on Monday to the decision by President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia to order the shedding of 755 positions at the United States Embassy in Moscow, even as President Trump remained silent on the escalating diplomatic row.

Traveling in Eastern Europe, Mr. Pence delivered a blunt message for Mr. Putin, noting that "recent diplomatic actions taken by Moscow will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, that of our allies and to freedom-loving nations around the world."

Mr. Pence said that while Mr. Trump remains "open to a better relationship" with Russia, he warned that "the United States rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation or malign influence in the Baltic States or against any of our treaty allies."

Mr. Putin over the weekend ordered that the embassy work force be trimmed by Sept. 1, responding to legislation approved last week by Congress to impose new sanctions on Russia for its meddling in the 2016 presidential election. The legislation also imposes additional sanctions on Iran and North Korea.

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Mr. Trump passed up several public opportunities on Monday to condemn the action, which includes American diplomats and Russian employees. As president, his posture toward Mr. Putin has been closely watched during a congressional inquiry into Russian election meddling and a special counsel investigation on the issue.

"Right now we're reviewing our options, and when we have something to say on it, we'll let you know," said Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the White House press secretary.

Ms. Sanders also declined to say when Mr. Trump planned to sign the sanctions legislation, which passed with overwhelming, veto-proof majorities in both the House and the Senate. On Friday, the White House said the president would sign the bill but had initially suggested it was an improper attempt by Congress to exercise the president's foreign policy powers.

Mr. Trump's silence on the new dispute with Russia struck some veteran foreign policy experts as a sign of weakness as he faces a dramatic diplomatic offense by a major adversary.

"Why is he not denouncing? It's a very weak signal that he's sending," said Michael McFaul, a Stanford University professor who served as ambassador to Russia under former President Barack Obama.

Mr. McFaul said that removing 755 people from the United States Embassy in Moscow — about two-thirds of the personnel in the compound — would severely affect the work that American diplomats do there. That includes processing visa applications for Russians seeking to visit the United States.

He also noted that a statement by the State Department called the Russian action "regrettable and uncalled-for." But Mr. McFaul said that previous administrations would have condemned the expulsion more strenuously and would have made sure the American president responded directly to his counterpart in Russia.

"That he chose not to was striking to me," Mr. McFaul said. "He's on Twitter all the time. If he has something to say, it would take him 10 seconds to say it."

Russian officials said over the weekend that Mr. Putin's diplomatic move was retaliation for the sanctions legislation, promising to go even further if the United States imposed additional economic restrictions in the future.

"This retaliation is long, long overdue," Sergei Ryabkov, Russia's deputy foreign minister, said on ABC's "This Week" on Sunday. Mr. Ryabkov called the sanctions legislation "completely weird and unacceptable" and said that in response to any more moves by the United States, "we will respond in kind."

"We will mirror this," he added. "We will retaliate."

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While Mr. Trump remained silent on Monday, Mr. Pence used his trip to Estonia to underscore a tougher stance for the Baltic nations toward Russia and its aggression in the region. He will visit Georgia and Montenegro later on his trip.

In a speech at Kadriorg Palace in Tallinn, the presidential residence of Estonia, Mr. Pence said he brought a message from Mr. Trump that "we are with you." In the speech, Mr. Pence reiterated the president's call for Russia to end "destabilizing activities in Ukraine and elsewhere."

"The United States will continue to hold Russia accountable for its actions — and we call on our European allies and friends to do the same," Mr. Pence said.

The vice president also explicitly promised that the United States would meet its obligations under NATO's Article 5 mutual defense pledge to come to the aid of a member nation who is attacked. Mr. Trump made a similar statement this summer after earlier refusing to say so directly.

Mr. Pence said that Mr. Trump would sign the sanctions legislation "very soon."

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Vice President Pence in Europe: Georgia
By Office of the Vice President
1 August 2017
The White House

Vice President Mike Pence's next stop on his visit to Eastern Europe was Georgia. Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili and the Vice President met to discuss how the United States, under President Donald Trump, strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgia's soil. Following his meetings, the Vice President and Second Lady Karen Pence toured the Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition, a symbol of the ancient faith that fills Georgia's ancient land, with Patriarch Ilias II and Father Giorgi Zviadadze. Vice President Pence also addressed American and Georgian troops at Exercise Noble Partner where he discussed our shared commitment to promote security and stability across the wider world. Following his speech, the Vice President departed for Montenegro, the last stop of his visit to Eastern Europe.

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During Whirlwind Week in Washington, VP Pence Comforts East European Allies
By Emily Tamkin
1 August 2017
The Cable: Foreign Policy

Amid chaos in Washington, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence is in Eastern Europe assuring American allies that the United States is committed to protecting them.

"We are with you. We stand with the people and nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania — and we always will," Pence said at a joint press availability with the Baltic leaders in Tallinn, even as, back home, President Donald Trump has yet to comment on Russian expulsion of U.S. diplomatic staff.

The vice president participated in a listening session on cyber and innovation with the president of Estonia in Tallinn, and travelled on Tuesday to Tbilisi, where he met with the Georgian prime minister for their third substantive meeting since Pence took office.

"We see Georgia as a key strategic partner and stand by your territorial integrity and your aspirations to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," Pence said at a dinner with Prime Minister Kvirikashvili in Tbilisi. At a joint press conference with Georgia's prime minister, Pence noted that Russia occupies one-fifth of Georgian Territory.

Back in Washington, in the meantime, President Trump has yet to comment personally on a bill that Congress passed imposing tougher sanctions on Russia. The White House press secretary said Friday in a statement that Trump would sign the bill.

Speaking in Tbilisi, Pence said the bill would be signed soon.

From Tbilisi, Pence traveled to the newest NATO member, Montenegro. In May at a NATO summit, President Trump appeared to push Montenegro's prime minister aside during a photo session.

Pence's staid tour abroad is in stark contrast to the roller coaster in Washington this week. On Monday, U.S. President Donald Trump lost a communications director who was brought on roughly a week prior; Jared Kushner, his son in law and advisor, told White House interns the Trump team was too disorganized to have colluded with Russia; and the *Washington Post* reported the president had dictated a misleading message to his son about a meeting with a Russian lawyer.

Trump's is not the first administration to send a vice president abroad in the president's stead, or to develop relations with diplomats and dignitaries from particular countries — former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden was known as Ukraine's man in Washington.

"Vice President Pence's visit sent a clear message about the enduring strength of the relationship between Georgia and the United States," Georgian Ambassador to the United States David Bakradze told Foreign Policy by email. "This is an important milestone in the bilateral relationship."

"In short," a representative from the Estonian Embassy in Washington, D.C. relayed to FP, "we consider the trip a great success."

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The embassy of Montenegro did not immediately respond to request for comment.

Update, Aug. 1 2017, 4:16 pm ET: This piece was updated to include comment from the Estonian Embassy.

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Social Media Coverage

Prominent Facebook Posts on the VP Trip

Vice President Mike Pence

Vice President Mike Pence added 4 new photos.
2 hrs

#VPinEurope Photos of the Day: Karen and I landed in Georgia last night and were welcomed by Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili and his wife, Maia. Today, the Prime Minister and I met and I told him that the United States of America, under President Donald J. Trump, strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgia's soil. Following our productive discussions, we toured the Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition, a symbol of the ancient faith that fills Georgia's ancient land, with Patriarch Ilias II and Father Giorgi Zviadadze. To conclude our visit to Georgia, I spoke with American and Georgian troops at Exercise Noble Partner and discussed our shared commitment to promote security and stability across the wider world. Today we recommit ourselves to the cause of security, prosperity, and freedom for the people of Georgia.



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White House Official Facebook Page

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Vice President Pence's Trip to Europe

24 Photos Updated 2 hours ago

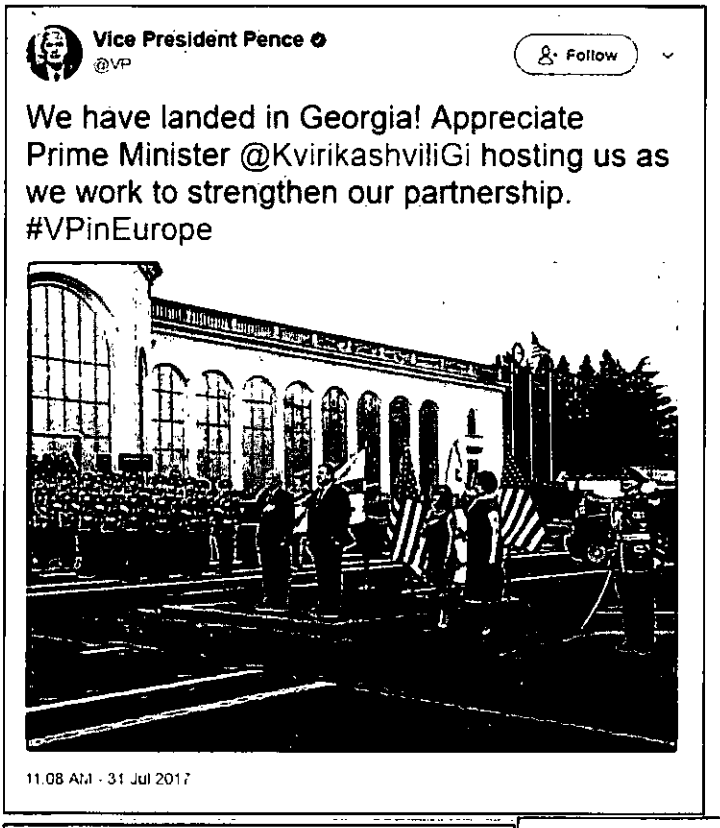


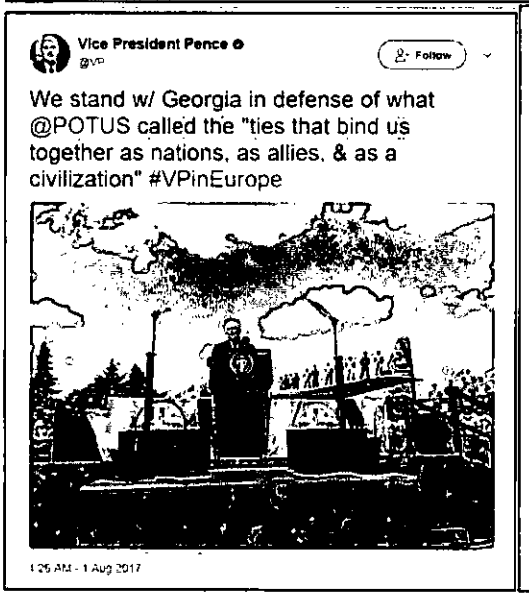
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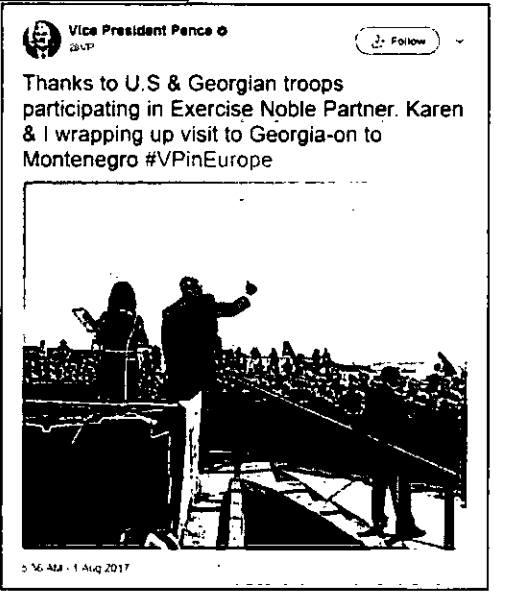
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Prominent Tweets on VP Visit

Mike Pence, Vice President of the United States – 4.08M Followers







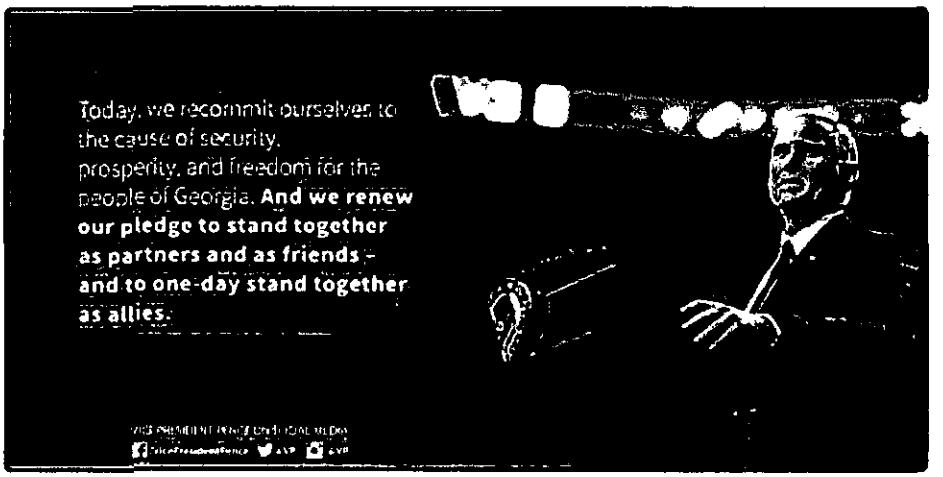
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Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

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Today, we recommit ourselves to the cause of security, prosperity, and freedom for the people of Georgia. #VPinEurope



4:34 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

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A better relationship will require Russia to reverse actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place. #VPinEurope



4:32 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

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We stand here today in the gap - on a front line of freedom, compromised by Russian aggression nearly a decade ago. #VPinEurope



4:32 AM - 1 Aug 2017

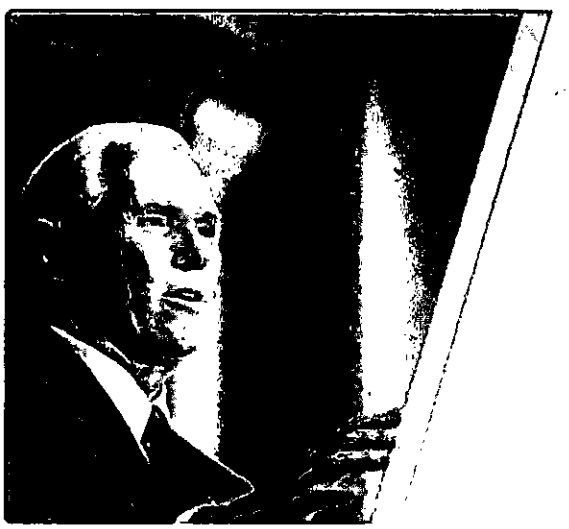
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Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

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The rise of adversaries new and old requires renewed strength and resolve by all who cherish freedom. #VPinEurope

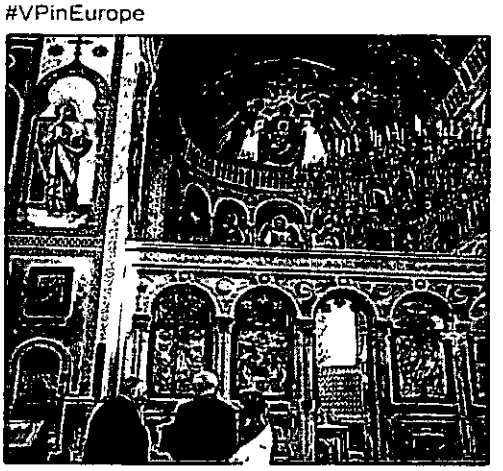


4:31 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

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Karen & I visited Sioni Cathedral a symbol of the faith that fills Georgia's ancient land. Thanks Patriarch Ilia II & Fr Zviadze #VPinEurope

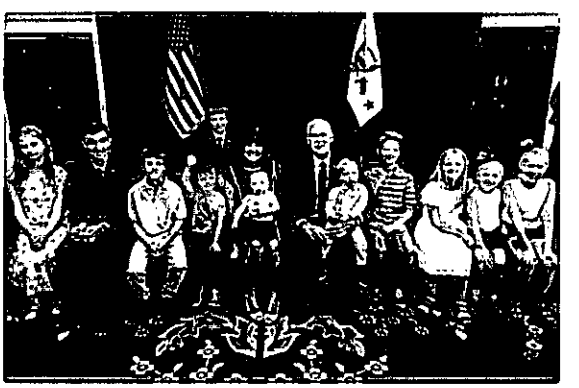


4:01 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

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Karen & I spoke w/ dedicated @EmbassyTbilisi staff members & their families & thanked them for the great work they do for the US #VPinEurope



2:19 AM - 1 Aug 2017

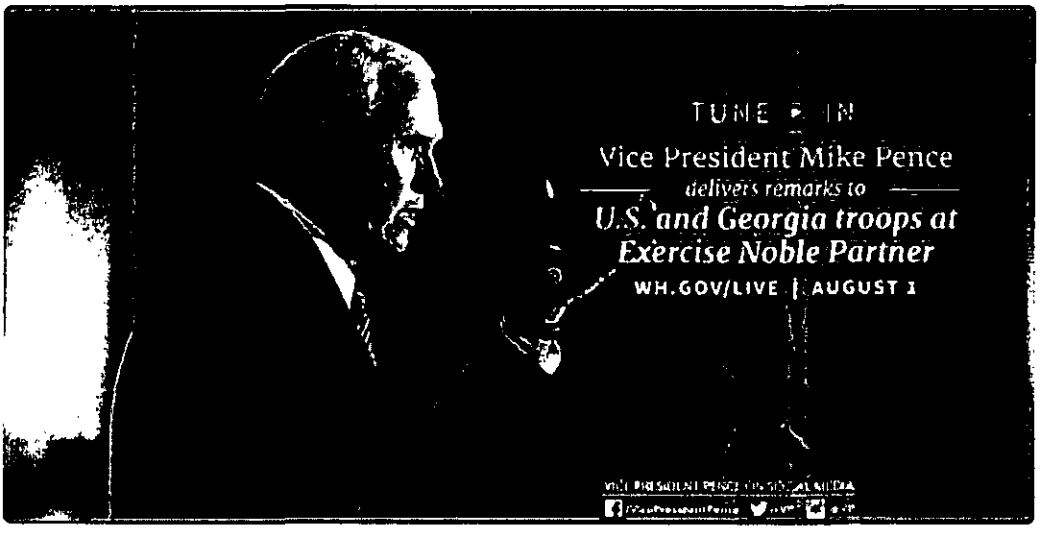
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Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

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TUNE IN! I'm speaking to U.S. and Georgia troops at Exercise Noble Partner: 45.wh.gov/v3dhHa #VPinEurope

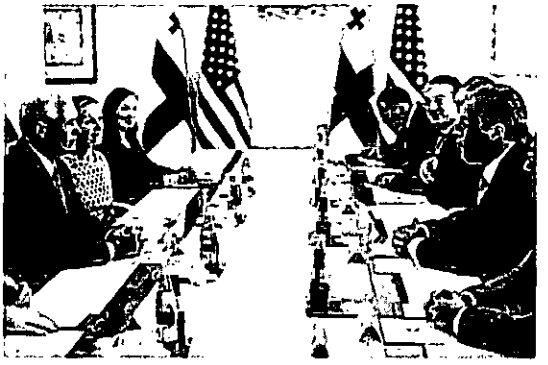


4:14 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

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The United States will continue to work with Georgia to reduce vulnerabilities and counter Russian aggression. #VPinEurope

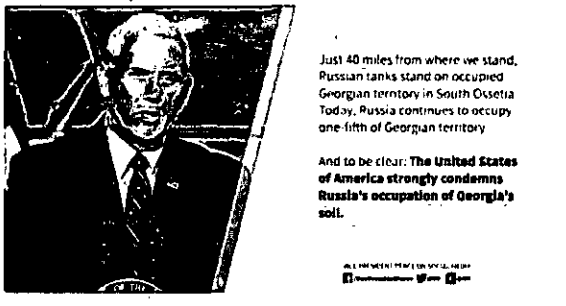


2:16 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

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To be clear: the United States of America strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgia's soil. #VPinEurope



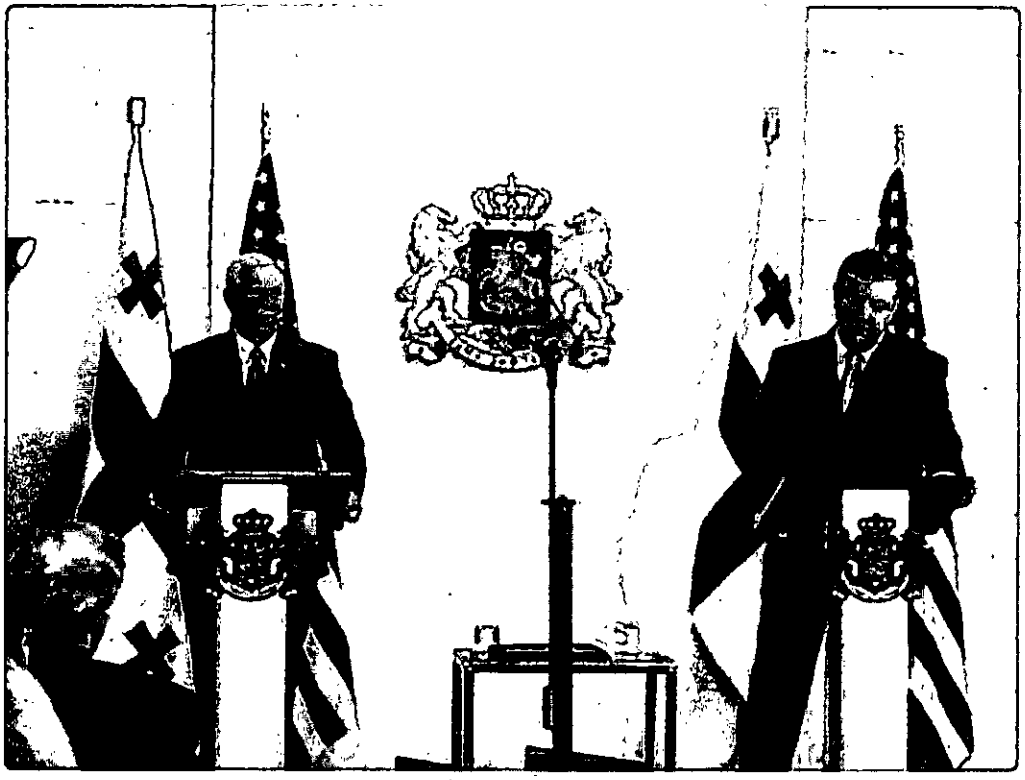
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Vice President Pence @VP · 7h

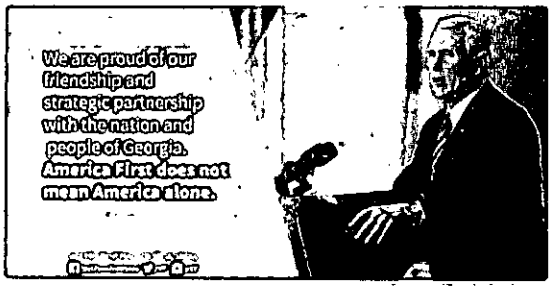
It is heartening to see that Georgia already exceeds NATO's goal of spending two percent of gross domestic product on defense. #VPinEurope



102 433 1.7K

Vice President Pence @VP Follow

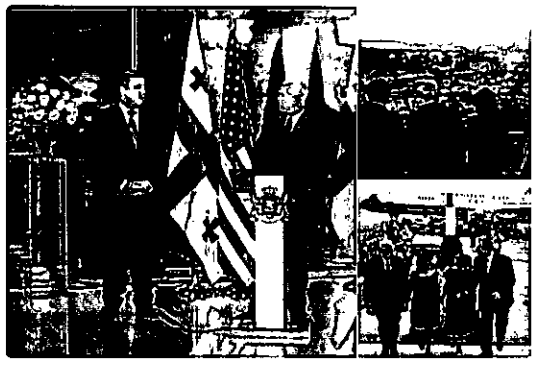
We are proud of our friendship and partnership with the nation and people of Georgia. America First does not mean America alone. #VPinEurope



12:45 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence @VP Follow

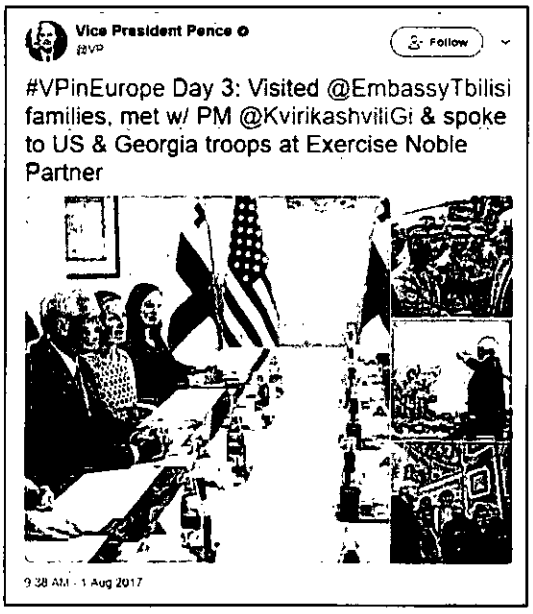
Thanks @KvirikashviliGi & Maia for welcoming Karen & I to Georgia yesterday. We enjoyed Tbilisi, looking forward to our meetings #VPinEurope



10:09 PM - 31 Jul 2017

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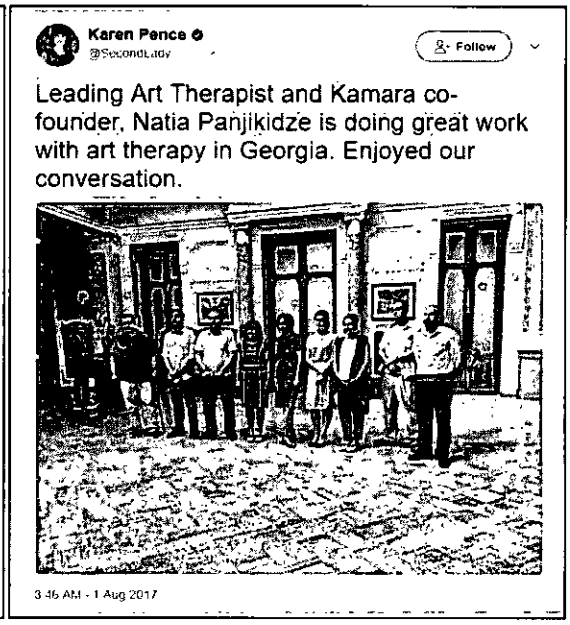


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Karen Pence, Second Lady of the United States – 235K Followers





John McCain, U.S. Senator – 2.39M Followers



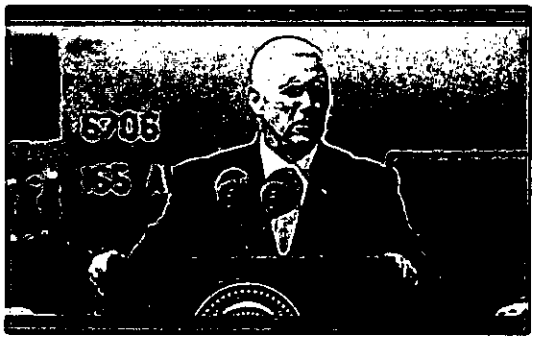
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Mark Knoller, CBS News White House Correspondent – 301K Followers

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In Tblisi, addressing US and Georgian troops. @VP declares the US "strongly condemns Russian occupation of Georgian soil."



4:35 AM - 1 Aug 2017

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Declaring Georgia's "future is in the west," the @VP reaffirmed US support for Georgia's eventual membership in @NATO.



4:38 AM - 1 Aug 2017

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Earlier, VP and Mrs Pence visited Tblisi's Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition. They toured, lit candles and spent a moment in prayer.



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Government Statements and Releases

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and U.S. Vice President Mike Pence Agree to Further Enhance Georgia-US Security and Economic Cooperation
1 August 2017
Government of Georgia (Press Release)

Readout of Second Lady Karen Pence's Visit to Tbilisi, Georgia
Office of the Second Lady
1 August 2017
White House

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and U.S. Vice President Mike Pence Agree to Further Enhance Georgia-US Security and Economic Cooperation
1 August 2017
Government of Georgia (Press Release)

Tbilisi, 1st August 2017 – Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili today met with United States Vice President Mike Pence to discuss expanding future security and economic cooperation between Georgia and the U.S. Last night, Kvirikashvili hosted Vice President Pence and the American delegation for dinner in Tbilisi.

"Vice President Pence's visit so shortly after taking office bears witness to his and President Trump's great desire to deepen the strategic partnership and friendship with Georgia, for which I am very grateful," stated Prime Minister Kvirikashvili. "The Georgian nation deeply appreciates the American people's friendship, solidarity, and strong support."

During their meeting, Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and Vice President Pence discussed the U.S.-Georgian security partnership in depth. Following the meeting, the Vice President met with Georgian and U.S. soldiers participating in the Noble Partner exercise, a U.S. Army-led exercise to support the training, evaluation and eventual certification of Georgia's second light infantry company contribution to the NATO Response Force (NRF).

"The Vice President's meeting with Georgian and American service members participating in the Noble Partner exercises is an unmistakable demonstration of the strong U.S. support for spurring our country's sovereignty and integration into NATO," affirmed Prime Minister Kvirikashvili. "The special bonds and extraordinary sacrifices of our two militaries -- currently fighting extremism together -- is something to behold. Georgia and the U.S. are truly brothers in arms."

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and Vice President Pence also held productive discussions about furthering the economic partnership between Georgia and the U.S. Georgia's Anaklia Port on the Black Sea, which will become a focal point in trade between Europe and Asia, is being built by an American-Georgian consortium, led by U.S. company Conti. SSA Marine, another U.S. company, will

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operate it. The two leaders also discussed potential steps for moving forward with a bilateral free trade agreement between the two countries.

During the visit, Vice President Pence also reaffirmed U.S. support for continued progress toward Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

-/-

Readout of Second Lady Karen Pence's Visit to Tbilisi, Georgia
Office of the Second Lady
1 August 2017
White House

Second Lady Karen Pence started her day with the Vice President where they participated in a meet-and-greet with U.S. embassy employees and their families. Mrs. Pence continued her day to the National Parliamentary Library where she joined art therapists and patients from Kamara, a pscho-social rehabilitation center and leading provider of art therapy in Georgia. The Second Lady observed the patient's art therapy work before participating in a roundtable discussion with Kamara co-founders and art therapists, Natia Panjikidze and Nino Komakhidze, and art therapist Salome Panjikidze. After the art therapy program visit, the Second Lady enjoyed lunch at the Vinotel Restaurant with United States Marines who represented both the Marine Security Guard Detachment and Marines from the Georgia Deployment Program. After lunch, Mrs. Pence met with Georgian artist, Olesya Tavadze, who works in easel paintings and graphics. Mrs. Tavadze is passionate about American literature, in particular Robert Frost. Mrs. Pence viewed Mrs. Tavadze's exhibit of paintings inspired by Robert Frost's poems at the Tbilisi History Museum Karvasla. Following the museum visit, Mrs. Pence joined the Vice President to tour the Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition. After the tour, Mrs. Pence listened to the Vice President deliver remarks to U.S. and Georgian Noble Partner Participants at the Tbilisi Airport before departing to Podgorica, Montenegro.

"Art therapy is an emerging profession in Georgia with only a few professionally trained art therapists in the country," said Second Lady Karen Pence. "I will cherish my opportunity to meet with the leading art therapists in Georgia who are breaking new ground in the country by offering art therapy as an option for therapeutic treatment. They are doing great work and making a positive difference in Georgia."

Tomorrow, Wednesday, August 2nd, Mrs. Pence will wrap up her Eastern Europe visit with activities in Podgorica, Montenegro. To stay updated on Mrs. Pence's events, follow her on Twitter at, @SecondLady.

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From: Bethany Bassett
Sent: Thursday, August 03, 2017 3:54 PM
To: 'chris_homan@durbin.senate.gov'
Subject: Pence/Georgia Trip

Hi Chris-

Hope you are well. We do some work with the Government of Georgia and thought you might be interested in material covering Vice President Pence's recent trip to Georgia.

Let me know if you need anything else.

Thanks much-

Bethany

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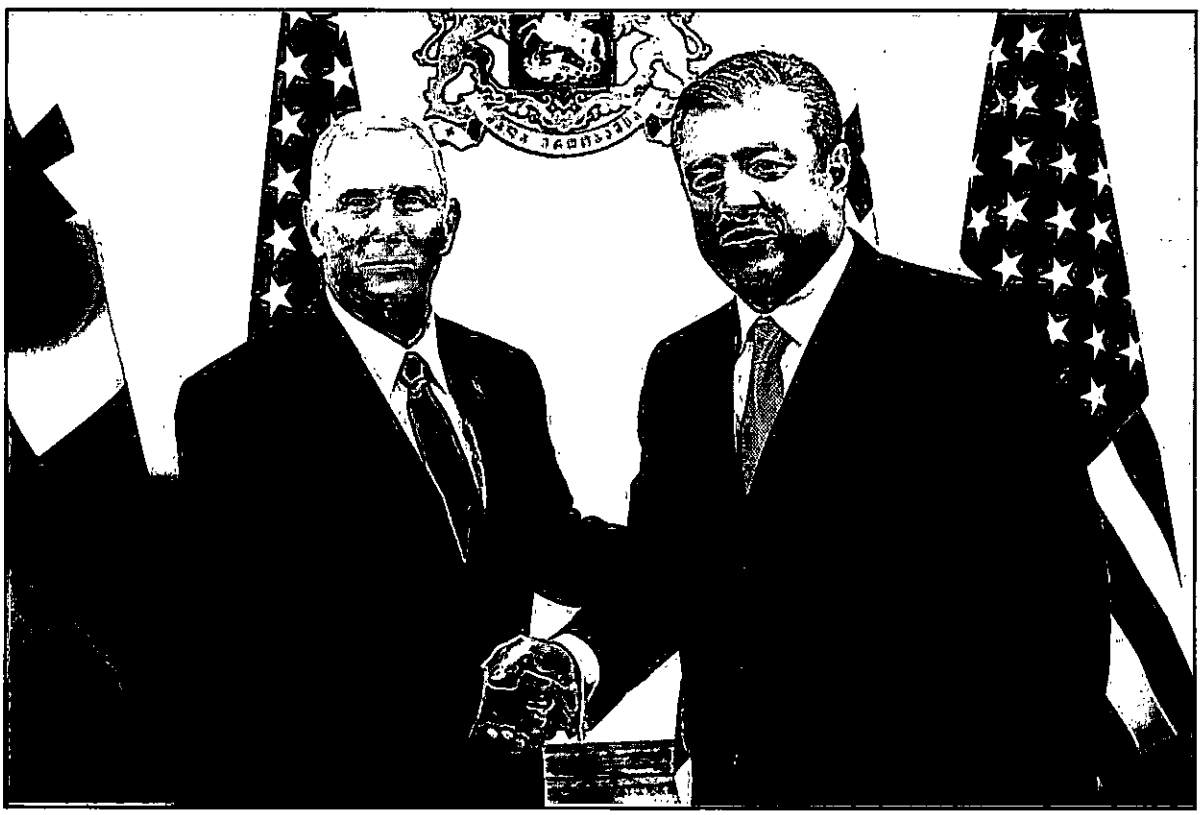
Bethany M. Bassett
Senior Vice President
Rasky Partners, Inc.
D: 202 530 7701
C: 617 458 1302
www.rasky.com

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VICE PRESIDENT MIKE PENCE'S VISIT WITH GOVERNMENT OF GEORGIA

July 31-August 1, 2017



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Transcript of the Press Conference of Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili and US Vice President Mike Pence

PM Kvirikashvili:

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to host in Georgia Mr. Mike Pence, who is not only the Vice President of our country's key strategic partner, the United States of America, but also a great friend whom Georgia has made in such a short period. It is especially exciting that he is visiting Georgia in the company of his spouse.

After our brief introductory meeting in Munich, I was honored to hold meetings in Washington, at the invitation of the Vice President, and today we continue our dialogue in Tbilisi.

Mr. Vice President, your visit very shortly after taking office bears witness to your and President Trump's great desire to deepen your strategic partnership and friendship with Georgia, for which I am very grateful to you.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of our diplomatic relations. Throughout this time, America has played a vital role on our country's path toward democratic and economic development, safeguarding Georgia's sovereignty, and NATO membership.

Thanks to your assistance, today Georgia is neither a Soviet nor post-Soviet country. Today we are an EU associated European democracy. Together with the Americans, we are proudly standing guard protecting global security and making our contribution to regional stability.

The Georgian nation deeply appreciates the American people's friendship, solidarity, and strong support.

Mr. Vice President, today we discussed our strategic partnership further in depth. First, I would like to single out and welcome our defense and security cooperation. Your meeting with Georgian and American service members participating in the Noble Partner exercises is an unmistakable demonstration of the strong US support for spurring our country's sovereignty and integration into NATO alike.

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This year, we adopted the Joint Action Plan that ensures enhancing Georgia's resilience, which is so crucially important for maintaining the stability and sustainability of Georgia and the region.

The United States of America has provided Georgia with significant financial assistance over these 25 years, and today we are happy to be an increasingly attractive country for American businesses. Today we offer one of the best business environments, extremely low corruption and red-tape rates, and equally low taxes, which is the best opportunity for American businesses to benefit.

Our goal is to put in place the best platform in the region suitable for American business interests. Notably, American companies are taking interest in engaging in large-scale regional infrastructural projects implemented in our country. Along with the Conti Group joining the Anaklia Deep Sea Port Consortium, we welcome the signing of the document on cooperation between the Anaklia Deep Sea Port Consortium and SSA Marine, one of the leading American port operators in the world. According to this document, the SSA Marine will operate the container terminal and invest in this most valuable project in the country today. The foregoing reaffirms the growing interest of American businesses and our country's immense potential for becoming the regional hub.

In the past 25 years, we have implemented numerous energy projects in cooperation with the United States. These projects ensure sustainable Euro-Atlantic energy security, and we are committed to continuing our cooperation in this direction as well.

We are a partner ready for high-level trade and investment relations with the USA based on mutual economic benefits.

Georgia is America's important partner in the region, which, among others, stems from our shared values, such as democracy and human rights. America has played an important role in the building of our democratic institutions. Our democratic development, for its part, is a precondition for developing Georgia as a sustainable and stable state that ensures the protection of the rights of every citizen and preserves our cultural uniqueness.

US support is vital in peaceful resolution of Georgia-Russia conflict. We deeply appreciate the US strong and unwavering stance on Georgia's territorial integrity. The decisions made by President Trump, you personally, Mr. Vice President, and the new Administration and the Congress on Georgia's occupied territories have proved unprecedented.

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Today we discussed the serious challenges facing our country as a result of occupation. The US plays a tremendous role in the Geneva International Discussions format. Importantly, through high-level engagement, particular decisions must be sought for ensuring the de-occupation of and security in Georgia's territories, and for political conflict resolution.

In conclusion, I would like to reaffirm that Georgia has always been and will always be by the US' side when it comes to any challenge or threat facing the world. Our strategic partnership focuses equally on strengthening security in Georgia, regionally, and worldwide, on promoting peaceful and democratic development.

Once again, I emphasize the importance of this visit and its outcomes. We appreciate the fact that, despite more than one challenge in different parts of the world, the Vice President is visiting Georgia as part of his first European trip.

I am also thankful to our American colleagues for visiting Georgia and their special contribution to deepening our bilateral cooperation.

I am convinced that our joint efforts will further deepen our strategic partnership. At the same time, we are eager to introduce the Vice President, his spouse, and the American guests to Georgia's culture and historical heritage as the pride and joy of the Georgian nation.

Thank you.

VP Pence:

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili thank you so much for those words and for the hospitality you shown me and my family. It was an honor to welcome you to the White House just a few short months ago. And now it is my honor to be welcomed by you to the beautiful and storied nation of Georgia.

The President of the United States of America, President Donald Trump sent me here with a simple message for you and for the people of Georgia: we are with you; we stand with you; we are proud of our friendship and strategic partnership with the nation and the people of Georgia. In a word, I am here to say: America first does not mean America alone. And America stands with Georgia.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the US diplomatic relationship with Georgia. Yet, this is a nation whose roots stretch back to the amiss of history. Sitting at the crossroads of

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empires and civilizations, where East meets West, where North meets South; Georgia has fostered your own language, your own traditions, your own identity over the millennia. Today the people of Georgia are renowned the world over for your vibrant culture, which, my wife and I enjoyed last night at our first super dinner featuring Georgian cuisine, and a lot of it and traditional song and dance from Abkhazia, South Ossetia and all across Georgia.

We have also been deeply inspired by the rich heritage of faith and my wife and I look forward to visiting the historic Sioni Cathedral and meeting the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church this afternoon. While this may be my first visit to this nation, the enduring courage and spirit of Georgian people have long inspired me. It was only a generation ago that Georgia was still imprisoned in then-Soviet Union. When that brutal regime collapsed, you reclaimed your independence and your freedom. You reached out our hand of friendship to Europe and United States of America and we were proud to reach back.

Today, I commended the Prime Minister for Georgia's democratic development, which has brought Georgia closer to unity with Europe and membership in North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Further progress on the goals that the Prime Minister has set will bring Georgia even closer and NATO even closer to your grasp and it will strengthen the bond between our nations.

Now, nowhere is the bond between our two nations stronger than in our shared effort to promote security and stability across the wider world. Georgia is the key strategic partner of the US. Since 2004, thousands of Georgians have served shoulder to shoulder with Americans in Kosovo, in Iraq and in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan alone, I say with grateful heart, Georgia has provided more troops on a per capita basis than any other country in the world. And 31 brave Georgian soldiers have given their lives for the cause of freedom. American people remember and mourn the sacrifice of your countrymen. They are heroes, all and they and their families will be enshrined in the hearts of American people forever. Later today I will meet with troops participating in the exercise Noble Partner. This initiative has brought together the armed forces of the US, Georgia and many other nations to train together and strengthen Georgia's ability to defend itself. It is only one of many examples of the US' commitment to Georgia's security.

President Trump and I stand by the 2008 NATO Bucharest statement, which made it clear that Georgia will one day become a member of NATO. As I expressed to the Prime Minister, it is heartening to see that Georgia already exceeds the NATO's goal of spending 2 % of its GDP on its national defense. But as we all know, Georgia's investment in defense is an

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investment born of necessity. At this very moment, just 40 miles from where we stand, Russian tanks stand on occupied territories at South Ossetia. Today, Russia continues to occupy one fifth of Georgian territory. So to be clear, the United States of America strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgian soil. The United States support Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders. Under President Trump the United States will reject any claim, at any time, by any nation that undermines this enduring principle. President Trump has called on Russia to seize its destabilizing activities. My purpose here is to reinforce that message to the people of Georgia.

In sign of our commitment President Trump will sign very soon legislation to solid and codify the United States' sanctions against Russia. As always, our country prefers a constructive relationship with Russia, based on cooperation and common interests, but President and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia: a better relationship, lifting of sanctions, will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place. We hope for better days and we hope for better relations with Russia. But the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow, I can assure you, will not deter the United States' commitment to our security, that of our allies and freedom loving nations around the world, like Georgia. The US will continue to work with Georgia to reduce your vulnerabilities and counter Russian aggression and so, too will we work with Georgia to deepen our ties of commerce of which the Prime Minister just spoke.

The United States has a keen interest in expanding our trade and investment relationship with Georgia. And your ongoing reforms Mr. Prime Minister have clearly demonstrated your openness and commitment to the stronger commercial partnership with the west. Today I thank the Prime Minister for his leadership focused on bringing greater economic opportunity to all of Georgian citizens. The Anaklia Deep Sea Port shows the potential of a stronger bilateral relationship between our nations. American companies are investing alongside with Georgian counterparts in this multibillion-dollar project. As we look toward the future of our two nations have untold opportunities to contribute even more to each other's prosperity. The US has stood with Georgia for quarter century and under president Trump we will continue to stand with you as partners, as friends and one day we will stand together as allies. Georgia's future is in the west and as the people of Georgia have long declared, our strength is now and always will be in our unity. So thank you Mr. Prime Minister, thank you for your hospitality here today and thank you for the strong leadership that you provide for this country. We look forward to working with you for the prosperity and the security of the people of Georgia and of our great nation.

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Q&A

Q: Greetings. I am Salome Kokiashvili, Public Broadcaster of Georgia. Mr. Vice President, you said during your visit to the Baltic States that the US always stands strong for freedom. In addition, the US has always been a staunch supporter of Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Given the continuous occupation of Georgia's regions—and we see that the fundamental rights of those living in these territories, of IDPs, are being violated on a daily basis—what steps Georgia can take together with its partners to deal with these problems?

VP Pence:

Well, as I said, the United States of America stands strong for the territorial integrity of Georgia. We have stood on that principle since the time that Russian tanks overtook Abkhazia and Ossetia in 2008. And we will continue to stand strong. The joint military operations that are taking place today, we hope, are a visible sign of our commitment to Georgia's sovereignty and to her internationally recognized borders.

We also believe that, in addition to security partnership, the stronger and more prosperous Georgia will lead to the restoration of a whole and free Georgia. So the United States will continue to look for ways where we can strengthen Georgia not only from the standpoint of its defense and security, but where we can strengthen Georgia economically, creating jobs and opportunity, and prosperity. Strengthening the hand of Georgia so that, one day, Georgia can once again celebrate its historical territorial integrity intact.

PM Kvirikashvili:

Thank you very much for the question. I would like to thank Mr. Vice President for his very clear message and the strong support Georgia enjoys from the US.

As mentioned earlier, our territorial integrity is a deep-rooted problem that requires a consistent approach in terms of Georgia's stability and economic and democratic development, on one hand, and Georgia's crucial defense and security partnership, on the other. I would like to reaffirm that this conflict can be resolved, and territorial integrity can be restored, only peacefully, consistently, through our economic development and with strong support from our strategic partners, especially from the US. Thank you.

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Q: Ashley Parker from the Washington Post. Mr. Vice President, in light of Russia's retaliation against sanctions, as well as Russia sending 100,000 troops to the eastern edge of NATO territory to drill, do you truly believe that better relationship that you and President Trump want with Russia is possible? And if things continue in this direction, can we be headed toward another cold war?

Mr. Prime Minister, you know better than anyone how real the threat of Russian aggression is. The Vice President just said that the US supports Georgia's aspirations into NATO, but what concrete assurances do you have that the US will defend you should Russia attack, as President Putin threatened?

VP Pence:

Thank you for your question. President Trump sent me on this journey to send a very clear message to the Baltic States, to the people of Georgia, and before the end of the day, Montenegro that the United States of America will stand with freedom-loving nations around the world. And that we will do so as Mr. President has said, not merely with words, but with actions. The presence of American forces in Poland, the presence of British forces—with whom I met—in Estonia, at the gathering yesterday, all give material evidence of the commitment of NATO in that region to live up to our Article 5 obligations. The current Russian exercises, which news reports today suggest will move up to 100,000 Russian troops into Belarus, is simply a confirmation of the importance of clarity within the NATO partnership.

President Trump and I believe that better relations with Russia may be possible. But as the President has said, we will see. But negotiations between parties always begin with the recognition of and respect for the position of each party. And with the sanctions President Trump will sign this week, codifying sanction that have been in place by the United States, our country is sending a very clear message and calling on our European allies to join in a very clear message that we mean what we say and say what we mean; that Russia's destabilizing activities in Ukraine, their support for rogue regimes like Iran, Syria, and North Korea, their posture has to change. But we believe by being clear and being strong that we can pursue a dialogue based on mutual understanding. President Trump holds the view that it has been a lack of clarity in the commitment by the US that has created much of the instability in the world today. When, in the past, America has spoken of red lines and not followed through on red lines. Many argue that it emboldened others to act in ways that they would not have. So President Trump believes that we can have peace through strength,

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and strong and clear positions, we believe, can create the foundation where authentic dialogue that may, we hope, result in better relations and in the resolution of long-standing disputes in Ukraine, Georgia, and other areas of the world.

PM Kvirikashvili:

Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Vice President, and thank you for the question. I think that a very clear and string message—we are with you!—tells everything. Georgia faces endless provocations daily along the occupation line, facing challenges of borderization, capturing, kidnapping of ethnic Georgians, and violating basic human rights of ethnic Georgians residing on the occupied territories. But the response to that is even more resolve and consistency, and dedication to the goals we set for ourselves. And integration into NATO is a process which matters for Georgia. Of course, the final goal to join NATO is set by the Georgian population, and we are following this very difficult path of reforming Georgia's military system and developing institutional democracy in Georgia. Believe me, through the consistency and dedication, clearness of our messages, and unity with our important strategic partners, it will be able for Georgia to reach this very important goal, to ensure long-term stability, and it is possible. We Georgians believe that.

Q: Reuters news agency, Margarita Antidze. Mr. Vice-President, what are the red lines Washington's red lines on Russia especially in regard with Georgia. And also you said in Estonia that in case of Russia's aggression against NATO alliance, members of the alliance, the US will intervene. What would be your reaction in case of Russia's aggression against Georgia, against NATO's partners? Thank you very much. Mr. Prime Minister do we have enough patience to wait NATO's partnership? We are waiting, you are waiting, and Georgia is waiting for a while? Thank you.

VP Pence:

Thank you for the question. Well, the essence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is a mutual defense. We agree that attack on one is an attack on all. What President wanted me to communicate as I traveled to the NATO countries, as later today I will visit the newest member of NATO is that the US says what it means and means what it says and we will live

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up our obligation under article 5. With regard to Georgia, we strongly support Georgia's aspiration to become a member of NATO and we will continue to work closely with this Prime Minister and the Government of Georgia broadly to advance the policies that will facilitate becoming a NATO member. We believe that Georgia has made an extraordinary progress not in just last twenty five years but over the last five years. There has been significant progress that we believe will strengthen the application for NATO membership. But with regard to the Russian aggression, which took place in 2008 which has... as we stand here today Russian tanks are parked on Georgian soil forty miles from where we stand. The US will continue to be unambiguous in our commitment to the territorial integrity of Georgia. We will stand for a strong and a whole Georgia, we will continue to provide support for the defense and security of Georgia and we will continue to seek a peaceful resolution that will reestablished internationally recognized borders of this nation.

PM Kvirikashvili:

Thank you Mr. Vice President. Thank you for the question. You said it is about patience, yes, it is about strategic patience, I would say, to stay consistent on the road where we are. Today we have all practical tools to advance toward NATO membership. We have substantial package, we are implementing it very successfully; we have Georgia Defense Readiness Programme jointly with the US, which is complementary to the Substantial Package; and it was said many times by the leaders of our strategic partners, the US first, of course and NATO leadership that no other country has a say to block the membership of Georgia to NATO. It is only NATO members and applicant countries, who decide about their future in NATO. And we have made our own decision. Thank you.

Q: Thank you, it is Peter Nicholas of the Wall Street Journal. Mr. Vice President, you have talked about the new Russian sanction's bill as an example of the US resolve in the face of Russian aggression. But did not the Trump's White House oppose this bill fearing that this bill relinquishes Presidential authority to Congress. What happened in this process that caused the White House to sign on?

Mr. Prime Minister, the US Intelligence community has concluded that Russia tried to interfere in our Presidential election. Living so close to Russia, having dealt with Russian provocations, do you have any advice to the US in how to cope with Russian efforts to intervene in our elections and influence voters in our country?

VP Pence:

Thank you, Peter, thank you. President Trump will sign the Russian sanctions bill soon. Our administration had concerns about this legislation that emerged from the US Senate. The concern was that the bill did not include traditional flexibility that is afforded to the State

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Department or any administration in the conduct of American foreign policy. I am pleased to report that the bill improved significantly as it moved through the House of Representatives and through the legislative process. And this legislation, we believe, will not only codify current Russian sanctions that our administration has upheld, but will also strengthen those sanctions, even while giving the President of the United States and our State Department the ability and a flexibility to be able to administer American foreign policy as appropriate. Let me say that in signing these sanctions, our President and our Congress are speaking in a unified voice that those matters that the President spoke about so eloquently in Warsaw, but Russian destabilizing activities, Russia's efforts to support rogue regimes, has to change. For there to be a change in our relationship with Russia, Russia has to change its behavior. By these sanctions, by my presence here, by the President's powerful affirmation of the objectives and the values of our alliance in the west our hope is for that we will move toward better relations and a better future and a more peaceful world as a result.

PM Kvirikashvili:

Thank you. First of all, let me mention once again how important is strong America for Georgia. We are genuinely interested in the strength of the United States; we want to see the US united, coping with global challenges. I do not think that Georgia is in a position to judge about Russian interference. With our excellent intelligence capabilities, we were not able to detect any interference and we think that American nation has made its decision to elect the President and of course we look for more partnership with the current administration of the US.

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Remarks by the Vice President to Noble Partner Participants

August 1, 2017

Tbilisi International Airport

Tbilisi, Georgia

THE VICE PRESIDENT: President Margvelashvili, Prime Minister Kvrikashvili, Minister Izoria, General Chachibaya, members of the armed forces of the United States of America and Georgia, to all our distinguished guests, it is an honor to join you here today to address the men and women of Exercise Noble Partner. (Applause.)

And to all of you, I bring greetings from the leader of the free world, the President of the United States of America -- President Donald Trump. (Applause.)

The President sent me here to this place, at this time simply to thank all -- thank you for stepping up to serve your nations, for standing in the gap on this great frontier -- united in the defense of freedom.

You are the best of us -- heroes all.

And you are here, the Americans among you so far away from home, because the United States and Georgia are bound together by the abiding oath of friendship and by our shared commitment to the cause of freedom.

Under President Trump, the policy of the United States is to place the security and the prosperity of America first. But as the President has made clear, and as our presence here today demonstrates, America First does not mean America alone.

We are here today, with the steadfast assurance of the United States of America to tell our friends in Georgia: We are with you. (Applause.)

We stand with the nation and the people of Georgia, and we will stand with you as you pursue membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. And the United States of America stands with Georgia in defense of what President Trump in Warsaw called "the priceless ties that bind us together as nations, as allies, and as a civilization." And those ties are freedom, democracy, and the rule of law.

The roots of the nation and people of Georgia stretch back into the mists of history. Sitting here at the crossroads of empires and civilizations -- where East meets West, where North meets South -- Georgia has fostered a vibrant culture and a rich heritage of faith.

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And through all the millennia, none have been able to deprive you of your identity. The people and culture of Georgia have stood the test of time. (Applause.)

It was only a generation ago that Georgia was still imprisoned inside the Soviet Union. That Communist regime personified everything that free peoples reject, and it sought to crush you in its heartless, inhuman embrace. The Soviet Union sought to eradicate your history -- even the very essence of who you are, the cherished ties of culture and faith.

But when the Soviet Union collapsed, Georgia reclaimed its liberty. You reached out your hand in friendship to the free nations of Europe and the United States, and the United States of America proudly reached back. (Applause.)

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the diplomatic relations between the United States and Georgia, and we marvel at your progress -- the progress you've made since you regained your independence. Georgia's future is in the West.

For many years, Georgia has been a key strategic partner of the United States. Since 2004, thousands of brave Georgians have served with their American brothers-and-sisters-in-arms in Kosovo, in Iraq, and in Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan alone, Georgia has provided more troops on a per-capita basis than any other country in the world. (Applause.)

And today we remember 31 Georgian soldiers who've given their lives in the cause of freedom in that land. The American people remember their sacrifice and their families on this day. They are heroes. And let me assure you and their families that they will be enshrined in the hearts of the American people forever.

The strategic partnership between the United States and Georgia is stronger now than ever before, and this joint exercise is a tangible sign of our commitment to each other to make it stronger still.

Exercise Noble Partner brings together the Armed Forces of the United States, of Georgia, and many other nations to train together and execute complex operations.

Noble Partner will strengthen Georgia's ability to defend itself in the years ahead. It will prepare Georgian soldiers to join NATO's Response Force in the future.

This exercise is a testament to your professionalism, to the high value that the United States and our

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NATO allies place on Georgia's security. But our commitment to your security doesn't stop there.

American advisors will continue to work alongside your leaders to improve Georgia's military readiness. And along with all our NATO allies, the United States is contributing to the Substantial Package for Georgia, to strengthen Georgia's resilience, and to bring Georgia ever closer to your goal of membership in NATO. (Applause.)

And to be clear, President Trump and the United States stand firmly behind the 2008 NATO Bucharest statement, which made it clear that Georgia will someday become a member of the most successful military alliance in the history of the world. (Applause.)

Georgia has already taken important steps toward this goal -- especially in terms of security. Georgia has long exceeded NATO's own goal of spending 2 percent of gross domestic product on defense. Your commitment is a model for many current NATO members, many of which have not fulfilled their obligations to our common defense. And so I want to congratulate and thank Georgia for your strong commitment and your strong example of national leadership on national defense. (Applause.)

And to those here in the uniform of the United States, be assured your Commander-in-Chief is busy making the strongest fighting force in the history of the world stronger still.

As President Trump said just a few days ago, in his words, "American might is second to none -- and we're getting bigger, and better, and stronger every day."

The President has already signed the largest increase in military spending in nearly 10 years. And we're calling on Congress to pass one of the largest investments in defense since the days of the Cold War.

Our investments in our defense, like Georgia's, are borne of necessity. The rise of adversaries new and old requires renewed strength and renewed resolve by all who cherish freedom.

We stand here today in the gap, on a frontline of freedom, a frontline compromised by Russian aggression nearly a decade ago. At this very moment, just 40 miles from where we stand, Russian tanks sit on Georgian land in South Ossetia. Today, Russia continues to occupy one-fifth of Georgian territory.

The United States strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgia's soil. (Applause.)

Be assured: The United States will continue to support Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity

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within its internationally recognized borders.

The United States of America, under President Donald Trump, will reject any claim, at any time, by any nation that undermines this enduring principle.

To that end, President Trump has called on Russia recently, here and elsewhere, to "cease its destabilizing activities," and we will continue to work with Georgia to reduce your vulnerabilities and counter potential Russian aggression.

And in a further sign of our commitment, very soon, President Trump will sign legislation to strengthen and codify the United States' sanctions against Russia.

The United States prefers a constructive relationship with Russia based on mutual cooperation and common interests. But the President and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia -- a better relationship, the lifting of sanctions will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused the sanctions to be imposed in the first place. And not before. (Applause.)

We hope for better days, for better relations with Russia, but the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow I can assure you will not deter this President or the commitment of the United States to our security, that of our allies, and freedom-loving nations around the world like the freedom-loving people of Georgia.
The United States has stood with Georgia since your independence, and under President Trump, we will continue to stand shoulder-to-shoulder and work hand-in-hand with you to fortify your defense, to strengthen your democracy, and to deepen your ties of friendship with Europe and the United States.

We stand with you because we know the wisdom of that ancient Georgian saying there is -- "strength is in unity." (Applause.)

So in unity, together, we will be strong in arms. In unity, together, we will be strong in resolve. And in unity, together, we will be strong in faith -- faith in freedom, and faith in Him from whom our freedom springs.

Earlier today, my wife and I visited the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church at the Sioni Cathedral; that soaring temple, whose foundations stretch back more than 1,500 years, is deeply inspiring. It's a symbol of the ancient faith that fills this land.

As I walked beneath its painted dome, I could not help but think of an ancient truth from the sacred scriptures, one which we'd do well to reflect on in these challenging times. As we train, as we

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prepare, as we promote commerce and mutual prosperity, we do well to remember those words: "Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."

Today, we recommit ourselves to the cause of security, prosperity, and liberty for the people of Georgia. We renew our pledge to stand together in unity as partners and as friends, and to one day stand together as allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (Applause.)

And we do so with confidence and with faith -- faith in the courage of all of you who wear the uniform, faith and confidence in the strength and resilience of the proud people of this ancient land, confident in the leadership of our Commander-in-Chief, President Donald Trump, and your leadership in Georgia, and with faith in the blessings and protection of God above, I know the United States and Georgia will embrace a future of freedom in unity together.

Thank you. God bless you. God bless Georgia. And God bless the United States of America. (Applause.)

END

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During Whirlwind Week in Washington, VP Pence Comforts East European Allies
By Emily Tamkin
1 August 2017
The Cable: Foreign Policy

Amid chaos in Washington, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence is in Eastern Europe assuring American allies that the United States is committed to protecting them.

"We are with you. We stand with the people and nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania — and we always will," Pence said at a joint press availability with the Baltic leaders in Tallinn, even as, back home, President Donald Trump has yet to comment on Russian expulsion of U.S. diplomatic staff.

The vice president participated in a listening session on cyber and innovation with the president of Estonia in Tallinn, and travelled on Tuesday to Tbilisi, where he met with the Georgian prime minister for their third substantive meeting since Pence took office.

"We see Georgia as a key strategic partner and stand by your territorial integrity and your aspirations to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," Pence said at a dinner with Prime Minister Kvirikashvili in Tbilisi. At a joint press conference with Georgia's prime minister, Pence noted that Russia occupies one-fifth of Georgian Territory.

Back in Washington, in the meantime, President Trump has yet to comment personally on a bill that Congress passed imposing tougher sanctions on Russia. The White House press secretary said Friday in a statement that Trump would sign the bill.

Speaking in Tbilisi, Pence said the bill would be signed soon.

From Tbilisi, Pence traveled to the newest NATO member, Montenegro. In May at a NATO summit, President Trump appeared to push Montenegro's prime minister aside during a photo session.

Pence's staid tour abroad is in stark contrast to the roller coaster in Washington this week. On Monday, U.S. President Donald Trump lost a communications director who was brought on roughly a week prior; Jared Kushner, his son in law and advisor, told White House interns the Trump team was too disorganized to have colluded with Russia; and the *Washington Post* reported the president had dictated a misleading message to his son about a meeting with a Russian lawyer.

Trump's is not the first administration to send a vice president abroad in the president's stead, or to develop relations with diplomats and dignitaries from particular countries — former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden was known as Ukraine's man in Washington.

"Vice President Pence's visit sent a clear message about the enduring strength of the relationship between Georgia and the United States," Georgian Ambassador to the United States David Bakradze told Foreign Policy by email. "This is an important milestone in the bilateral relationship."

"In short," a representative from the Estonian Embassy in Washington, D.C. relayed to FP, "we consider the trip a great success."

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The embassy of Montenegro did not immediately respond to request for comment.

Update, Aug. 1 2017, 4:16 pm ET: This piece was updated to include comment from the Estonian Embassy.

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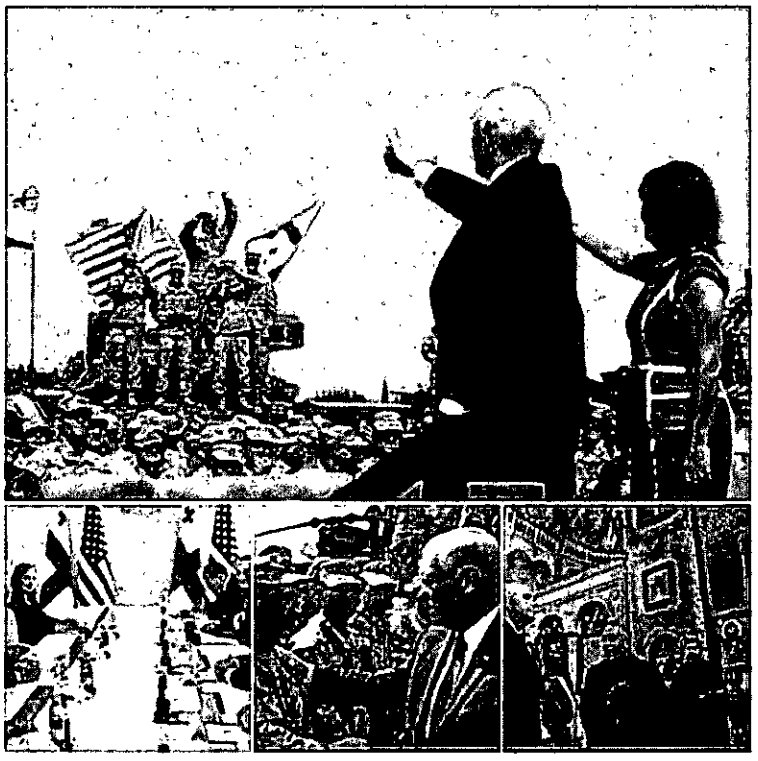
Social Media Coverage

Prominent Facebook Posts on the VP Trip

Vice President Mike Pence

Vice President Mike Pence added 4 new photos
2 hrs

#VPinEurope Photos of the Day: Karen and I landed in Georgia last night and were welcomed by Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili and his wife, Maia. Today, the Prime Minister and I met and I told him that the United States of America, under President Donald J. Trump, strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgia's soil. Following our productive discussions, we toured the Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition, a symbol of the ancient faith that fills Georgia's ancient land, with Patriarch Ilias II and Father Giorgi Zviadadze. To conclude our visit to Georgia, I spoke with American and Georgian troops at Exercise Noble Partner and discussed our shared commitment to promote security and stability across the wider world. Today we recommit ourselves to the cause of security, prosperity, and freedom for the people of Georgia.



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Vice President Pence's Trip to Europe

24 Photos Updated 2 hours ago

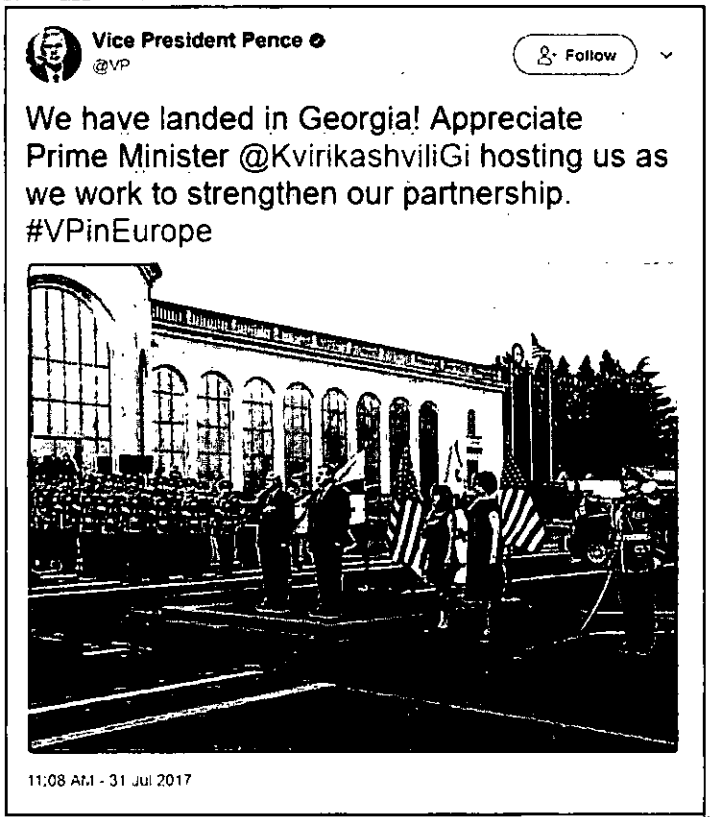


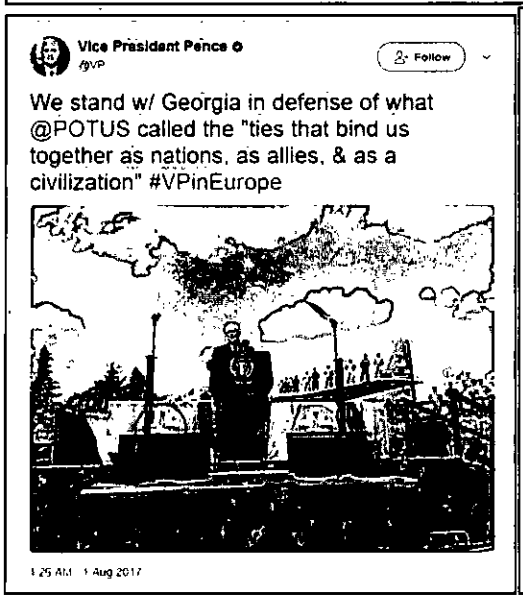
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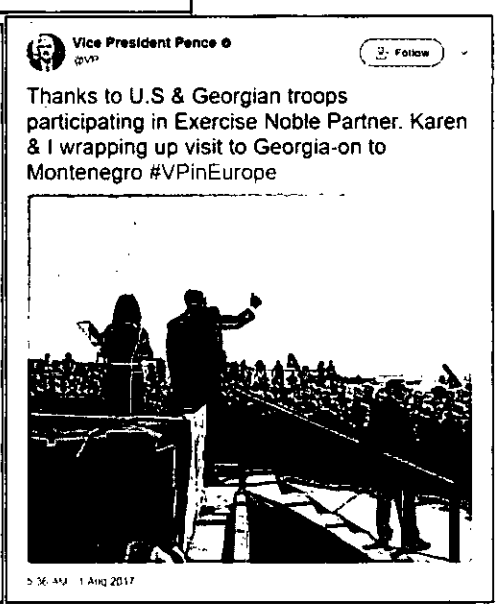
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Prominent Tweets on VP Visit

Mike Pence, Vice President of the United States – 4.08M Followers







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Vice President Pence ✪
@VP

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Today, we recommit ourselves to the cause of security, prosperity, and freedom for the people of Georgia. #VPinEurope

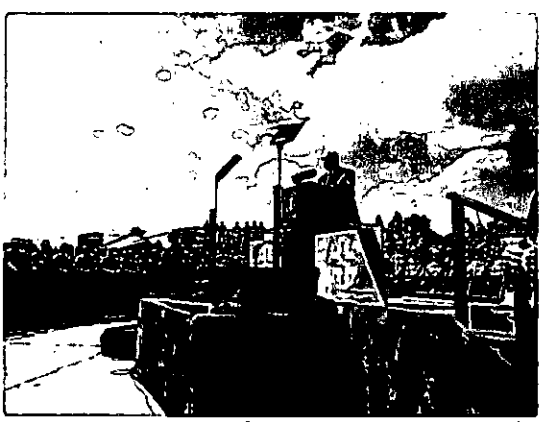


4:34 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✪
@VP

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A better relationship will require Russia to reverse actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place. #VPinEurope



4:32 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✪
@VP

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We stand here today in the gap - on a front line of freedom, compromised by Russian aggression nearly a decade ago. #VPinEurope



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Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

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The rise of adversaries new and old requires renewed strength and resolve by all who cherish freedom. #VPinEurope

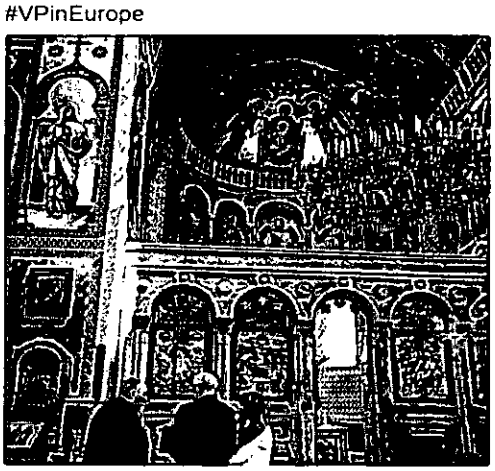


4:31 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

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Karen & I visited Sioni Cathedral a symbol of the faith that fills Georgia's ancient land. Thanks Patriarch Ilia II & Fr Zviadze #VPinEurope

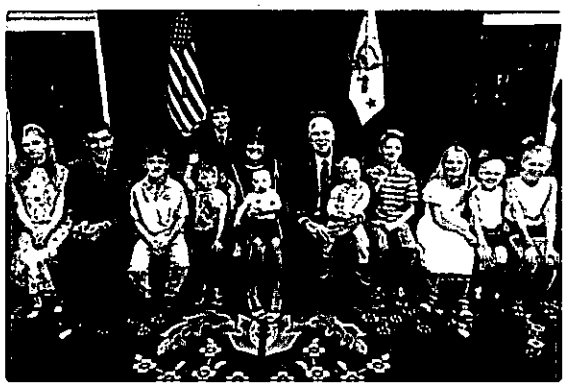


4:01 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

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Karen & I spoke w/ dedicated @EmbassyTbilisi staff members & their families & thanked them for the great work they do for the US #VPinEurope



2:19 AM - 1 Aug 2017

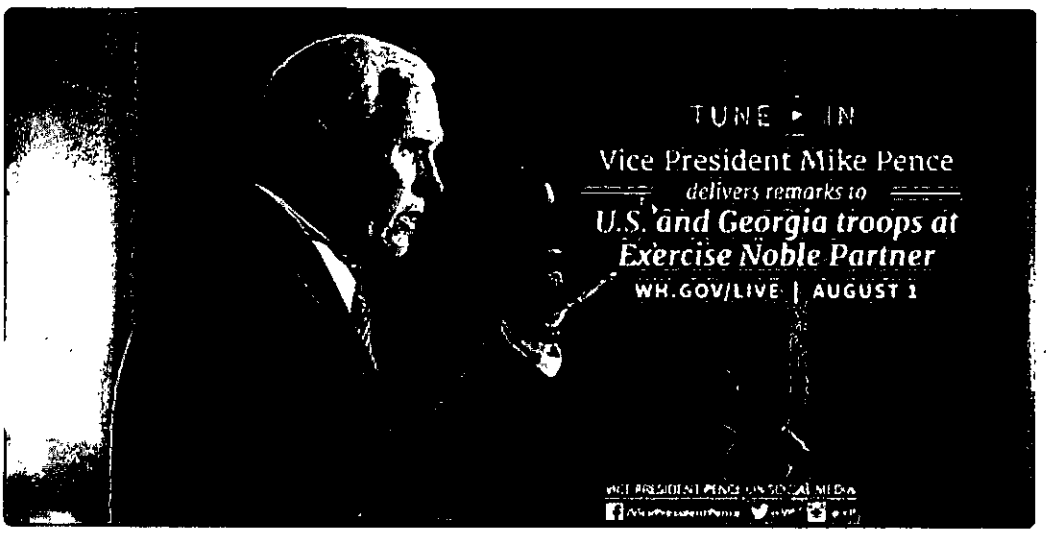
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Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

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TUNE IN! I'm speaking to U.S. and Georgia troops at Exercise Noble Partner: 45.wh.gov/v3dhHa #VPinEurope

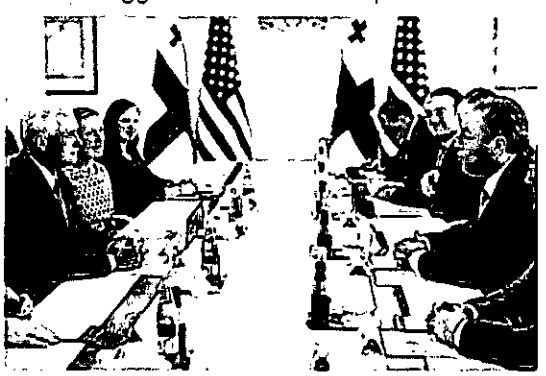


4:14 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

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The United States will continue to work with Georgia to reduce vulnerabilities and counter Russian aggression. #VPinEurope

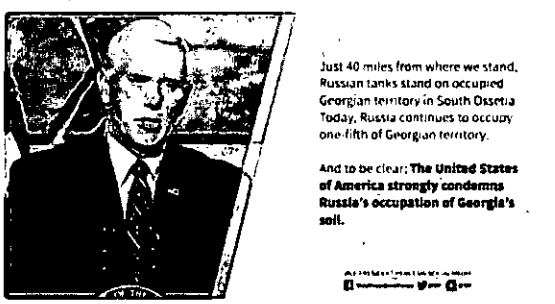


2:16 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

Follow

To be clear: the United States of America strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgia's soil. #VPinEurope



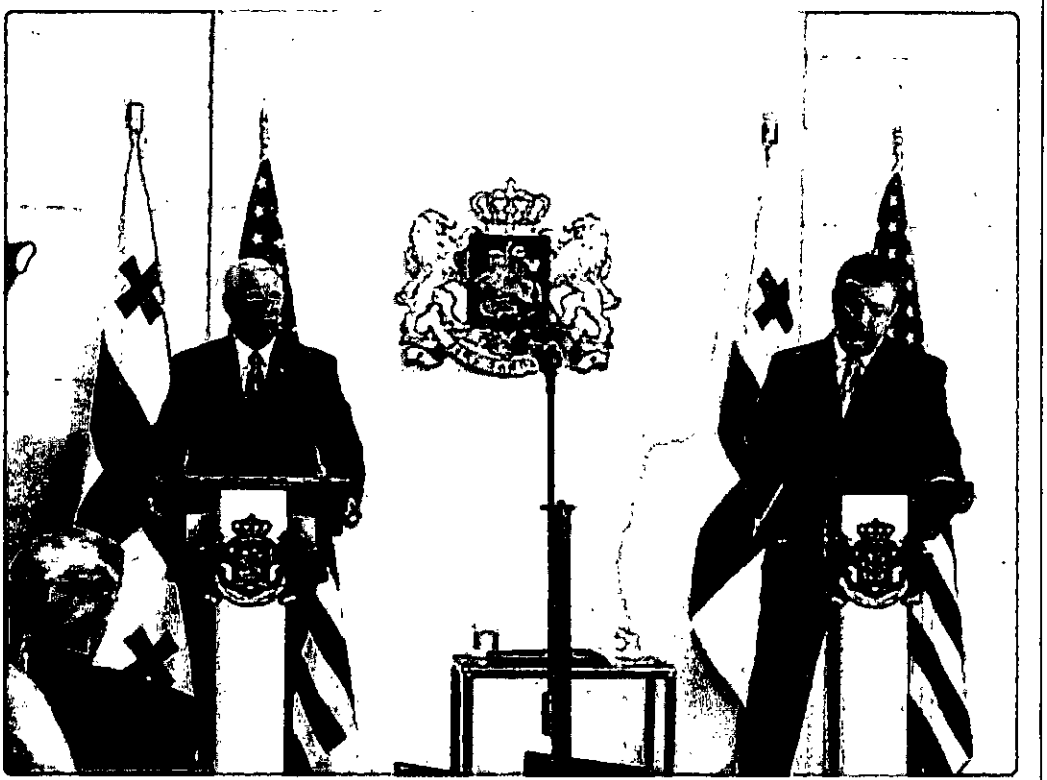
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Vice President Pence @VP · 7h

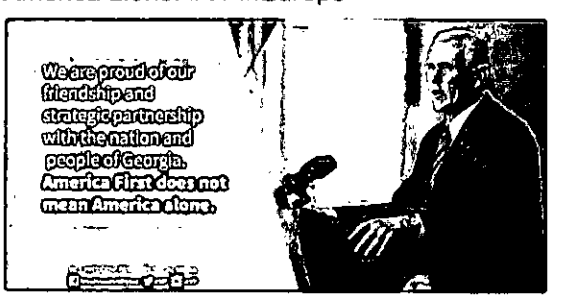
It is heartening to see that Georgia already exceeds NATO's goal of spending two percent of gross domestic product on defense. #VPinEurope



102 433 1.7K

Vice President Pence @VP Follow

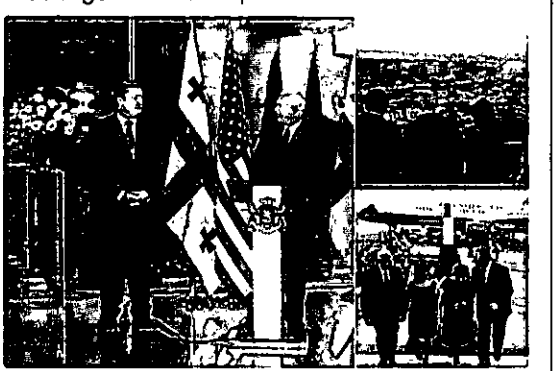
We are proud of our friendship and partnership with the nation and people of Georgia. America First does not mean America alone. #VPinEurope



12:45 AM - 1 Aug 2017

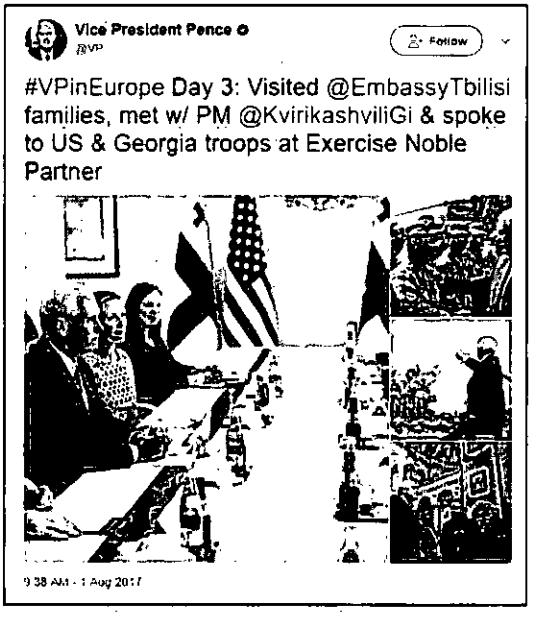
Vice President Pence @VP Follow

Thanks @KvirikashviliGi & Maia for welcoming Karen & I to Georgia yesterday. We enjoyed Tbilisi, looking forward to our meetings #VPinEurope

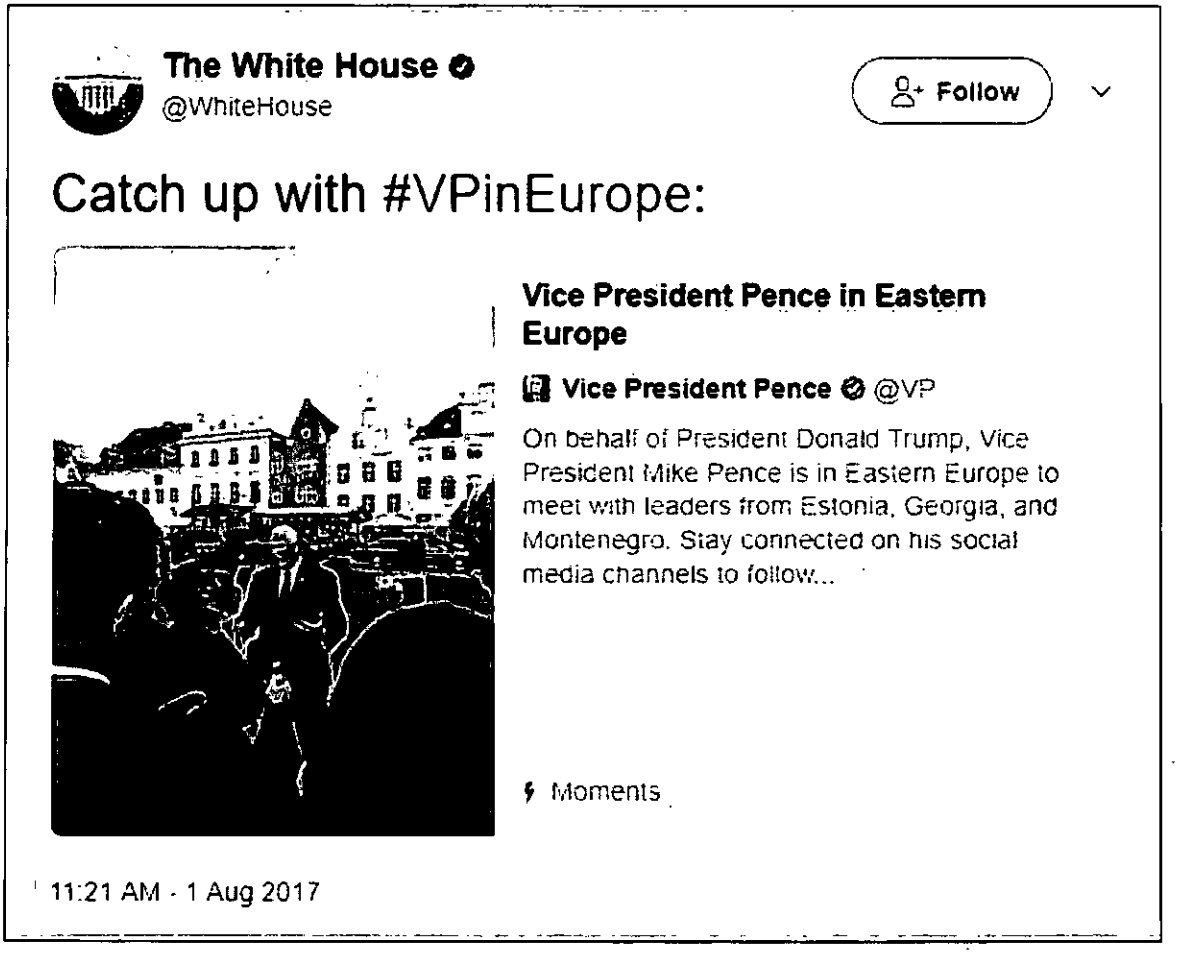


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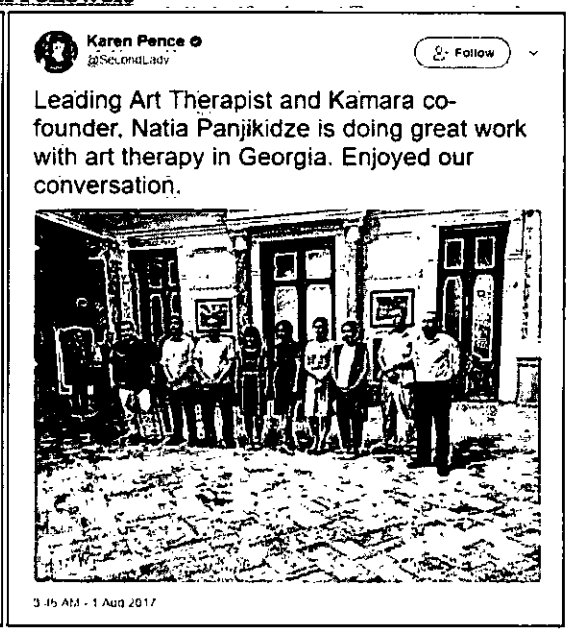


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Karen Pence, Second Lady of the United States – 235K Followers





John McCain, U.S. Senator – 2.39M Followers



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Mark Knoller, CBS News White House Correspondent – 301K Followers

Mark Knoller
@markknoller
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In Tblisi, addressing US and Georgian troops. @VP declares the US "strongly condemns Russian occupation of Georgian soil."



4:35 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Mark Knoller
@markknoller
Follow

Declaring Georgia's "future is in the west," the @VP reaffirmed US support for Georgia's eventual membership in @NATO.



4:38 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Mark Knoller
@markknoller
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Earlier, VP and Mrs Pence visited Tblisi's Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition. They toured, lit candles and spent a moment in prayer.



4:58 AM - 1 Aug 2017

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Government Statements and Releases

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and U.S. Vice President Mike Pence Agree to Further Enhance Georgia-US Security and Economic Cooperation
1 August 2017
Government of Georgia (Press Release)

Readout of Second Lady Karen Pence's Visit to Tbilisi, Georgia
Office of the Second Lady
1 August 2017
White House

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and U.S. Vice President Mike Pence Agree to Further Enhance Georgia-US Security and Economic Cooperation
1 August 2017
Government of Georgia (Press Release)

Tbilisi, 1st August 2017 – Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili today met with United States Vice President Mike Pence to discuss expanding future security and economic cooperation between Georgia and the U.S. Last night, Kvirikashvili hosted Vice President Pence and the American delegation for dinner in Tbilisi.

"Vice President Pence's visit so shortly after taking office bears witness to his and President Trump's great desire to deepen the strategic partnership and friendship with Georgia, for which I am very grateful," stated Prime Minister Kvirikashvili. "The Georgian nation deeply appreciates the American people's friendship, solidarity, and strong support."

During their meeting, Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and Vice President Pence discussed the U.S.-Georgian security partnership in depth. Following the meeting, the Vice President met with Georgian and U.S. soldiers participating in the Noble Partner exercise, a U.S. Army-led exercise to support the training, evaluation and eventual certification of Georgia's second light infantry company contribution to the NATO Response Force (NRF).

"The Vice President's meeting with Georgian and American service members participating in the Noble Partner exercises is an unmistakable demonstration of the strong U.S. support for spurring our country's sovereignty and integration into NATO," affirmed Prime Minister Kvirikashvili. "The special bonds and extraordinary sacrifices of our two militaries -- currently fighting extremism together -- is something to behold. Georgia and the U.S. are truly brothers in arms."

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and Vice President Pence also held productive discussions about furthering the economic partnership between Georgia and the U.S. Georgia's Anaklia Port on the Black Sea, which will become a focal point in trade between Europe and Asia, is being built by an American-Georgian consortium, led by U.S. company Conti. SSA Marine, another U.S. company, will

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operate it. The two leaders also discussed potential steps for moving forward with a bilateral free trade agreement between the two countries.

During the visit, Vice President Pence also reaffirmed U.S. support for continued progress toward Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

-/-

Readout of Second Lady Karen Pence's Visit to Tbilisi, Georgia
Office of the Second Lady
1 August 2017
White House

Second Lady Karen Pence started her day with the Vice President where they participated in a meet-and-greet with U.S. embassy employees and their families. Mrs. Pence continued her day to the National Parliamentary Library where she joined art therapists and patients from Kamara, a pscho-social rehabilitation center and leading provider of art therapy in Georgia. The Second Lady observed the patient's art therapy work before participating in a roundtable discussion with Kamara co-founders and art therapists, Natia Panjikidze and Nino Komakhidze, and art therapist Salome Panjikidze. After the art therapy program visit, the Second Lady enjoyed lunch at the Vinotel Restaurant with United States Marines who represented both the Marine Security Guard Detachment and Marines from the Georgia Deployment Program. After lunch, Mrs. Pence met with Georgian artist, Olesya Tavadze, who works in easel paintings and graphics. Mrs. Tavadze is passionate about American literature, in particular Robert Frost. Mrs. Pence viewed Mrs. Tavadze's exhibit of paintings inspired by Robert Frost's poems at the Tbilisi History Museum Karvasla. Following the museum visit, Mrs. Pence joined the Vice President to tour the Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition. After the tour, Mrs. Pence listened to the Vice President deliver remarks to U.S. and Georgian Noble Partner Participants at the Tbilisi Airport before departing to Podgorica, Montenegro.

"Art therapy is an emerging profession in Georgia with only a few professionally trained art therapists in the country," said Second Lady Karen Pence. "I will cherish my opportunity to meet with the leading art therapists in Georgia who are breaking new ground in the country by offering art therapy as an option for therapeutic treatment. They are doing great work and making a positive difference in Georgia."

Tomorrow, Wednesday, August 2nd, Mrs. Pence will wrap up her Eastern Europe visit with activities in Podgorica, Montenegro. To stay updated on Mrs. Pence's events, follow her on Twitter at, @SecondLady.

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From: Bethany Bassett
Sent: Thursday, August 03, 2017 3:53 PM
To: 'damian_murphy@foreign.senate.gov'
Subject: Pence/Georgia Trip

Hi Damian-

Hope you are well. We do some work with the Government of Georgia and thought you might be interested in material covering Vice President Pence's recent trip to Georgia.

Let me know if you need anything else.

Thanks much-

Bethany

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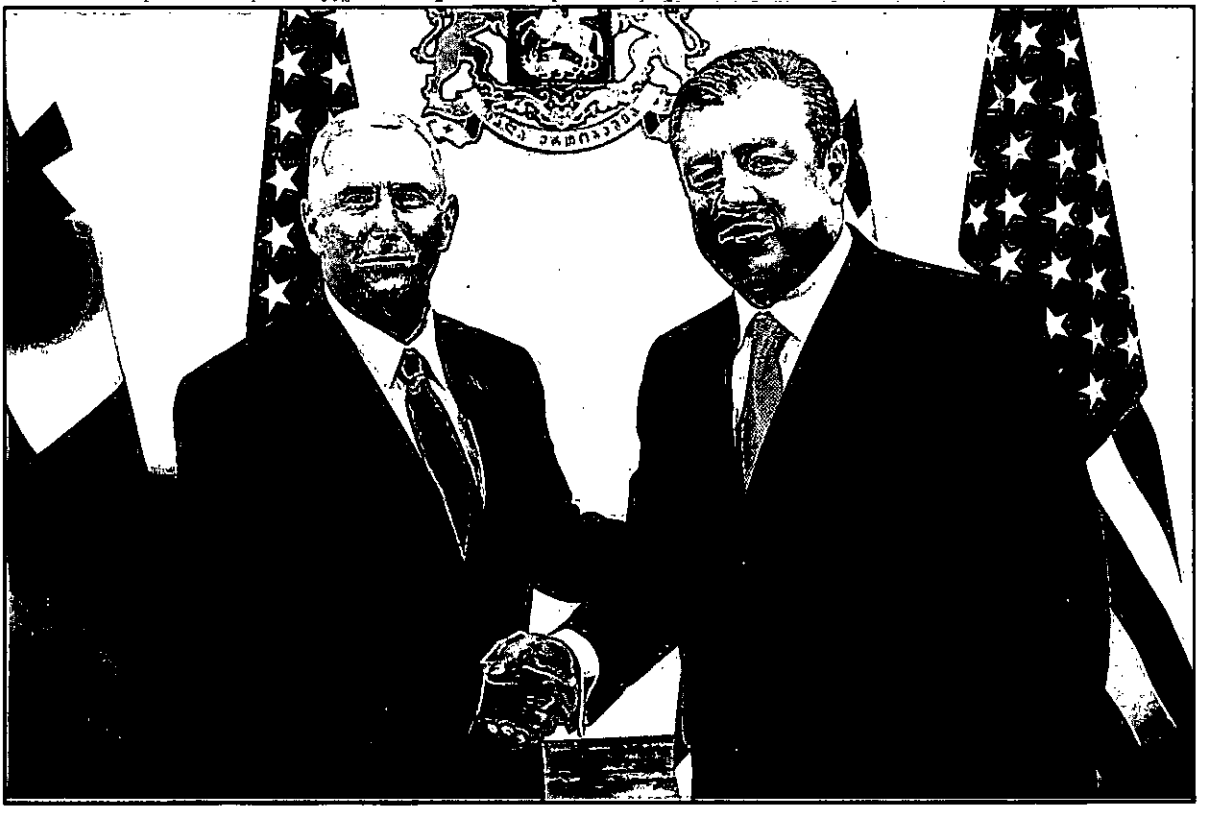
Bethany M. Bassett
Senior Vice President
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VICE PRESIDENT MIKE PENCE'S VISIT WITH GOVERNMENT OF GEORGIA

July 31-August 1, 2017



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Transcript of the Press Conference of Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili and US Vice President Mike Pence

PM Kvirikashvili:

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to host in Georgia Mr. Mike Pence, who is not only the Vice President of our country's key strategic partner, the United States of America, but also a great friend whom Georgia has made in such a short period. It is especially exciting that he is visiting Georgia in the company of his spouse.

After our brief introductory meeting in Munich, I was honored to hold meetings in Washington, at the invitation of the Vice President, and today we continue our dialogue in Tbilisi.

Mr. Vice President, your visit very shortly after taking office bears witness to your and President Trump's great desire to deepen your strategic partnership and friendship with Georgia, for which I am very grateful to you.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of our diplomatic relations. Throughout this time, America has played a vital role on our country's path toward democratic and economic development, safeguarding Georgia's sovereignty, and NATO membership.

Thanks to your assistance, today Georgia is neither a Soviet nor post-Soviet country. Today we are an EU associated European democracy. Together with the Americans, we are proudly standing guard protecting global security and making our contribution to regional stability.

The Georgian nation deeply appreciates the American people's friendship, solidarity, and strong support.

Mr. Vice President, today we discussed our strategic partnership further in depth. First, I would like to single out and welcome our defense and security cooperation. Your meeting with Georgian and American service members participating in the Noble Partner exercises is an unmistakable demonstration of the strong US support for spurring our country's sovereignty and integration into NATO alike.

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This year, we adopted the Joint Action Plan that ensures enhancing Georgia's resilience, which is so crucially important for maintaining the stability and sustainability of Georgia and the region.

The United States of America has provided Georgia with significant financial assistance over these 25 years, and today we are happy to be an increasingly attractive country for American businesses. Today we offer one of the best business environments, extremely low corruption and red-tape rates, and equally low taxes, which is the best opportunity for American businesses to benefit.

Our goal is to put in place the best platform in the region suitable for American business interests. Notably, American companies are taking interest in engaging in large-scale regional infrastructural projects implemented in our country. Along with the Conti Group joining the Anaklia Deep Sea Port Consortium, we welcome the signing of the document on cooperation between the Anaklia Deep Sea Port Consortium and SSA Marine, one of the leading American port operators in the world. According to this document, the SSA Marine will operate the container terminal and invest in this most valuable project in the country today. The foregoing reaffirms the growing interest of American businesses and our country's immense potential for becoming the regional hub.

In the past 25 years, we have implemented numerous energy projects in cooperation with the United States. These projects ensure sustainable Euro-Atlantic energy security, and we are committed to continuing our cooperation in this direction as well.

We are a partner ready for high-level trade and investment relations with the USA based on mutual economic benefits.

Georgia is America's important partner in the region, which, among others, stems from our shared values, such as democracy and human rights. America has played an important role in the building of our democratic institutions. Our democratic development, for its part, is a precondition for developing Georgia as a sustainable and stable state that ensures the protection of the rights of every citizen and preserves our cultural uniqueness.

US support is vital in peaceful resolution of Georgia-Russia conflict. We deeply appreciate the US strong and unwavering stance on Georgia's territorial integrity. The decisions made by President Trump, you personally, Mr. Vice President, and the new Administration and the Congress on Georgia's occupied territories have proved unprecedented.

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Today we discussed the serious challenges facing our country as a result of occupation. The US plays a tremendous role in the Geneva International Discussions format. Importantly, through high-level engagement, particular decisions must be sought for ensuring the de-occupation of and security in Georgia's territories, and for political conflict resolution.

In conclusion, I would like to reaffirm that Georgia has always been and will always be by the US' side when it comes to any challenge or threat facing the world. Our strategic partnership focuses equally on strengthening security in Georgia, regionally, and worldwide, on promoting peaceful and democratic development.

Once again, I emphasize the importance of this visit and its outcomes. We appreciate the fact that, despite more than one challenge in different parts of the world, the Vice President is visiting Georgia as part of his first European trip.

I am also thankful to our American colleagues for visiting Georgia and their special contribution to deepening our bilateral cooperation.

I am convinced that our joint efforts will further deepen our strategic partnership. At the same time, we are eager to introduce the Vice President, his spouse, and the American guests to Georgia's culture and historical heritage as the pride and joy of the Georgian nation.

Thank you.

VP Pence:

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili thank you so much for those words and for the hospitality you shown me and my family. It was an honor to welcome you to the White House just a few short months ago. And now it is my honor to be welcomed by you to the beautiful and storied nation of Georgia.

The President of the United States of America, President Donald Trump sent me here with a simple message for you and for the people of Georgia: we are with you; we stand with you; we are proud of our friendship and strategic partnership with the nation and the people of Georgia. In a word, I am here to say: America first does not mean America alone. And America stands with Georgia.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the US diplomatic relationship with Georgia. Yet, this is a nation whose roots stretch back to the amiss of history. Sitting at the crossroads of

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empires and civilizations, where East meets West, where North meets South; Georgia has fostered your own language, your own traditions, your own identity over the millennia. Today the people of Georgia are renowned the world over for your vibrant culture, which, my wife and I enjoyed last night at our first super dinner featuring Georgian cuisine, and a lot of it and traditional song and dance from Abkhazia, South Ossetia and all across Georgia.

We have also been deeply inspired by the rich heritage of faith and my wife and I look forward to visiting the historic Sioni Cathedral and meeting the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church this afternoon. While this may be my first visit to this nation, the enduring courage and spirit of Georgian people have long inspired me. It was only a generation ago that Georgia was still imprisoned in then-Soviet Union. When that brutal regime collapsed, you reclaimed your independence and your freedom. You reached out our hand of friendship to Europe and United States of America and we were proud to reach back.

Today, I commended the Prime Minister for Georgia's democratic development, which has brought Georgia closer to unity with Europe and membership in North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Further progress on the goals that the Prime Minister has set will bring Georgia even closer and NATO even closer to your grasp and it will strengthen the bond between our nations.

Now, nowhere is the bond between our two nations stronger than in our shared effort to promote security and stability across the wider world. Georgia is the key strategic partner of the US. Since 2004, thousands of Georgians have served shoulder to shoulder with Americans in Kosovo, in Iraq and in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan alone, I say with grateful heart, Georgia has provided more troops on a per capita basis than any other country in the world. And 31 brave Georgian soldiers have given their lives for the cause of freedom. American people remember and mourn the sacrifice of your countrymen. They are heroes, all and they and their families will be enshrined in the hearts of American people forever. Later today I will meet with troops participating in the exercise Noble Partner. This initiative has brought together the armed forces of the US, Georgia and many other nations to train together and strengthen Georgia's ability to defend itself. It is only one of many examples of the US' commitment to Georgia's security.

President Trump and I stand by the 2008 NATO Bucharest statement, which made it clear that Georgia will one day become a member of NATO. As I expressed to the Prime Minister, it is heartening to see that Georgia already exceeds the NATO's goal of spending 2 % of its GDP on its national defense. But as we all know, Georgia's investment in defense is an

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investment born of necessity. At this very moment, just 40 miles from where we stand, Russian tanks stand on occupied territories at South Ossetia. Today, Russia continues to occupy one fifth of Georgian territory. So to be clear, the United States of America strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgian soil. The United States support Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders. Under President Trump the United States will reject any claim, at any time, by any nation that undermines this enduring principle. President Trump has called on Russia to seize its destabilizing activities. My purpose here is to reinforce that message to the people of Georgia.

In sign of our commitment President Trump will sign very soon legislation to solid and codify the United States' sanctions against Russia. As always, our country prefers a constructive relationship with Russia, based on cooperation and common interests, but President and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia: a better relationship, lifting of sanctions, will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place. We hope for better days and we hope for better relations with Russia. But the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow, I can assure you, will not deter the United States' commitment to our security, that of our allies and freedom loving nations around the world, like Georgia. The US will continue to work with Georgia to reduce your vulnerabilities and counter Russian aggression and so, too will we work with Georgia to deepen our ties of commerce of which the Prime Minister just spoke.

The United States has a keen interest in expanding our trade and investment relationship with Georgia. And your ongoing reforms Mr. Prime Minister have clearly demonstrated your openness and commitment to the stronger commercial partnership with the west. Today I thank the Prime Minister for his leadership focused on bringing greater economic opportunity to all of Georgian citizens. The Anaklia Deep Sea Port shows the potential of a stronger bilateral relationship between our nations. American companies are investing alongside with Georgian counterparts in this multibillion-dollar project. As we look toward the future of our two nations have untold opportunities to contribute even more to each other's prosperity. The US has stood with Georgia for quarter century and under president Trump we will continue to stand with you as partners, as friends and one day we will stand together as allies. Georgia's future is in the west and as the people of Georgia have long declared, our strength is now and always will be in our unity. So thank you Mr. Prime Minister, thank you for your hospitality here today and thank you for the strong leadership that you provide for this country. We look forward to working with you for the prosperity and the security of the people of Georgia and of our great nation.

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Q&A

Q: Greetings. I am Salome Kokiashvili, Public Broadcaster of Georgia. Mr. Vice President, you said during your visit to the Baltic States that the US always stands strong for freedom. In addition, the US has always been a staunch supporter of Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Given the continuous occupation of Georgia's regions—and we see that the fundamental rights of those living in these territories, of IDPs, are being violated on a daily basis—what steps Georgia can take together with its partners to deal with these problems?

VP Pence:

Well, as I said, the United States of America stands strong for the territorial integrity of Georgia. We have stood on that principle since the time that Russian tanks overtook Abkhazia and Ossetia in 2008. And we will continue to stand strong. The joint military operations that are taking place today, we hope, are a visible sign of our commitment to Georgia's sovereignty and to her internationally recognized borders.

We also believe that, in addition to security partnership, the stronger and more prosperous Georgia will lead to the restoration of a whole and free Georgia. So the United States will continue to look for ways where we can strengthen Georgia not only from the standpoint of its defense and security, but where we can strengthen Georgia economically, creating jobs and opportunity, and prosperity. Strengthening the hand of Georgia so that, one day, Georgia can once again celebrate its historical territorial integrity intact.

PM Kvirikashvili:

Thank you very much for the question. I would like to thank Mr. Vice President for his very clear message and the strong support Georgia enjoys from the US.

As mentioned earlier, our territorial integrity is a deep-rooted problem that requires a consistent approach in terms of Georgia's stability and economic and democratic development, on one hand, and Georgia's crucial defense and security partnership, on the other. I would like to reaffirm that this conflict can be resolved, and territorial integrity can be restored, only peacefully, consistently, through our economic development and with strong support from our strategic partners, especially from the US. Thank you.

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Q: Ashley Parker from the Washington Post. Mr. Vice President, in light of Russia's retaliation against sanctions, as well as Russia sending 100,000 troops to the eastern edge of NATO territory to drill, do you truly believe that better relationship that you and President Trump want with Russia is possible? And if things continue in this direction, can we be headed toward another cold war?

Mr. Prime Minister, you know better than anyone how real the threat of Russian aggression is. The Vice President just said that the US supports Georgia's aspirations into NATO, but what concrete assurances do you have that the US will defend you should Russia attack, as President Putin threatened?

VP Pence:

Thank you for your question. President Trump sent me on this journey to send a very clear message to the Baltic States, to the people of Georgia, and before the end of the day, Montenegro that the United States of America will stand with freedom-loving nations around the world. And that we will do so as Mr. President has said, not merely with words, but with actions. The presence of American forces in Poland, the presence of British forces—with whom I met—in Estonia, at the gathering yesterday, all give material evidence of the commitment of NATO in that region to live up to our Article 5 obligations. The current Russian exercises, which news reports today suggest will move up to 100,000 Russian troops into Belarus, is simply a confirmation of the importance of clarity within the NATO partnership.

President Trump and I believe that better relations with Russia may be possible. But as the President has said, we will see. But negotiations between parties always begin with the recognition of and respect for the position of each party. And with the sanctions President Trump will sign this week, codifying sanction that have been in place by the United States, our country is sending a very clear message and calling on our European allies to join in a very clear message that we mean what we say and say what we mean; that Russia's destabilizing activities in Ukraine, their support for rogue regimes like Iran, Syria, and North Korea, their posture has to change. But we believe by being clear and being strong that we can pursue a dialogue based on mutual understanding. President Trump holds the view that it has been a lack of clarity in the commitment by the US that has created much of the instability in the world today. When, in the past, America has spoken of red lines and not followed through on red lines. Many argue that it emboldened others to act in ways that they would not have. So President Trump believes that we can have peace through strength,

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and strong and clear positions, we believe, can create the foundation where authentic dialogue that may, we hope, result in better relations and in the resolution of long-standing disputes in Ukraine, Georgia, and other areas of the world.

PM Kvirikashvili:

Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Vice President, and thank you for the question. I think that a very clear and string message—we are with you!—tells everything. Georgia faces endless provocations daily along the occupation line, facing challenges of borderization, capturing, kidnapping of ethnic Georgians, and violating basic human rights of ethnic Georgians residing on the occupied territories. But the response to that is even more resolve and consistency, and dedication to the goals we set for ourselves. And integration into NATO is a process which matters for Georgia. Of course, the final goal to join NATO is set by the Georgian population, and we are following this very difficult path of reforming Georgia's military system and developing institutional democracy in Georgia. Believe me, through the consistency and dedication, clearness of our messages, and unity with our important strategic partners, it will be able for Georgia to reach this very important goal, to ensure long-term stability, and it is possible. We Georgians believe that.

Q: Reuters news agency, Margarita Antidze. Mr. Vice-President, what are the red lines Washington's red lines on Russia especially in regard with Georgia. And also you said in Estonia that in case of Russia's aggression against NATO alliance, members of the alliance, the US will intervene. What would be your reaction in case of Russia's aggression against Georgia, against NATO's partners? Thank you very much. Mr. Prime Minister do we have enough patience to wait NATO's partnership? We are waiting, you are waiting, and Georgia is waiting for a while? Thank you.

VP Pence:

Thank you for the question. Well, the essence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is a mutual defense. We agree that attack on one is an attack on all. What President wanted me to communicate as I traveled to the NATO countries, as later today I will visit the newest member of NATO is that the US says what it means and means what it says and we will live

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up our obligation under article 5. With regard to Georgia, we strongly support Georgia's aspiration to become a member of NATO and we will continue to work closely with this Prime Minister and the Government of Georgia broadly to advance the policies that will facilitate becoming a NATO member. We believe that Georgia has made an extraordinary progress not in just last twenty five years but over the last five years. There has been significant progress that we believe will strengthen the application for NATO membership. But with regard to the Russian aggression, which took place in 2008 which has... as we stand here today Russian tanks are parked on Georgian soil forty miles from where we stand. The US will continue to be unambiguous in our commitment to the territorial integrity of Georgia. We will stand for a strong and a whole Georgia, we will continue to provide support for the defense and security of Georgia and we will continue to seek a peaceful resolution that will reestablished internationally recognized borders of this nation.

PM Kvirikashvili:

Thank you Mr. Vice President. Thank you for the question. You said it is about patience, yes, it is about strategic patience, I would say, to stay consistent on the road where we are. Today we have all practical tools to advance toward NATO membership. We have substantial package, we are implementing it very successfully; we have Georgia Defense Readiness Programme jointly with the US, which is complementary to the Substantial Package; and it was said many times by the leaders of our strategic partners, the US first, of course and NATO leadership that no other country has a say to block the membership of Georgia to NATO. It is only NATO members and applicant countries, who decide about their future in NATO. And we have made our own decision. Thank you.

Q: Thank you, it is Peter Nicholas of the Wall Street Journal. Mr. Vice President, you have talked about the new Russian sanction's bill as an example of the US resolve in the face of Russian aggression. But did not the Trump's White House oppose this bill fearing that this bill relinquishes Presidential authority to Congress. What happened in this process that caused the White House to sign on?

Mr. Prime Minister, the US Intelligence community has concluded that Russia tried to interfere in our Presidential election. Living so close to Russia, having dealt with Russian provocations, do you have any advice to the US in how to cope with Russian efforts to intervene in our elections and influence voters in our country?

VP Pence:

Thank you, Peter, thank you. President Trump will sign the Russian sanctions bill soon. Our administration had concerns about this legislation that emerged from the US Senate. The concern was that the bill did not include traditional flexibility that is afforded to the State

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Department or any administration in the conduct of American foreign policy. I am pleased to report that the bill improved significantly as it moved through the House of Representatives and through the legislative process. And this legislation, we believe, will not only codify current Russian sanctions that our administration has upheld, but will also strengthen those sanctions, even while giving the President of the United States and our State Department the ability and a flexibility to be able to administer American foreign policy as appropriate. Let me say that in signing these sanctions, our President and our Congress are speaking in a unified voice that those matters that the President spoke about so eloquently in Warsaw, but Russian destabilizing activities, Russia's efforts to support rogue regimes, has to change. For there to be a change in our relationship with Russia, Russia has to change its behavior. By these sanctions, by my presence here, by the President's powerful affirmation of the objectives and the values of our alliance in the west our hope is for that we will move toward better relations and a better future and a more peaceful world as a result.

PM Kvirikashvili:

Thank you. First of all, let me mention once again how important is strong America for Georgia. We are genuinely interested in the strength of the United States; we want to see the US united, coping with global challenges. I do not think that Georgia is in a position to judge about Russian interference. With our excellent intelligence capabilities, we were not able to detect any interference and we think that American nation has made its decision to elect the President and of course we look for more partnership with the current administration of the US.

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Remarks by the Vice President to Noble Partner Participants

August 1, 2017

Tbilisi International Airport

Tbilisi, Georgia

THE VICE PRESIDENT: President Margvelashvili, Prime Minister Kvrikashvili, Minister Izoria, General Chachibaya, members of the armed forces of the United States of America and Georgia, to all our distinguished guests, it is an honor to join you here today to address the men and women of Exercise Noble Partner. (Applause.)

And to all of you, I bring greetings from the leader of the free world, the President of the United States of America -- President Donald Trump. (Applause.)

The President sent me here to this place, at this time simply to thank all -- thank you for stepping up to serve your nations, for standing in the gap on this great frontier -- united in the defense of freedom.

You are the best of us -- heroes all.

And you are here, the Americans among you so far away from home, because the United States and Georgia are bound together by the abiding oath of friendship and by our shared commitment to the cause of freedom.

Under President Trump, the policy of the United States is to place the security and the prosperity of America first. But as the President has made clear, and as our presence here today demonstrates, America First does not mean America alone.

We are here today, with the steadfast assurance of the United States of America to tell our friends in Georgia: We are with you. (Applause.)

We stand with the nation and the people of Georgia, and we will stand with you as you pursue membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. And the United States of America stands with Georgia in defense of what President Trump in Warsaw called "the priceless ties that bind us together as nations, as allies, and as a civilization." And those ties are freedom, democracy, and the rule of law.

The roots of the nation and people of Georgia stretch back into the mists of history. Sitting here at the crossroads of empires and civilizations -- where East meets West, where North meets South -- Georgia has fostered a vibrant culture and a rich heritage of faith.

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And through all the millennia, none have been able to deprive you of your identity. The people and culture of Georgia have stood the test of time. (Applause.)

It was only a generation ago that Georgia was still imprisoned inside the Soviet Union. That Communist regime personified everything that free peoples reject, and it sought to crush you in its heartless, inhuman embrace. The Soviet Union sought to eradicate your history -- even the very essence of who you are, the cherished ties of culture and faith.

But when the Soviet Union collapsed, Georgia reclaimed its liberty. You reached out your hand in friendship to the free nations of Europe and the United States, and the United States of America proudly reached back. (Applause.)

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the diplomatic relations between the United States and Georgia, and we marvel at your progress -- the progress you've made since you regained your independence. Georgia's future is in the West.

For many years, Georgia has been a key strategic partner of the United States. Since 2004, thousands of brave Georgians have served with their American brothers-and-sisters-in-arms in Kosovo, in Iraq, and in Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan alone, Georgia has provided more troops on a per-capita basis than any other country in the world. (Applause.)

And today we remember 31 Georgian soldiers who've given their lives in the cause of freedom in that land. The American people remember their sacrifice and their families on this day. They are heroes. And let me assure you and their families that they will be enshrined in the hearts of the American people forever.

The strategic partnership between the United States and Georgia is stronger now than ever before, and this joint exercise is a tangible sign of our commitment to each other to make it stronger still.

Exercise Noble Partner brings together the Armed Forces of the United States, of Georgia, and many other nations to train together and execute complex operations.

Noble Partner will strengthen Georgia's ability to defend itself in the years ahead. It will prepare Georgian soldiers to join NATO's Response Force in the future.

This exercise is a testament to your professionalism, to the high value that the United States and our

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NATO allies place on Georgia's security. But our commitment to your security doesn't stop there.

American advisors will continue to work alongside your leaders to improve Georgia's military readiness. And along with all our NATO allies, the United States is contributing to the Substantial Package for Georgia, to strengthen Georgia's resilience, and to bring Georgia ever closer to your goal of membership in NATO. (Applause.)

And to be clear, President Trump and the United States stand firmly behind the 2008 NATO Bucharest statement, which made it clear that Georgia will someday become a member of the most successful military alliance in the history of the world. (Applause.)

Georgia has already taken important steps toward this goal -- especially in terms of security. Georgia has long exceeded NATO's own goal of spending 2 percent of gross domestic product on defense. Your commitment is a model for many current NATO members, many of which have not fulfilled their obligations to our common defense. And so I want to congratulate and thank Georgia for your strong commitment and your strong example of national leadership on national defense. (Applause.)

And to those here in the uniform of the United States, be assured your Commander-in-Chief is busy making the strongest fighting force in the history of the world stronger still.

As President Trump said just a few days ago, in his words, "American might is second to none -- and we're getting bigger, and better, and stronger every day."

The President has already signed the largest increase in military spending in nearly 10 years. And we're calling on Congress to pass one of the largest investments in defense since the days of the Cold War.

Our investments in our defense, like Georgia's, are borne of necessity. The rise of adversaries new and old requires renewed strength and renewed resolve by all who cherish freedom.

We stand here today in the gap, on a frontline of freedom, a frontline compromised by Russian aggression nearly a decade ago. At this very moment, just 40 miles from where we stand, Russian tanks sit on Georgian land in South Ossetia. Today, Russia continues to occupy one-fifth of Georgian territory.

The United States strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgia's soil. (Applause.)

Be assured: The United States will continue to support Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity

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within its internationally recognized borders.

The United States of America, under President Donald Trump, will reject any claim, at any time, by any nation that undermines this enduring principle.

To that end, President Trump has called on Russia recently, here and elsewhere, to "cease its destabilizing activities," and we will continue to work with Georgia to reduce your vulnerabilities and counter potential Russian aggression.

And in a further sign of our commitment, very soon, President Trump will sign legislation to strengthen and codify the United States' sanctions against Russia.

The United States prefers a constructive relationship with Russia based on mutual cooperation and common interests. But the President and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia -- a better relationship, the lifting of sanctions will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused the sanctions to be imposed in the first place. And not before. (Applause.)

We hope for better days, for better relations with Russia, but the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow I can assure you will not deter this President or the commitment of the United States to our security, that of our allies, and freedom-loving nations around the world like the freedom-loving people of Georgia.
The United States has stood with Georgia since your independence, and under President Trump, we will continue to stand shoulder-to-shoulder and work hand-in-hand with you to fortify your defense, to strengthen your democracy, and to deepen your ties of friendship with Europe and the United States.

We stand with you because we know the wisdom of that ancient Georgian saying there is -- "strength is in unity." (Applause.)

So in unity, together, we will be strong in arms. In unity, together, we will be strong in resolve. And in unity, together, we will be strong in faith -- faith in freedom, and faith in Him from whom our freedom springs.

Earlier today, my wife and I visited the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church at the Sioni Cathedral; that soaring temple, whose foundations stretch back more than 1,500 years, is deeply inspiring. It's a symbol of the ancient faith that fills this land.

As I walked beneath its painted dome, I could not help but think of an ancient truth from the sacred scriptures, one which we'd do well to reflect on in these challenging times. As we train, as we

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prepare, as we promote commerce and mutual prosperity, we do well to remember those words: "Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."

Today, we recommit ourselves to the cause of security, prosperity, and liberty for the people of Georgia. We renew our pledge to stand together in unity as partners and as friends, and to one day stand together as allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (Applause.)

And we do so with confidence and with faith -- faith in the courage of all of you who wear the uniform, faith and confidence in the strength and resilience of the proud people of this ancient land, confident in the leadership of our Commander-in-Chief, President Donald Trump, and your leadership in Georgia, and with faith in the blessings and protection of God above, I know the United States and Georgia will embrace a future of freedom in unity together.

Thank you. God bless you. God bless Georgia. And God bless the United States of America. (Applause.)

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PRESS RELEASE: Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and U.S. Vice President Mike Pence Agree to Further Enhance Georgia-US Security and Economic Cooperation

Tbilisi, 1st August 2017 – Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili today met with United States Vice President Mike Pence to discuss expanding future security and economic cooperation between Georgia and the U.S. Last night, Kvirikashvili hosted Vice President Pence and the American delegation for dinner in Tbilisi.

"Vice President Pence's visit so shortly after taking office bears witness to his and President Trump's great desire to deepen the strategic partnership and friendship with Georgia, for which I am very grateful," stated Prime Minister Kvirikashvili. "The Georgian nation deeply appreciates the American people's friendship, solidarity, and strong support."

During their meeting, Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and Vice President Pence discussed the U.S.-Georgian security partnership in depth. Following the meeting, the Vice President met with Georgian and U.S. soldiers participating in the Noble Partner exercise, a U.S. Army-led exercise to support the training, evaluation and eventual certification of Georgia's second light infantry company contribution to the NATO Response Force (NRF).

"The Vice President's meeting with Georgian and American service members participating in the Noble Partner exercises is an unmistakable demonstration of the strong U.S. support for spurring our country's sovereignty and integration into NATO," affirmed Prime Minister Kvirikashvili. "The special bonds and extraordinary sacrifices of our two militaries -- currently fighting extremism together -- is something to behold. Georgia and the U.S. are truly brothers in arms."

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and Vice President Pence also held productive discussions about furthering the economic and trade partnership between Georgia and the U.S. Georgia's Anaklia Deep Sea Port on the Black Sea, which will become a focal point in trade between Europe and Asia, is being built by an American-Georgian consortium, led by U.S. company Conti. SSA Marine, another U.S. company, will operate it.

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During the visit, Vice President Pence also reaffirmed U.S. support for continued progress toward Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

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For more information contact:

Levan Karumidze

Media Adviser

Department of Public Relations

Administration of the Government of Georgia

Phone: +995 599 969610

E-mail: lkarumidze@geo.gov.ge ; levankarumi@gmail.com

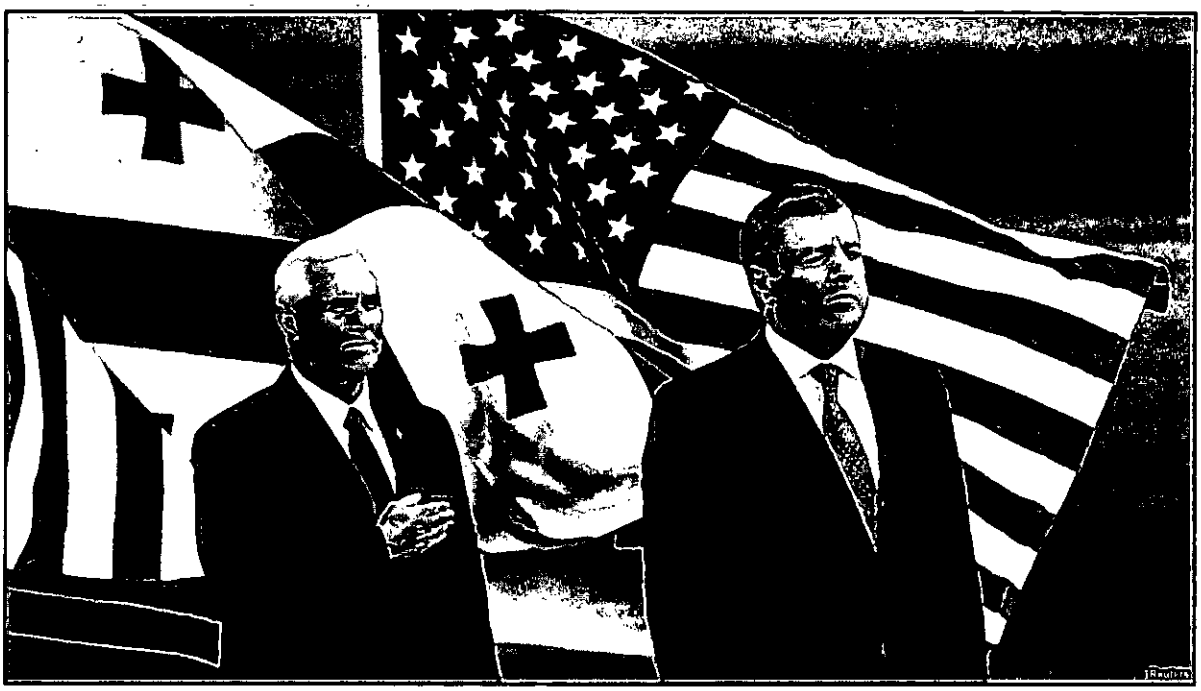
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Pence Arrives In Georgia In Bid To Reassure U.S. Allies
31 July 2017
Radio Free Europe

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence arrived in Georgia on July 31 for the second leg of his three-day trip aimed at reassuring allies in Eastern Europe in the face of what the United States calls Russia's efforts to destabilize the region.

Pence was greeted at the Tbilisi airport by Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili just hours after the U.S. vice president reaffirmed Washington's solidarity with the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders" and "undermine democracies."

"We stand with the people and nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and we always will," Pence said in Tallinn, where he met with the three Baltic presidents -- Kersti Kaljulaid, Raimonds Vejonis, and Dalia Grybauskaite, respectively.

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions, as have Georgia and the third ally on Pence's itinerary: new NATO member Montenegro.

"No threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said. "At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another."

The United States "rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation, or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies," he also said.

Article 5

Pence said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty -- the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

He also pledged that the United States would not be deterred from its goals by Moscow's demand for drastic cuts in staff levels at U.S. diplomatic facilities in Russia.

"Recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter commitment of the United States to our security, the security of our allies, and the security of freedom-loving nations around the world," he said.

After Pence began his visit to Estonia on July 30, Prime Minister Juri Ratas said the U.S. vice president raised the possibility of deploying the Patriot antimissile defense system in the country.

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"We spoke about it today, but we didn't talk about a date or time," Ratas told state broadcaster ERR.

The U.S. Patriot defense system is a mobile, ground-based system designed to intercept missiles and warplanes.

Ratas also said the two leaders talked about the upcoming Russian military maneuvers planned for near the Estonian border, "and how Estonia, the United States, and NATO should monitor them and exchange information."

'Very Clear' Message

Estonian Foreign Minister Sven Mikser told Current Time TV, the Russian-language network run by RFE/RL in cooperation with Voice of America (VOA), that Pence's visit was "an extremely important event."

"The message from the vice president was very clear: The U.S. stands by all its allied obligations and commitments, and the U.S. is truly committed to being there for us, for all of its NATO allies," Mikser said.

Pence planted an English oak before departing Tallinn aboard Air Force Two en route to Georgia's capital, Tbilisi, where he was greeted at the airport by Prime Minister Giorgi Kvrikashvili later on July 31.

Officials said Pence will highlight U.S. support for the Caucasus nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity before continuing on to Montenegro, the newest NATO member.

Georgia, which has expressed hopes of joining the Western alliance, has seen Russian encroachment on its territory.

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili said on July 27 that Pence's visit will demonstrate that the United States continues to support Georgia in building a stronger military force.

During Pence's visit, 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the previously planned Noble Partner 2017 exercises.

Troops from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, and Armenia were taking part.

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"The vice president's presence here is definitely showing that this is not only about military exercises, but it is also showing unification with our values, with our foreign policy targets, and showing a clear message that we are together," Margvelashvili said.

Pence was to participate in an official dinner hosted by Kvrikashvili. State media in Georgia reported that Margvelashvili was expected to join them.

On the last stop, Pence will welcome NATO's newest member with his stop in Montenegro, whose accession to the alliance in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica, U.S. officials said.

Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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Pence to Visit Estonia, Georgia, Montenegro on NATO, Russia
By Laurie Kellman
28 July 2017
Associated Press

Vice President Mike Pence visits three countries in Russia's neighborhood beginning Monday to signal support for them and NATO while drawing a line against aggression.

Pence's trip to Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro is viewed as a follow-up to President Donald Trump's visit to Europe earlier this month. Then, Trump used stops in Poland and Germany to try to pull off a tricky balancing act of improving ties with Moscow while also presenting the U.S. as a check against Russia's moves in the region.

Pence's mission will be encouraging those countries to continue to ally with the West and resist Russia's attempts to splinter the NATO alliance.

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson have previously been dispatched to try to allay the concerns of countries near Russia that the U.S. really will stand behind NATO and support the sovereignty of non-member former Soviet republics.

The concerns stem from Trump's suggestion during the campaign that the U.S. might not defend NATO allies and his apparent desire for closer relations with Russia. Trump received criticism on his

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first European trip for passing up the chance to affirm the NATO mutual defense commitment clause known as Article 5, which frames an attack on one as an attack on all. Trump did affirm U.S. support for Article 5 on his second trip to Europe.

The vice president is expected to deliver a message of support for U.S. trade and investment with the countries while underscoring the U.S. commitment to the security of the three nations, according to senior administration officials who briefed reporters about the trip on the condition that they not be identified by name. Pence also will stress the values of freedom of speech, democracy and religious tolerance.

In Estonia, Pence is expected to highlight bilateral ties with the U.S., particularly on trade, investment and cyber issues. Pence also is expected to thank Estonian officials for their approach to "burden-sharing," diplomatic speak for agreeing to spend a full share of 2 percent of their GDP on defense, the administration officials said.

The vice president also is expected to underscore the U.S. commitment to NATO, which sees Russia as a security threat and offers protection to concerned member states near Russia's borders.

In Georgia, Pence is expected to highlight U.S. support for its sovereignty and territorial integrity, the officials said. Georgia is the only country on the trip that is not a NATO member and, like Ukraine, has seen Russian encroachment on its territory. The administration officials said the U.S. is encouraging Georgia to continue to make reforms to its judiciary and expand anti-corruption efforts.

In Montenegro, Pence will celebrate that nation as the newest NATO ally.

On Wednesday, he'll attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Podgorica, Montenegro, to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and underscore the importance of good governance, political reforms and rule of law. Also expected to attend are the leaders of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia.

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VP Pence, in the Baltics, voices support for mutual defense in NATO
By David Mardiste, Andrius Sytas
31 July 2017
Reuters

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence on Monday assured the Baltic states of U.S. support if they faced aggression from Russia, telling them that Washington firmly backs NATO's doctrine of collective defense.

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Pence's comments to the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, ahead of Russian war games on their doorstep, were clearly intended to reassure following Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine and U.S. President Donald Trump's early lukewarm support for NATO.

During a visit to NATO's Brussels headquarters in May, Trump jarred allies by not restating U.S. support for a critical portion of the alliance's charter and instead berated some members for not spending enough on defense.

Trump has since said he supports the NATO charter's Article 5, the requirement that each member of the alliance defend each other if they come under attack.

"A strong and united NATO is more necessary today than at any point since the collapse of communism a quarter-century ago and no threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said at news conference with the three Baltic presidents.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States stands firmly behind our Article 5 pledge of mutual defense. An attack on one of us is an attack on us all."

Russia is scheduled next month to hold large-scale military maneuvers with its ally Belarus. The U.S. army's top general in Europe said this month that the Zapad war games could be a "Trojan horse" resulting in military equipment being left in Belarus.

He warned that Russia continues to "seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine democracies of sovereign nations and divide the free nations of Europe, one against another".

Lithuania's President Dalia Grybauskaite told Lithuanian radio that NATO's air-policing missions would be doubled during the Russian-led Zapad exercise.

Pence is also due to visit Montenegro, the alliance's newest member, and make a stop in Georgia, an aspiring member, which fought a brief war with Russia in 2008.

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Pence: Baltic States' Greatest Threat Comes from Russian Aggression
31 July 2017
Voice of America

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence said Monday there is no larger threat to Baltic states than the "specter of aggression" by Russia, as he pledged support for NATO allies Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

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Pence met in Tallinn with the presidents of all the Baltic states — Estonia's Kersti Kaljulaid, Latvia's Raimonds Vejonis and Lithuania's Dalia Grybauskaite — and afterward summarized the U.S. position on Russia's "destabilizing" activities:

"At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine democracies of sovereign nations and divide the free nations of Europe one against another. Under President Donald Trump, the United States of America rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies."

During his public remarks in Estonia's capital, the U.S. vice president also expressed hope for improved relations with Russia. He said the Kremlin decree this week ordering most American diplomats to leave their posts in Moscow will not deter the U.S. commitment to its allies' security.

Pence praised Estonia for meeting the NATO alliance target for defense spending of at least 2 percent of its gross domestic product, and he noted Latvia and Lithuania would hit that level by the end of next year. Trump has repeatedly called on NATO members to boost defense spending.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania all have asked for tangible demonstrations of U.S. military support. Concerns about Russian expansionism have increased sharply in the Baltic region since Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine three years ago.

From Estonia, Pence traveled later Monday to Georgia, where troops from the United States and other NATO partners are conducting military exercises that began Sunday.

Welcoming him to Tbilisi, Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili said, "Vice President Pence's visit sends a strong message about the enduring strength of the relationship between Georgia and the United States."

Pence praised the Georgian people for their strong "commitment to independence and freedom." He and Kvirikashvili dined together Monday and will hold talks Tuesday.

Following his visit to Georgia, Pence's three-nation tour of Eastern Europe will conclude in Montenegro, NATO's newest member.

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Pence Says U.S. Will 'Always Stand' With Baltic Nations
31 July 2017
Radio Free Europe

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence has reaffirmed Washington's support for the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders " and "undermine democracies."

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"We stand with the people and nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and we always will," Pence said on July 31 in the Estonian capital, Tallinn, where he met with the three Baltic presidents -- Kersti Kaljulaid, Raimonds Vejonis, and Dalia Grybauskaite.

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries and other allies in Eastern Europe have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions in their respective regions.

"No threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said. "At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another."

The United States "rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation, or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies," he also said.

Pence said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty -- the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

He also pledged that the United States would not be deterred from its goals by Moscow's demand for drastic cuts in staff levels at U.S. diplomatic facilities in Russia.

"Recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter commitment of the United States to our security, the security of our allies, and the security of freedom-loving nations around the world," he said.

After Pence began his visit to Estonia on July 30, Prime Minister Juri Ratas said the U.S. vice president raised the possibility of deploying the Patriot antimissile defense system in the country.

"We spoke about it today, but we didn't talk about a date or time," Ratas told state broadcaster ERR.

The U.S. Patriot defense system is a mobile, ground-based system designed to intercept missiles and warplanes.

Ratas also said the two leaders talked about the upcoming Russian military maneuvers planned for near the Estonian border, "and how Estonia, the United States, and NATO should monitor them and exchange information."

Estonian Foreign Minister Sven Mikser told Current Time TV, the Russian-language network run by RFE/RL in cooperation with Voice of America (VOA), that Pence's visit was "an extremely important event."

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"The message from the vice president was very clear: The U.S. stands by all its allied obligations and commitments, and the U.S. is truly committed to being there for us, for all of its NATO allies," Mikser said.

Pence planted an English oak before departing Tallinn aboard Air Force Two later on July 31, en route to Georgia's capital, Tbilisi, for the second leg of his trip.

Officials said Pence will highlight U.S. support for the Caucasus nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity before continuing on to visit the newest NATO member, Montenegro.

Georgia, which has expressed hopes of joining the Western alliance, has seen Russian encroachment on its territory.

Georgia, which has expressed hopes of joining the Western alliance, has seen Russian encroachment on its territory.

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili said on July 27 that Pence's visit will demonstrate that the United States continues to support Georgia in building a stronger military force.

During Pence's visit, 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the previously planned Noble Partner 2017 exercises.

Troops from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, and Armenia were taking part.

"The vice president's presence here is definitely showing that this is not only about military exercises, but it is also showing unification with our values, with our foreign policy targets, and showing a clear message that we are together," Margvelashvili said.

Pence was due to arrive in Tbilisi in the evening of July 31 and participate in an official dinner hosted by Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvrikashvili.

On the last stop, Pence will welcome NATO's newest member with his stop in Montenegro, whose accession to the alliance in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica, U.S. officials said.

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Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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Georgia begins U.S.-led military exercise a day before Vice President Pence visit
By Margarita Antidze
30 July 2017
Reuters

The Georgian army began two weeks of military exercises with the United States and other partner countries on Sunday, a day before U.S. Vice President Mike Pence visits the ex-Soviet nation.

About 2,800 soldiers from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, Armenia and Georgia were taking part in the maneuvers, with Washington dispatching an entire mechanized company including several Bradley infantry fighting vehicles and M1A2 Abrams main battle tanks.

Georgia's Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili said the drills were an important event for the South Caucasus republic.

"These exercises will help Georgia to get closer to NATO standards and to strengthen stability in the whole region," Kvirikashvili said at the opening ceremony on Sunday.

The "Noble Partner" exercises are being held in Georgia for the third time. Russian officials had not commented on the event yet, but in previous years Moscow warned that drills could destabilize the region, a charge denied by Georgian officials and U.S. diplomats.

"This exercise is not directed against any country. It's about to help Georgia to grow its capacity to interoperate in international operations," U.S. Ambassador Ian Kelly told Reuters.

Russia and Georgia fought a war in August 2008 over the breakaway Georgian region of South Ossetia. Moscow continues to garrison troops there and to support another breakaway region, Abkhazia.

The exercises were being run out of the Vaziani military base near Georgia's capital, Tbilisi.

Russian forces used to be based there until they withdrew at the start of the last decade under the terms of a European arms reduction agreement.

Pence plans to attend the drills and address participants on Tuesday.

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The United States has spoken favorably of the idea that Georgia might one day join NATO, something Russia firmly opposes.

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U.S. backing of Georgian military sends strong message to Russia: Margvelashvili
By Margarita Antidze
27 July 2017
Reuters

The United States has continued to support Georgia in building more resilient military forces, training and equipping its army, Georgian president Giorgi Margvelashvili said on Thursday.

He added that these issues would be "one of the main" topics discussed during U.S. Vice President Mike Pence's visit to the ex-Soviet country.

Margvelashvili also said the Georgian army will start two weeks of military exercises with the United States and other partner countries on Sunday, the day before Pence's visit to Tbilisi, to send an important message to Russia about their common values and political targets.

"The vice-president's presence here is definitely showing that this is not only about military exercises, but it is also showing unification with our values, with our foreign policy targets and showing a clear message that we are together," Margvelashvili told a news conference.

Russia defeated Georgia in a short war in 2008 over the breakaway Georgian region of South Ossetia, and Moscow continues to station troops there and to support another breakaway region, Abkhazia.

"This is an important message especially in the environment when (Russia's) training and exercises going on the occupied territories of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region (South Ossetia)," Margvelashvili added.

Pence plans to visit Georgia as a part of his trip to Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro.

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U.S., U.K., Ukraine, Others Begin Massive Military Drills In Georgia
30 July 2017
Radio Free Europe

Some 2,800 troops from host Georgia, the United States, and six other countries have begun a major military exercise in the South Caucasus nation.

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Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili and other leaders on July 30 said they see the event as a substantial step toward their goal of one day joining NATO.

"These exercises will help Georgia to get closer to NATO standards and to strengthen stability in the whole region," Kvirikashvili said at the opening ceremonies at the Vaziani military base near the capital, Tbilisi.

Georgia's defense minister, Levan Izoria, called the scale of exercises "unprecedented" and said they "make clear the support for Georgia by the NATO member states, especially the U.S."

U.S. officials in the past have spoken favorably toward Georgian hopes of eventually joining NATO, a move Russia vehemently opposes.

At a 2008 summit in Bucharest, NATO leaders made a formal pledge that Georgia "will become a NATO member," but alliance leaders have moved warily toward that goal in the face of Moscow's opposition.

About 1,600 U.S. troops and 800 Georgian soldiers are taking part in the two-week exercises, dubbed Noble Partner.

Troops from Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, and Armenia are also participating, with the United States deploying a mechanized company, including several Bradley infantry fighting vehicles and M1A2 Abrams battle tanks.

It is the third time the exercises have been held in Georgia, a country that has seen much-larger rival Russian encroach on its territory since its independence from the Soviet Union.

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway areas of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008, and Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

In previous years, Moscow warned that the drills could destabilize the region, a notion that Georgia and the United States have dismissed.

"This exercise is not directed against any country. It's about to help Georgia to grow its capacity to interoperate in international operations," U.S. Ambassador Ian Kelly told Reuters news agency, citing missions such as the current one in Afghanistan.

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence is scheduled to visit Georgia on July 31 after a stop in Estonia to meet with Baltic leaders also concerned about Russia's intensions in their region. He will meet with U.S. troops on August 1.

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During his stop in Tallinn, Pence said, "Our message to the Baltic states -- my message when we visit Georgia and Montenegro -- will be the same: To our allies here in Eastern Europe, we are with you, we stand with you on behalf of freedoms."

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US and Georgia hold military drills, as Russia shows off naval strength
30 July 2017
BBC

The US and Georgia have launched their biggest ever joint military exercises, as the Caucasus nation seeks to push its bid to join Nato.

US Vice-President Mike Pence will visit this week and is expected to back the plan, which Russia strongly opposes.

Georgia and Russia have had fractious relations over two breakaway republics and fought a brief war in 2008.

Russia staged its own show of force on Sunday with President Putin joining a naval display in St Petersburg.

The US-Georgia military drills, dubbed Noble Partner, involve some 1,600 US and 800 Georgian troops.

The US has also deployed M1A2 Abrams main battle tanks and M2 Bradley infantry vehicles for the exercises, which will go on until 12 August.

A number of other nations, including the UK, are involved.

Georgian Defence Minister Levan Izoria said the "unprecedented" exercises would "make clear the support for Georgia by the Nato member states, especially the US".

Although Georgia is not a member of Nato, it does voluntarily contribute to the Nato Response Force (NRF), the multinational force of land, air, navy and special operations units the alliance can deploy quickly when needed.

The Russo-Georgian War in August 2008 led to Moscow occupying the Russian-backed self-proclaimed republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Meanwhile on Sunday, President Vladimir Putin attended a show of might on Russia's annual Navy Day.

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Some 50 warships and submarines were on displayed in the Gulf of Finland and on the Neva river around St Petersburg.

He said in an address: "The navy is not only dealing with its traditional tasks but also responding with merit to new challenges, making a significant contribution to the fight against terrorism and piracy."

There were other displays around the country, and Russia also showed off its naval hardware at its Syrian base of Tartus.

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Mike Pence arrives in Estonia, kicking off Eastern Europe trip
By David Caplan
30 July 2017
ABC News

Vice President Mike Pence and second lady Karen Pence arrived in Estonia Sunday afternoon, kicking off a three-country visit of Eastern Europe.

The Pences, who left from Joint Base Andrews in Maryland Saturday night, were greeted at the Tallinn airport by U.S. ambassador to Estonia James D. Melville and Estonian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sven Mikser. The group shook hands and spoke briefly before the vice president's motorcade headed to the Pences' hotel.

"On behalf of @POTUS, arrived in Tallinn, Estonia with @SecondLady to meet w/ leaders of Baltic States on security & prosperity #VPinEurope," Pence tweeted upon his arrival.

In explaining the purpose of the trip, a senior Trump administration official told reporters last week, "This builds upon the administration's engagement. The Secretary of Defense had been there recently, and it builds upon the Vice President's trip when we addressed some of these leaders at the Munich Security Conference when he met with the three Baltic Presidents then. And he has since hosted the Prime Minister of Georgia here at the White House, as did the President. And then on Montenegro's accession into NATO, we also hosted leadership here in the White House."

The office of Estonian Prime Minister Juri Ratas said in a press release Saturday that Ratas and Pence will meet at 5:30 p.m. local time, to "discuss cooperation in defence, digital issues and cyber defence, as well as cooperation between the US and the EU in connection with the Estonia Presidency of the Council of the European Union."

Ratas said in a statement, "The contribution of the US to the security of the Baltic States and also the whole of Europe is vital, and I certainly wish to thank the Vice President for that. Besides that, we plan to speak about the Estonian digital solutions that are of interest to the US, and developing

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cooperation in cyber defence at our meeting. Another important topic that will be on the table, is the cooperation between the EU and the US."

A senior White House administration official told reporters last week that while in Estonia, Pence "will highlight our strong bilateral ties, including by trade and investment. And particularly with Estonia, successes in the cyber realm, and their current partnership on cyber issues, and their leading not only in that region, but globally."

On Thursday, Karen Pence expressed her enthusiasm for the trip, tweeting "Looking forward to our visit to Eastern Europe where I highlight my iniative, art therapy. What an honor!"

According to the second lady's office, she will tour a medical center in Tallinn, and participate in a roundtable discussion with art therapists.

The senior administration official said in Georgia, the vice president will "highlight our commitment to the U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership, our strong support Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity ... and its internationally recognized borders, and our support for Georgia and their Euro-Atlantic aspirations."

While in Georgia, Karen Pence will visit with patients of an art therapy program in Tbilisi.

On Wednesday, Pence will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Podgorica, Montenegro, to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and underscore the importance of good governance, political reforms and rule of law. Also expected to attend are the leaders of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia.

In Podgorica, Montenegro, the second lady will tour a honey farm, where she will learn about a local family's beekeeping business.

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Pence travels to Baltic states to reassure allies and send message to Russia
By Ashley Parker
31 July 2017
Washington Post

Vice President Pence touched down in Estonia on Sunday on the eve of President Trump's expected signing of legislation to impose broad sanctions against Russia, and said he came bearing a message from the president: "Russia's destabilizing activities, its support for rogue regimes, its activities in Ukraine, are unacceptable."

Speaking briefly with reporters in Town Hall Square here in Tallinn's old town, Pence reaffirmed the president's decision to sign the sanctions bill but also held out the possibility that the implementation

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of the penalties — for which Russia has already retaliated — might actually improve relations between the two countries, saying he and Trump "expect Russian behavior to change."

"The president and I remain very hopeful that we'll see different behavior by the Russian government, with regard to Ukraine, with regard to supporting rogue regimes in Iran and North Korea," Pence said. "We continue to believe that if Russia will change its behavior, our relationship can change for the good and improve for the interests in both of our countries and the interest of peace and stability in this region and around the world."

Russia has rejected the idea that the sanctions will in any way improve relations, with its U.S. embassy tweeting on Saturday: "Washington still doesn't get the fact that pressure never works against @Russia, bilateral relations can hardly be improved by sanctions."

Russian President Vladi-mir Putin said Sunday that the U.S. diplomatic missions in Russia will have to reduce their staffs by 755 people.

Pence's long-planned, 3½-day trip to Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro was originally intended to reaffirm the United States' commitment to NATO — Estonia is one of five countries meeting its defense spending commitment — and touch on the United States' commitment to the security of the Baltic states. All three countries have been the targets of Russian aggression.

But in the wake of Trump's decision to sign the legislation — which passed the Senate on Thursday on an overwhelming 98 to 2 vote — the vice president's trip has taken on a clear Russia focus, senior administration officials said. Nearly all of Pence's remarks and speeches are likely to address the challenges Russia poses in this part of the world.

But Pence's rhetoric abroad so far seems slightly out of sync with some of his boss's previous comments and actions on the topics of both Russia and NATO.

Despite the firm conclusion of his own intelligence community that Russia interfered in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Trump has repeatedly refused to fully accept that determination. When he has acknowledged that Russia did meddle, he has played down Moscow's role, saying other state or individual actors could have played a role as well.

When asked how the Baltic states can accept Pence's reassurances that the United States will support them against Russian aggression and interference in their domestic politics when Trump has frequently taken a softer line, the vice president said, "The president has confirmed repeatedly that we believe Russia did meddle in U.S. elections. I think he has also said it could have been other actors as well."

His message throughout Eastern Europe, Pence added, is a simple one. "While our policy is America-first, it's not America-alone, and that our allies in Eastern Europe can be confident that the United States of America stands with them," he said. "We are committed to NATO, we are committed to our common defense."

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Trump's comments and actions have at times raised questions about his commitment to the alliance, despite statements of strong support from Pence and other administration officials.

While attending a ceremony at NATO headquarters in Brussels in May on his first trip abroad, Trump delivered a speech from which he specifically removed a roughly 20-word section intended to reaffirm U.S. support for the treaty's Article 5, which says an attack on one member is an attack on all members. He later committed to NATO's collective defense ideal, which is the cornerstone of the treaty, but the earlier omission worried European leaders.

Pence on Sunday again tried to play down the president's previous uncertainty on Article 5, arguing Trump has never wavered in his commitment.

"From the time the president sent me to speak at the Munich Security Conference, we made it clear that the policy of our administration is to stand firmly with our NATO allies and to stand firmly behind our Article 5 commitment that an attack on one is an attack on all," Pence said. "The president has made it clear from the outset of our administration and will continue to make it clear to all our allies in the region."

Trump was initially reluctant to accept the Russia sanctions legislation, which curbs his ability to lift them on his own without consent from Congress. But he finally agreed to sign it after revisions, which also include sanctions on Iran and North -Korea.

In many ways, the president had no choice. Trump would have encountered a fierce political backlash — as well as faced the threat of a veto override from a Republican-controlled Congress — had he refused to sign the bill. Rejecting the legislation also would have raised further questions about his seeming reluctance to confront Putin.

Pence's trip also comes as Trump is facing growing scrutiny at home over Russia, in the form of special counsel Robert S. Mueller III's widening investigation. In addition to looking into whether Trump's associates colluded with Russians in the 2016 election, Mueller's probe has grown to include questions about the finances of Trump and his family, as well as possible attempts to obstruct the investigation.

Michael McFaul, the ambassador to Russia under former president Barack Obama, said that Pence's tough-on-Russia message will be "welcome" in each of the countries he's visiting — but may disguise a deeper uncertainty about what the Trump administration's true policy is toward Moscow.

"It will be easy for him to have positive bilateral meetings when he goes there," McFaul said. "But of course he has a very convoluted message on what they're doing on Russia."

All three countries have struggled for years with Russian aggression. In 2007, Estonia faced a cyberattack that hobbled dozens of corporate and government websites — an attack for which it blames Russia, though the Kremlin denies the charge. In 2008, Russia invaded Georgia, and

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Montenegro has accused Russian agents of an attempted coup in 2016, aimed at preventing the nation from joining NATO.

"Most certainly all three of these countries have felt the influence — the coercive influence — of Russia on their domestic politics, so from my point of view, that's an interesting and positive set of countries for him to go to, with the caveat that I don't know what their Russia policy is," McFaul said. "I follow it pretty closely, and I could not tell you what the strategy is."

But Sunday afternoon, in the sun-soaked town square, Pence seemed to only have one overarching message — that he and the president are in policy lockstep, and that he is just a humble emissary spreading Trump's greetings abroad.

The vice president stopped to shake hands with a few of the people who had gathered to watch the spectacle, many of them — like Pence — tourists in Estonia. As each individual introduced themselves, Pence often tied their comments back to Trump, telling a man from Paris, "The president was just in Paris for Bastille Day," and telling a couple from Poland, "The president was just in Warsaw."

Then, he ducked into his motorcade and pulled away.

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Pence Delivers Tough Speech on 'Unpredictable' Russia
By Peter Nicholas
31 July 2017
Wall Street Journal

Vice President Mike Pence issued one of the Trump administration's toughest attacks to date on Russia, coming to a nation on Russia's border to warn against aggression from the "unpredictable neighbor to the east."

Mr. Pence said Monday that President Donald Trump would sign a bill passed by Congress that imposes new sanctions on Russia, despite earlier reservations from the White House and a promise from Moscow to expel hundreds of U.S. diplomats in return.

Mr. Pence said the Russia must be held accountable for its actions, saying the U.S. wouldn't lift sanctions until it sees as a reversal of "the actions that caused the sanctions in the first place."

"At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe one against another," he said.

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Mr. Pence is in the midst of a three-day overseas trip that includes stops in two other countries that Moscow has seen as its traditional sphere of influence: the former Soviet state of Georgia and the Balkan state of Montenegro. His repeated message is that the U.S. won't abandon allies living in Russia's shadow.

The vice president delivered his remarks outside Estonia's defense headquarters, surrounded by symbols of military resolve. Flanking him were armored tanks and standing in front of the stage were hundreds of U.S., British, French and Estonian troops, hands clasped behind their backs.

Moscow has accused the U.S. of threatening Russia by pushing for the expansion of NATO up to its borders through the admittance of the Baltic states and the inclusion of Ukraine and Georgia.

Before the speech, Mr. Pence and the presidents of the three Baltic states, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, received a private military briefing that opened with an officer referencing the "eastern flank of NATO."

Mr. Pence praised Estonia for being one of just five in the NATO alliance to devote 2% of its gross domestic product to defense. The country of 1.3 million has pushed for more U.S. air cover for the region, but NATO officials say its 183-mile border with Russia would be hard to defend against a determined Russian assault. A Rand Corp. study last year showed that Russia could beat back NATO forces reach the outskirts of Tallinn, the capital, in just a few days.

In his 2016 presidential campaign, Mr. Trump often spoke of more cooperative dealings with Russia, and described NATO as obsolete. But he has since toughened his line on Russia, and Mr. Pence's remarks signaled again that the U.S. supported NATO's common-defense provision, known as Article 5.

"The United States rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation or malign influence in the Baltic States or against any of our treaty allies—and under President Donald Trump, the United States of America will stand firmly behind our (NATO) Article 5 pledge of mutual defense—and the presence of U.S. Armed Forces here today proves it," Mr. Pence said.

Mr. Trump in recent months has described relations with Russia at an all-time low point. After insisting he didn't believe Russia interfered in the 2016 presidential race, he has said Russia was "probably" involved, though he has also said China and other actors could have been. Russia has denied interfering in the election.

Mr. Pence, talking to reporters during a visit to Old Town Square, said that Mr. Trump's feelings on the matter are clear.

"The president has confirmed repeatedly that we believe Russia did meddle in U.S. elections." Mr. Pence said. "I think he has also said it could have been other actors as well. But he's confirmed his belief and our intelligence that Russia was involved in meddling in U.S. elections."

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Having chided Russia for its actions, Mr. Pence held open the possibility of a thaw. "President Trump has made it clear: America is open to a better relationship with Russia," he said.

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The Latest: US VP Wants Better Relations With Russia
31 July 2017
Associated Press

The Latest on U.S-Russian tensions (all times local):

2:50 p.m.

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence says that despite what the State Department described as "a regrettable and uncalled-for act" when the Kremlin ordered the U.S. to cut embassy and consulate staff in Russia, America wants to improve relations with Moscow.

Pence told reporters during a visit to Estonia that "we hope for better days, and better relations with Russia."

Speaking to the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania — all former Soviet republics bordering Russia — he said Monday that "the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, the security of our allies, and the security of freedom-loving nations around the world."

Pence was speaking on the first leg of a European tour that continues to Georgia and Montenegro.

On Sunday, Russian President Vladimir Putin said the U.S. would have to cut 755 of its embassy and consulate staff in Russia — a sweeping reduction that he described as a response to new U.S. sanctions.

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1:10 p.m.

The Kremlin says Washington needs to show "political will" for Russia-U.S. relations to recover.

President Vladimir Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said Monday that it will take time for the U.S. to rid itself of what he called "political schizophrenia." He added that Russia remains interested in constructive cooperation with the U.S.

On Sunday, Putin said the U.S. would have to cut 755 of its embassy and consulate staff in Russia — a sweeping reduction which he described as a response to new U.S. sanctions. The Russian Foreign

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Ministry also announced closing down a U.S. recreational retreat on the outskirts of Moscow as well as warehouse facilities.

Moscow's move showed that its earlier hopes for an improvement in Russia-U.S. ties after Donald Trump's victory in the U.S. presidential election have withered.

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12 noon

Russian President Vladimir Putin has demanded that United States cut its embassy and consulate staff in Russia by 755 people, heightening tensions between Washington and Moscow three days after the U.S. Congress approved sanctions against Russia.

The U.S. State Department called Putin's move "a regrettable and uncalled-for act."

The announcement Sunday also came hours after U.S. Vice President Mike Pence landed in Estonia, which borders Russia, for talks with the country that holds the rotating European Union presidency.

Russian's Foreign Ministry on Friday first ordered a reduction by Sept. 1 in U.S. diplomatic personnel in Russia to 455 people in response to a new package of American sanctions.

The sanctions seek to punish Moscow for meddling in the 2016 U.S. election and for its aggression in Ukraine and Syria.

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Pence: We will 'hold Russia accountable for its actions'
By Louis Nelson
31 July 2017
Politico

Amid a fresh wave of sanctions and renewed tension between the United States and Russia, Vice President Mike Pence reassured NATO's Baltic member states that the U.S. stands firmly behind its mutual-defense commitment in the face of stepped-up aggression from Moscow.

"The United States stands with the nations and people of the Baltic States — and we always will. We stand with our NATO allies in our commitment to your security," Pence said Monday in remarks at the headquarters of Estonia's defense forces. "Today we stand where East meets West — on a great frontier of freedom. No threat looms larger in the Baltic States than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east."

Pence's remarks came before members of the U.S., French, British and Estonian militaries and followed a meeting between the vice president and the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

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Pence offered optimism that the U.S.-Russia relationship might improve but said that any warming would come with a shift in Moscow's behavior. The vice president reaffirmed President Donald Trump's commitment to signing sanction legislation targeting Russia passed overwhelmingly last week by Congress.

In response to the forthcoming sanctions measure, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the U.S. to reduce the number of diplomats stationed in Russia by more than 700. The dueling diplomatic maneuvers marked a new low in already frosty relations for the former Cold War rivals.

Trump's presidency brought with it the possibility of improved relations with Russia after the president spent much of the 2016 campaign speaking warmly of Putin and expressing optimism that he would be able to build a strong relationship with the Kremlin. Instead, relations have worsened amid investigations into Russia's efforts to interfere in last year's election, continued Russian military activity in Ukraine as well as Moscow's support for Syrian dictator Bashar Assad.

Trump, too, has shifted his rhetoric in regards to Russia, drawing a relatively tougher line even if some critics would prefer him to take an even more aggressive approach. And after characterizing NATO as "obsolete" and questioning the U.S.'s willingness to comply with the treaty's all-for-one, one-for-all defense agreement, Trump has more recently reaffirmed his nation's commitment while also urging member states to increase their defense spending.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States will continue to hold Russia accountable for its actions — and we call on our European allies and friends to do the same," Pence said Monday in Estonia. "President Trump has made it clear: America is open to a better relationship. But the president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia — a better relationship, and the lifting of sanctions, will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place."

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Pence: Administration policy is 'America first,' not 'America alone'
By Julia Manchester
31 July 2017
Hill

Vice President Mike Pence looked to reassure NATO allies on his trip to Eastern Europe on Sunday, saying President Trump's "America first" policies are not meant to isolate U.S. allies.

"President Trump sent me to eastern Europe with a very simple message, that is America first doesn't mean America alone," Pence said in an interview with Fox News during a stop in Tallinn, Estonia.

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"Our message to the Baltic states, my message when we visit Georgia and Montenegro will be the same. To our allies in Eastern Europe, we are with you, we stand with you on behalf of freedom," he continued.

Pence's visit comes as tensions between NATO member states and Russia continue to rise. He arrived in Estonia on Sunday to showcase support for NATO allies in the Baltic region and Eastern Europe.

It also comes as Trump prepares to sign legislation that would slap brand new sanctions on Russia.

"The president has made it very clear that Russia's destabilizing activities and support for rogue regimes and its activities in Ukraine are unacceptable. The president made it clear that very soon he will sign sanctions from the Congress to reinforce that," Pence said Sunday.

"But at the same time as we make our intentions clear that we expect Russian behavior to change, the president and I remain very hopeful that we'll see very different behavior from the Russian government," he added.

Russia caught the attention of NATO and its allies earlier this month, when when it sent 2,500 troops to the Latvian and Estonian borders as a part of a military drill in the Pskov region.

It's also at the heart of the election meddling investigations that have expanded to include questions about possible Trump campaign contact with Moscow.

The vice president will also make stops in Montenegro, which became a NATO member earlier this year, and Georgia, which has attempted to join the alliance in the past.

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Vice President Mike Pence: Russian 'Aggression' Makes NATO Necessary
By Eoghan Macquire
31 July 2017
NBC News

The "specter of aggression" from Russia makes a strong and united NATO more important now than at any time since the Soviet Union's collapse, Vice President Mike Pence said Monday.

"Russia seeks to redraw international borders by force, undermine democracies of sovereign nations and divide the free nations of Europe," Pence said after meeting the leaders of the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

The three European countries are now members of NATO but were part of the Soviet Union and still feel the pressure of Russian influence after gaining independence in the early 1990s.

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"A strong and united NATO is more necessary today than at any point since the collapse of communism a quarter-century ago and no threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States of America rejects any attempts to use force, threats, intimidation or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies," he added.

Pence made the comments in the Estonian capital, Tallinn, the first stop on a three-day trip that will also take in Georgia and Montenegro.

Some in the Baltic nations have fretted they could be in Russia's sights after its annexation of Crimea and backing of pro-Moscow separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Although Pence stated that U.S. still wanted to foster "better relations" with Russia, he reiterated that the U.S. would continue to adhere to Article 5 of the alliance's charter — a tenet of collective defense.

President Trump had previously caused concern among NATO members by saying the organization was "obsolete" and declining to promise that America would defend fellow members if they did not up their military spending.

No other president since NATO was founded in 1949 had questioned that principle — until Trump, although he recently expressed support for NATO's Article 5.

Pence also stated that "recent diplomatic action" by Russia will not impact American commitments to the security of its NATO allies.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said Sunday that he was ordering the U.S. to reduce its diplomatic staff in the country by 755.

The move came in the wake of new sanctions voted through by the U.S. Congress last week which aim to punish Moscow for interfering in the 2016 presidential election and for its military aggression in Ukraine and Syria.

"Recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter the commitment of the United States of America to our security, the security of our allies and the security of freedom loving nations around the world," Pence said.

"[The U.S.] stands firmly behind our Article 5 pledge of mutual defense and an attack on one of us is an attack on us all," he added.

Estonian president, Kersti Kaljulaid, said the presence of Pence in Tallinn "underlined the credibility of Article 5."

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President Dalia Grybauskaitė of Lithuania, meanwhile, praised the decision of the U.S. Congress to pass new sanctions against Russia, describing it as a "very good message."

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The Testing Ground for Trump's Russia Policy
By Uri Friedman
30 July 2017
Atlantic

At the moment, U.S.-Russian relations could be thought of as a live experiment in the "Great Man" theory of history, which attributes historical change to the actions of exceptional individuals rather than impersonal forces that transcend any man or woman. If it were up to Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump, it seems, Russia and the United States would be teaming up to defeat terrorism, leaving the bitter days of sanctions and election meddling and proxy wars behind them.

The evidence to date, however, suggests it's mostly not up to the two men. Despite all the speculation about the American president cozying up to the Kremlin, the United States under Trump has repeatedly done the opposite. Yes, Trump has echoed Putin talking points, wavered on clearly committing to defend NATO allies, and ended some U.S. funding for rebels fighting Russia's ally in Syria, President Bashar al-Assad. Yet since Trump took office, the U.S. government has also attacked Assad's forces, admitted another country to the NATO military alliance over Russian objections, and advanced new sanctions to punish Russia for interfering in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign.

Many members of Congress and Trump's own administration, including the president's defense secretary and national-security adviser, consider Russia a U.S. adversary. Many Americans, amid investigations into whether the Trump campaign colluded with the Russian government to undermine Hillary Clinton's candidacy, are suspicious of any White House concession to the Kremlin. And so far, these views, as well as the clashing geopolitical goals of the two world powers, have proven stronger than Trump's desire to pursue friendlier relations with Moscow.

In the latest sign of the Russia hawks prevailing over the Russia doves, Vice President Mike Pence departs Sunday for a four-day trip to Eastern Europe, where he'll seek to reassure U.S. allies who see nearby Russia as a threat—and to shore up NATO in particular as a bulwark against that threat.

In Estonia, he'll meet with the leaders of the three Baltic countries, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, who are among NATO's easternmost members. In Georgia, an aspiring NATO member, he'll visit troops involved in a NATO-affiliated military exercise. And in Montenegro, a new NATO member that has never before received such a high-ranking U.S. official, he'll attend a summit of current and potentially future NATO members.

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According to the White House, Pence is making the trip "at the direction of President Trump." And surely there's some truth to that. But the direction of President Trump—especially when it comes to Russia—is far from clear. The countries on Pence's itinerary offer examples for how the administration's perplexing, bifurcated approach to Russia could be poked and prodded in the coming months and years. Small nations such as Estonia, Georgia, and Montenegro, which straddle East and West, literally test the limits of the America-First president's commitment to U.S. allies and to fundamentally changing America's relationship with Russia. And unlike another testing ground for Trump's Russia policy—his response to Russia's alleged intervention in the U.S. election—the one in Eastern Europe will yield results that don't primarily affect Americans. It isn't all about "us."

It's also very much about Estonians and Georgians and Montenegrins: The vice president is visiting a region that is "somewhere in between the EU and NATO and Russia," Vesko Garcevic, a former Montenegrin ambassador to NATO, told me. "Therefore, for Russia, this is really a battleground—a place where Russia can influence countries."

Or consider the view from Moscow: "The Baltic states right now are seen as a U.S./NATO foothold close to Russia's main [power] centers; Georgia is a U.S. ally in the Caucasus and the Black Sea region, a sensitive area in security terms," Dmitri Trenin, the director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, wrote in an email. As the Kremlin sees it, Pence "will be visiting the new U.S. sphere of influence. Russian conventional thinking maintains that the U.S. is supporting the Balts, Georgians, and Ukrainians not because they are democratic or strive for democracy but because they are vehemently anti-Russian and are only too happy to lease their territory to the Pentagon, CIA, et al."

In each country that Pence is visiting, the perceived threat from Russia looks different. In Georgia, which fought a war with neighboring Russia in 2008 that left two Georgian breakaway regions in de facto Russian control, there are fears that the Kremlin could do what it did in Ukraine in 2014: support separatists and seize control of just enough territory to keep the country in Russia's sphere of influence and out of the West's. Moscow currently seems content to nibble around the edges of Georgian territory, in what Georgian officials have condemned as "creeping occupation."

In Montenegro, the threat is more political than military. The former Yugoslav republic joined NATO in June despite Russian vows to retaliate against its onetime ally for taking a "hostile course"—one that would cut the Russian navy off from the Adriatic Sea and reduce Russia's sway in the Balkans. And several Serbian and Russian nationals will soon go on trial in Montenegro for allegedly planning a coup last fall that would have overthrown the nation's pro-West government, brought the pro-Russia opposition to power, and thwarted Montenegro's bid to become part of NATO and eventually the European Union. Montenegrin authorities claim the Russian government was involved in the plot, which the Kremlin denies. Montenegro is a young, fragile democracy, Garcevic observed, and Russia has exploited its "democratic deficiencies" to "gain greater geopolitical influence in the region."

In Estonia, a former Soviet republic that is now a thriving democracy ensconced in NATO and the EU, the main concern is Russia manipulating Estonian politics and policy by, for instance, launching cyberattacks, tampering with energy supplies, engaging in information warfare, or carrying out

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limited military provocations. The present preoccupation involves Russia's plans to stage large-scale military drills, known as Zapad ("West"), in Belarus this fall, ahead of which NATO has rotated troops through the Baltics and Poland. Baltic leaders are now increasing their defense budgets—already among NATO's most robust—and asking the alliance to permanently deploy anti-aircraft weapons in their countries as further deterrents against Russian aggression.

The wide open question, however, is the extent to which Pence's reassurance tour can really reassure these countries.

"People here, politicians, are puzzled with the new administration's position toward Russia," said Garcevic. There are moments when that position "seems to be very friendly and forthcoming to Putin," which suggests the United States is "turning its back to the Balkans," he explained, and other moments when it appears to be a "more traditional American approach" of fully supporting NATO and America's European alliances.

"Sometimes it seems like an unguided missile," Garcevic mused. "You don't know what's going to happen next."

Since Montenegrin officials "are interested in having good relations with the U.S.," they try to "minimize and downplay, water down, what President Trump says, particularly in his tweets," Garcevic added. But when I presented him with a scenario—Pence tells the Montenegrin government everything it wants to hear, only for Trump to complain about NATO on Twitter a couple days later—Garcevic acknowledged the limits of this approach. "If Trump says this, this would be like a cold shower," he responded. "This will cast a shadow over what I'm assuming the vice president will do in the Balkans."

I found Toomas Hendrik Ilves, who left office as Estonia's president shortly before Trump was elected, similarly mystified. "There will be cyber cooperation [between the U.S. and Russia], there won't be cyber cooperation, now there is cyber cooperation," he said. You have Trump and his supporters "trying to dream up some kind of conspiracy on the part of Ukraine against Trump and then you have [Trump's Ukraine envoy] Kurt Volker saying ... there are more Russian tanks in Ukraine than there are tanks in Western Europe."

"Were I to be in office right now, the concern would be trying to [determine] what is exactly the [U.S.] policy that we're going to have to count on," Ilves told me. So, I asked, how would he describe that policy?

He laughed. "I don't know. I don't know. I don't think anyone really does."

It's wrong to picture Estonian leaders panicking, Ilves said, but they're probably confused. "How do we proceed?" he asked. "Do we spend more money on [defense]? Do we start pushing for something in the European Union? Do we want NATO to have a shift in focus?"

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It used to be that "when the [American] president says something, it becomes policy," noted Ilves, who served as Estonia's president for 10 years, spanning the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Now he's unsure, especially when it comes to Trump's tweets. "I think that they don't reflect policy," he said.

Trenin, for his part, dismissed the idea behind much of the unease in Eastern European capitals: that Russia is poised to act aggressively against another country in its neighborhood, as it did in Ukraine. The worry is based on the assumption that Russia has some inherent desire to "expand, invade, [and] subjugate others," Trenin argued, and that assumption is mistaken. "From the Kremlin's standpoint, Russia's intervention in Ukraine [after a revolution overthrew Ukraine's pro-Russia President Viktor Yanukovych] was a defensive move. The importance of Ukraine to Russia's security and the Russian psyche can hardly be overestimated."

There "is only one Ukraine," Trenin added.

Nearby countries such as the Baltic nations will remain fearful of Russia, Trenin conceded, but those fears have less to do with Russia itself than with the West, whose leaders failed to protect them during the World War II era. (The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, a 1939 agreement in which Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union secretly staked out spheres of influence in the Baltics and elsewhere in the region, is "the big national scar" for Estonia and the other plundered countries, Ilves told me. From the Estonian perspective, great powers made a deal "about you," he explained. This left a legacy of "paranoia" that "is always a subcurrent" of the public's thinking on Russia-related matters.)

"In 1939-40, Britain and France did not much help [these countries] against the Nazis," Trenin wrote to me. "Now they are not sure whether the United States would defend them against a nuclear superpower. During the Cold War, the unanswered question was whether Washington would REALLY risk losing Chicago for Hamburg. Would it do so now for Tallinn? Since there can be no clear answer, there will always be fears"—whether Donald Trump is in office or not.

As for the Trump administration's contradictory Russia policy, and the latest move in Congress to impose additional sanctions on Russia in legislation that also slaps sanctions on Iran and North Korea, Trenin had this to say: "I think the Kremlin views the U.S. as a dysfunctional polity, with its political class at war with itself and its society deeply divided along cultural fault lines. Under these circumstances one hardly expects a consistent policy."

"The president has to bow to the prevailing anti-Russian consensus in the policy establishment," he continued. "The new sanctions bill, which puts Russia into the same category of U.S. worst enemies as Iran and North Korea, is a very candid statement that virtually nothing positive can be achieved between the U.S. and Russia for a long time to come," despite the hopes of a U.S.-Russian rapprochement that initially followed Trump's election.

"Bad as they are now, U.S.-Russian relations continue to get worse, edging ever closer to a kinetic collision between their armed forces somewhere: in Syria, over the Baltic and Black Seas, or Ukraine," Trenin warned. Putin's decision this week to retaliate against America's retaliation for

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Russian interference in the 2016 election, which included the seizure of U.S. diplomatic properties and a demand that the United States cut its diplomatic staff in the country, "will usher in a new and harsher round of rivalry" between the two countries, he predicted. On Sunday, Mike Pence wades into the territory where that rivalry is fiercest.

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VP Pence: Attack on 1 NATO ally is attack on all
By Jari Tanner
31 July 2017
Associated Press

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence on Monday strongly pledged America's commitment to protecting NATO allies against attacks, including the Baltic states, which have anxiously watched a growing Russian military presence in the region.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States stands firmly behind our Article 5 pledge of mutual defense — an attack on one of us is an attack on us all," Pence told reporters after meeting with the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the Estonian capital of Tallinn.

Mutual defense is a vital issue for the three small former Soviet states that border Russia, which were all occupied for nearly five decades by Soviet troops before regaining their independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The United States never recognized the claim by Soviet leader Josef Stalin on the three countries — which have a combined population of 6 million — allowing Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to maintain independent diplomatic missions and have their national flags stored at the State Department throughout the occupation.

Saying that Trump "knows security is the foundation of our prosperity," Pence said America and the Baltic countries would seek new ways to increase prosperity by increasing two-way trade that currently amounts to $3.5 billion and by increasing their mutual investments.

Earlier, he met Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid, Latvian President Raimonds Vejonis and Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaite at the baroque 18th-century Kadriorg Palace, which was built by the Russian Emperor Peter the Great.

Energy is one way that Washington is seeking to tighten its commercial ties with the Baltic countries. It closed a deal in June to sell liquefied natural gas (LNG) directly from the United States to the region.

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A Lithuanian state-owned gas trading company will receive the first delivery of U.S. imported LNG in August — something that Pence said will "benefit not only our prosperity, but regional security. And I am confident that this deal will only be the first of many."

Pence said he and Trump were pleased with the deal that will help the Baltic states to reduce their reliance on Russian gas.

Later Monday, Pence met with NATO troops from Britain, France and the United States that are stationed in Estonia. The alliance has deployed some 4,000 troops and military hardware in the three Baltic states and Poland to counter Russia's presence in the Baltic Sea region.

Before departing for Georgia, Pence took shovel and planted an English oak outside the headquarters of the Estonian defense forces together with the leaders of Latvia and Lithuania.

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Sunday ordered the U.S. to cut its embassy and consulate staff in Russia by 755 people. On Monday, Pence said America wants to improve bilateral relations with Russia "despite the recent diplomatic action by Moscow."

"We hope for better days and better relations with Russia," Pence told reporters.

Yet Russia's upcoming Zapad 2017 military exercises with 13,000 troops near the Baltic states' borders in September may further strain relations.

Grybauskaite told Lithuanian national radio on Monday that the U.S. would double the number of military jets and increase American troops on her country's soil during the Russian drills to signal that Washington is monitoring the Baltics situation closely.

Estonia — which currently holds the rotating presidency of the 28-nation European Union — is the first leg of Pence's European tour. The U.S. vice president flew later Monday to Georgia, another former Soviet republic, and will also visit new NATO member Montenegro, two countries facing strong pressure from Russia.

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Mike Pence Wants Sanctions to Change Russia's 'Behavior' as Putin Orders Expulsion of Hundreds of U.S. Diplomatic Staff
By Harriet Sinclair
31 July 2017
Newsweek

Vice President Mike Pence said he hopes the decision to place sanctions on Russia will prompt "different behavior" from Moscow, as President Vladimir Putin announced the U.S. would have to cut 755 diplomatic staff from Russia.

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After the White House on Friday confirmed the sanctions on Russia, Putin responded by announcing the cuts, but Pence appears optimistic about the future relationship between the two countries.

Speaking from his European tour on Sunday, Pence said he hoped the sanctions would prompt Moscow to reconsider its position on a number of issues, including North Korea.

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"The President and I remain very hopeful that we'll see different behavior by the Russian government, with regard to Ukraine, with regard to supporting rogue regimes in Iran and North Korea," Pence said in comments reported by Fox News.

"We continue to believe that if Russia will change its behavior, our relationship can change for the good and improve for the interests in both of our countries and the interest of peace and stability in this region and around the world," he said.

Pence also took the opportunity to stress that President Trump does accept the intelligence community's conclusion that Russia attempted to "meddle" in the U.S. election, despite the president previously making contradictory statements on the topic.

"The President has confirmed repeatedly that we believe Russia did meddle in U.S. elections," Pence told Fox News.

"I think he has also said it could have been other actors as well. But he's confirmed his belief and our intelligence that Russia was involved in meddling in US elections and it's part of what inspired the bipartisan action in the Congress to codify the sanctions that our administration has been implementing against Russia and will continue to advance that," he added.

But any U.S. hopes that sanctions would prompt any cooperation from Moscow appear to have been dashed after Putin announced the U.S. would lose diplomatic staff in Russia, and warned about further retaliation over the sanctions.

"We were waiting for quite a long time that maybe something would change for the better, were holding out hope that the situation would change somehow. But it appears that even if it changes someday it will not change soon," Putin said in comments carried by Russian state media.

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Pence pressures China on North Korea, talks Russia sanctions, election meddling
By Deena Zaru
30 July 2017
CNN (Excerpt)

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Pence's visit to Estonia is the first leg of an Eastern European trip that will also take him to Georgia and Montenegro to show US support for them and NATO in the face of what the administration has called Russia's destabilizing activities in Ukraine and elsewhere and its efforts to undermine the alliance. The trip comes amid rising tensions between the US and Russia over a new sanctions bill that easily cleared Congress last week and that the White House says Trump is expected to sign.

Passage of the bill prompted Russia to retaliate by cutting US diplomatic missions by 755 people, which Moscow announced Friday -- an in-kind response to penalties that would be codified by the legislation, including the ejection of Russian diplomatic staff and closure of two Russian compounds in the US, for its alleged meddling in last year's election and aggression in Ukraine.

"We waited a long time for things to perhaps change for the better," Russian state media quoted Russian President Vladimir Putin as saying Sunday. "We had such hope that the situation would change, but judging by the situation that will not be soon."

On taking retaliatory measures, Putin said, "I thought it was time for us to show that we will not leave this without an answer. As for other possible measures, or whether it is a lot or not, this is quite sensible from the point of view of the work of the diplomatic department. ..."

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov threatened further retaliation against the US on Sunday morning, saying that if that US goes through with the sanctions, "we will respond in kind," but he would not specify how Russia plans to respond.

Pence said Sunday that he hopes that slapping new sanctions on Russia would lead Russia to change its behavior with regard to Ukraine and end its support for Iran and North Korea.

"The President and I remain very hopeful that we'll see different behavior by the Russian government, with regard to Ukraine, with regard to supporting rogue regimes in Iran and North Korea," Pence said. "We continue to believe that if Russia will change its behavior, our relationship can change for the good and improve for the interests in both of our countries and the interest of peace and stability in this region and around the world."

Pressed on how to square the purpose of his trip with Trump's position on Russia's alleged efforts to influence last year's election, Pence defended the President. He insisted Trump is in agreement with US intelligence services on Russian meddling despite newly appointed White House communications director Anthony Scaramucci telling CNN last week that Trump is still unsure.

"The President has confirmed repeatedly that we believe Russia did meddle in US elections," Pence said. "I think he has also said it could have been other actors as well. But he's confirmed his belief and our intelligence that Russia was involved in meddling in US elections and it's part of what inspired

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the bipartisan action in the Congress to codify the sanctions that our administration has been implementing against Russia and will continue to advance that."

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Pence vows U.S. resistance to Russia during Estonia visit
By S.A. Miller
31 July 2017
Washington Times

Vice President Mike Pence on a visit to Estonia pledged Monday unwavering support of NATO allies and steadfast resistance to Russia aggression, especially in Baltic states that have been feeling intense pressure from Moscow.

Mr. Pence said he was in Eastern Europe to deliver a message from President Trump that the "the United States of America is with you."

"At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another," Mr. Pence said in a speech after meeting with the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuiana.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States of America rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation, or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies," he said.

The tough talk came amid mounting tension between Washington and Moscow. Russian President Vladimir Putin expelling 755 U.S. diplomats in retaliation for new sanctions legislation Mr. Trump is expected to sign.

"To be clear: We hope for better days, and better relations with Russia, recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, the security of our allies, and the security of freedom-loving nations around the world," Mr. Pence said.

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Pence's tricky trip has Russia hanging over it
By Andrew Hammond
30 July 2017
Gulf News (Opinion)

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US Vice-President Mike Pence started an important Eastern European tour yesterday that will last until tomorrow. The visit, whose subtext is that of the future of United States-Russia relations under US President Donald Trump, will see stops in Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro, and comes in the wake of the US Senate and House of Representatives' landmark votes to impose new sanctions on Moscow, which has already drawn Russian retaliation.

Key agenda items in Pence's tricky trip include a visit to see US and Georgian troops participating in the Noble Partner Nato-related exercise, which also features troops from the United Kingdom, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Armenia, and Slovenia. And the US vice-president will also participate, in Montenegro, with leaders across the Western Balkans in the Adriatic Charter Summit.

The immediate backdrop for Pence's visit is the continuing controversy over Russia and the Trump team. The US Senate and House voted overwhelmingly in recent days to impose sanctions on Moscow, and Trump now has to sign it into law or, in what would be a remarkable move, veto it. The legislation, whose restrictions would include on oil-and-gas projects in Russia, has been condemned by the country's Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergei Ryabkov, who asserts it would plant a "dangerous mine" under bilateral relations that could explode in coming months. Already, Moscow has retaliated to the congressional votes by ordering US diplomatic staff out of Russia and seizing two US diplomatic properties in the country.

The bill, which would also impose sanctions on North Korea and Iran, puts Trump in an awkward position, given his apparent pro-Moscow leanings. The president, who already has congressional and FBI investigations underway into his team's alleged ties with Russia, has only vowed at this stage to "study" the legislation, but is under strong pressure to sign it into law.

Trump's decision on this issue will be watched closely, not just in Moscow, but across Eastern Europe where Pence is visiting. Part of the nervousness that key US allies in Europe have about the Trump's positioning on Russia is what it potentially may mean for US commitments in the region and Nato. Trump has flip-flopped on this issue, describing the military alliance last year as "obsolete", and then this year as "not obsolete", sowing the seeds of confusion over what his true beliefs are.

Already, uncertainty over Trump's Nato policy is spurring the European Union to seek to reverse around a decade of defence spending cuts, totalling around 10 per cent in real terms. Moreover, a new European Defence Action Plan was agreed earlier this year by the EU, which will see greater continental military cooperation too.

For Trump, the key strategic question now on Russia is whether recent developments have destroyed the window of opportunity that may have existed for a warming of relations between Washington and Moscow. The US president has previously given multiple indications that he believes Russia is not a serious threat to America, hinting in January that he could even drop existing economic sanctions if the country "is helpful". Specifically, he appears to believe there were multiple common interests over issues such as preventing Iran from securing nuclear weapons, and combating terrorism.

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Trump's proposed repositioning of relations with Russia now looks, at the least, to have been put on ice. Here it is not only the fact that any new US sanctions will make relations frostier, but also that the Trump team is under significant pressure over the congressional and FBI investigations, and this issue has already claimed the scalp of national security adviser Michael Flynn.

'Complicit' or 'incompetent'

Should Trump be forced to sign the sanctions legislation, it will reassure the allies in Eastern Europe that Pence is visiting. However, it will complicate US foreign policy in other theatres, including potentially the Middle East, where Russian relations are relevant.

Already this year, there were tensions between Moscow and Washington here, which saw US missile strikes targeted at Syria, following an earlier poison gas attack on citizens in a rebel-held town allegedly by the Damascus regime, which killed at least 80 people, including around two dozen children. Russia — highly implausibly, given the nature of the chemicals involved — asserted that they were released inadvertently when Syrian planes struck a terrorist laboratory.

The ratcheting up of tensions has widened differences between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin over the future of Syrian President Bashar Al Assad after they had seemed to be getting closer to an agreement to potentially bring an end to Syria's six-year civil war that has left half a million people dead and triggered floods of refugees, while letting Al Assad stay in power. Rhetorically, at least, Trump appeared to move away from the latter and called for the Syrian president to be ousted, and US Ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, said that the Trump administration was ready to take further military steps in the country if needed.

US Defence Secretary James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson were also forceful in their criticism of Moscow. For instance, Tillerson said that "either Russia has been complicit or simply incompetent" in Syria, referring to Moscow's apparent inability to prevent the Al Assad regime from using chemical weapons, despite a 2013 agreement under which Russia was a guarantor, to remove these stockpiles from the country.

The spike in Washington-Moscow tensions over Syria even saw Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev saying the two countries were "one step away from war" and had "totally ruined" relations. Signs of rising tensions include Moscow's suspension of an agreement with Washington to share communications about US and Russian aircraft conducting missions over Syria. The Admiral Grigorovich, the frigate warship was dispatched from Crimea to the Syrian port of Tartus.

Taken overall, as Pence undertakes his trip to reassure Eastern European allies, Trump now finds himself in a big bind over Russia. Despite his desire for warming of relations between Washington and Moscow, the window of opportunity for that may be narrowing significantly and this could have implications across the world, including in Syria.

(Andrew Hammond is an Associate at LSE IDEAS at the London School of Economics.)

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Vice President Pence's Trip: An Opportunity to Advance U.S. Leadership in Europe
By Luke Coffey, Daniel Kochis
20 July 2017
Heritage Foundation (Opinion)

From July 30 to August 2, Vice President Mike Pence will travel to Estonia, Georgia, and Montenegro. This trip is the perfect follow-up to President Donald Trump's visit to Poland for the "Three Seas" conference—a meeting focused on the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic Seas—in early July. Vice President Pence should use his trip to affirm U.S. commitment to these three important countries, and to strengthen U.S. focus on the key regions in which they reside. While in Europe, it is important for the Vice President to underscore U.S. commitment to NATO, Baltic security, and U.S. engagement in the Balkans and the Black Sea region, while taking a hard line on Russian aggression.

The Baltic Sea

In Estonia, Vice President Pence will meet with Estonian Prime Minister Jüri Ratas as well as the three Baltic leaders, President Kersti Kaljulaid of Estonia, President Raimonds Vējonis of Latvia, and President Dalia Grybauskaitė of Lithuania.

The U.S. has a long history of championing the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Baltic states dating back to the interwar period of the 1920s. After regaining their independence from Russia in the early 1990s, the Baltic states have been staunch supporters of the transatlantic relationship.

Estonia is the regional leader in defense matters and is currently one of only five NATO countries that spend the required 2 percent of gross domestic product on defense. In terms of economic freedom, the Baltic region is a beacon of hope for Europe and the rest of the world. The region is proof that pursuing policies of economic liberalization and growth works. Estonia ranks first in the eurozone, and sixth in the world, in the 2017 Index of Economic Freedom, published by The Heritage Foundation.

The Baltic states face an existential threat from Russia, and are concerned about the upcoming Russian Zapad 17 exercises. In addition to Zapad, the Vice President's arrival will come just as Russia and China will have wrapped up joint exercises in the Baltic Sea.

The keystone of NATO's new deterrence measures are multinational battalions stationed in each of the Baltic countries and Poland to deter Russian aggression. The Alliance has also increased the number of aircraft taking part in Baltic Air Policing. While in Estonia, Vice President Pence should reiterate U.S. commitment to the transatlantic alliance, NATO, and the Article V security guarantee.

The Black Sea

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In Georgia, the Vice President will meet with President Giorgi Margvelashvili and Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili. In addition, he will visit U.S. and Georgian troops participating in the Noble Partner exercise. Vice President Pence's visit provides a perfect opportunity to strengthen the bilateral relationship with Tbilisi.

Georgia is a staunch ally of the United States. Since regaining its independence in 1991, successive Georgian governments have pursued an agenda of liberalizing the economy, cutting bureaucracy, fighting corruption, and embracing democracy—and in doing so, Georgia and its people have shown a firm and unwavering commitment to the transatlantic community.

Georgia is located in a dangerous and important geopolitical neighborhood for NATO. After the Russian invasion in 2008 and the subsequent Russian occupation of 20 percent of Georgia's territory, Georgia has transformed its military and has been steadfast in its support of overseas security operations. Georgia has contributed thousands of troops to Afghanistan (with 870 currently serving there) and Iraq, and hundreds of peacekeepers to the Balkans and in the Central African Republic.

The Adriatic Sea

In Podgorica, Montenegro, the Vice President will meet with Montenegrin President Filip Vujanović and Prime Minister Duško Marković. Vice President Pence will also participate with leaders from across the western Balkans in an Adriatic Charter Summit. Montenegro is the newest member of NATO, and an important U.S. ally in a region that is becoming increasingly unstable due to malign Russian influence, poor economic opportunities, and the rise of Islamist extremism.

The Balkans is home to unfinished business in Europe. In addition to historic, ethnic, religious, and cultural tensions, the Balkans are caught between Russia's destabilizing influence and pockets of Islamist extremism in the region. Montenegro is a poignant example.

Over the past seven years, Montenegro—a U.S. ally—has reformed itself in preparation for NATO membership. Last year, Russia, not happy with Montenegro's decision to join NATO, was suspected of having been behind a failed plot to break into parliament on election day, assassinate the former prime minister, and install a pro-Russian government in Podgorica, the nation's capital.

The U.S. has invested heavily in the Balkans since the end of the Cold War. Tens of thousands of U.S. service members have served in the Balkans, and billions of dollars in aid has been spent there, all in the hope of creating a secure and prosperous region that will someday be part of the transatlantic community. The Administration should articulate why the Balkan region remains important to the United States, and set out a clear policy to counter threats to the region.

The Way Forward

This trip offers a great opportunity to deepen three very important bilateral relations. To make this visit a success, Vice President Pence should:

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Reiterate America's commitment to NATO's Article V. The Vice President should echo President Trump's commitment made in Warsaw to NATO's Article V. The ultimate guarantor of security and stability in the Baltic region is the knowledge that the U.S. stands firmly by its mutual defense commitments as a member of NATO.

Make the case for a permanent military presence in the Baltic region. The U.S. and NATO need to show an enduring commitment to the region by permanently stationing armed forces in the Baltics and maintaining a robust maritime presence in the region.

Forcefully condemn Russian disinformation. Russia's disinformation measures are especially active in the region. In part, Russia has sought to undermine support for NATO's enhanced forward deployments by propagating false stories of abuse by troops serving in the multinational battalions, such as Canadian, British, or German soldiers. U.S. troops stationed in Poland for NATO's enhanced forward presence there have been targeted by similar Russian disinformation. Russia has also sought to delegitimize the Baltic nations as independent countries. The U.S. should forcefully condemn Russian disinformation and consider becoming a sponsoring nation at the NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence in Riga, the Latvian capital.

Empower global free-market energy policy. The U.S. should work immediately and comprehensively to eliminate remaining barriers to U.S. energy exports.

Push back against Nord Stream II. The Nord Stream II pipeline project that would connect Germany with Russia is neither economically necessary, nor is it geopolitically prudent. Vice President Pence should declare U.S. opposition to the pipeline, which in particular threatens allies in Eastern and Central Europe.

Ensure that the U.S. is clear on Georgia's future NATO membership. Vice President Pence should make it clear that Georgia's successful completion of subsequent Annual National Programs, the close relationship through the NATO–Georgia Commission, and the Substantial NATO–Georgia Package are the true markers of progress that will bring Georgia closer to ultimate membership.

Help the Georgians defend themselves. Georgia has the inherent right to self-defense. The U.S. should sell defensive anti-tank and anti-aircraft weaponry to Georgia.

Refer to the Russian military presence in Georgia as an occupation. During his visit, the Vice President should call the presence of several thousand Russian troops in South Ossetia and Abkhazia what it is: an illegal occupation.

Keep a focus on the Balkans. The Balkan nations are facing increased Russian interference and pressure with the aim of regional destabilization. In addition, the threat from Islamist ideology has not abated. The U.S. should look to take on a larger role within the region, and should seek to collaborate with NATO allies in the region to address growing instability.

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Offer political support for the Southern Gas Corridor project. As Europe seeks alternatives to Russian gas, the Southern Gas Corridor, which in part will run through Georgia and the Balkans, will play an important role.

Keep the door open to further NATO enlargement in the Balkans. NATO has helped promote democracy, stability, and security in the Balkans. It has also been a catalyst for reforms within candidate countries. Montenegro is just the latest example of this. The U.S. should ensure the door remains open to deserving Balkan nations, including Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.
Conclusion

Vice President Pence's trip, during which he will visit allies in the Adriatic, Baltic, and Black Sea regions, dovetails with President Trump's recent trip to Warsaw where he took part in the Three Seas conference. While each region faces threats from Russia, each also presents unique challenges, which demand robust attention. Estonia, Georgia, and Montenegro are important U.S. allies with basic common values. The success of the Trump Administration's policy in Europe will rest in large part on its ability to secure these important regions.

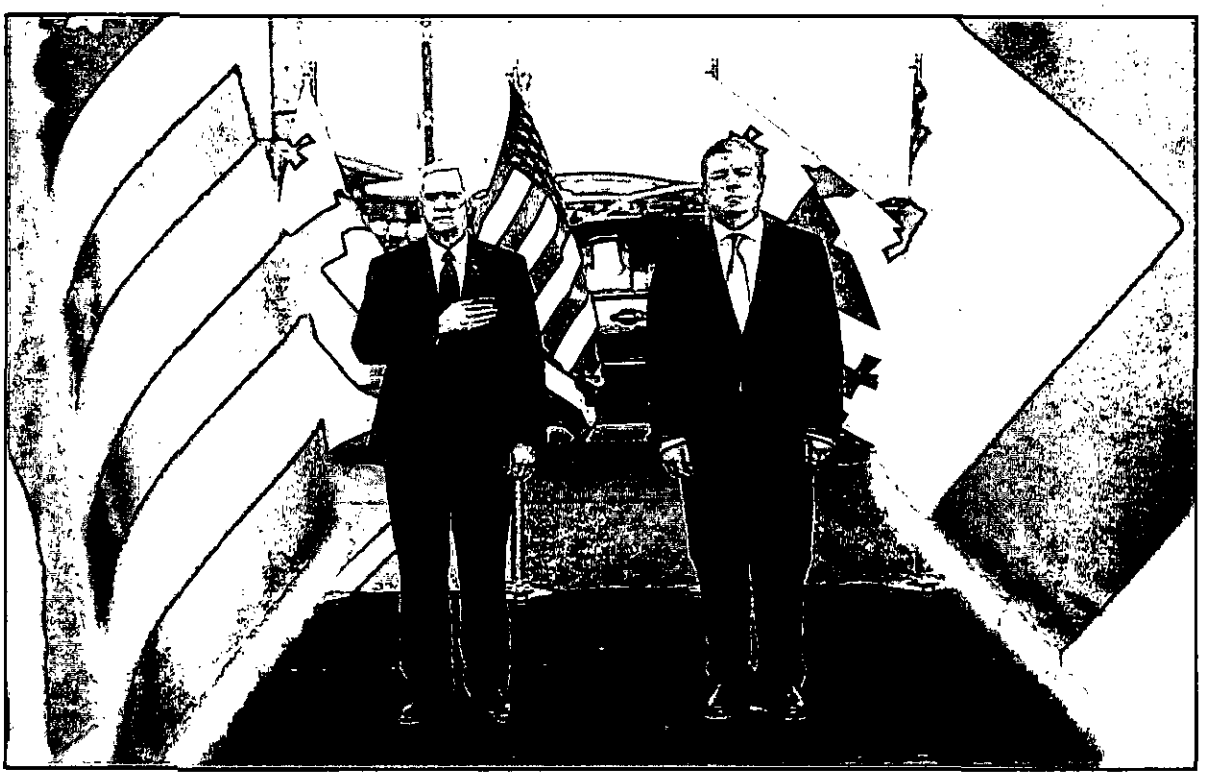
(Luke Coffey is Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation. Daniel Kochis is a Policy Analyst in European Affairs in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, of the Davis Institute)

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Vice President Pence Trip to Georgia Coverage Report for August 1, 2017



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Pence pledges support for Georgia, condemns Russian moves
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In Georgia, Pence says Trump will back toughened sanctions on Russia
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Trump Will Sign Russia Sanctions Law 'Very Soon,' Pence Says
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Pence Reaffirms U.S. Solidarity With Georgia, Denounces Russian 'Aggression'
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In Georgia, Pence Assures Eastern Europe of US Backing
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Mike Pence promises US and NATO support for Georgia in Tbilisi
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Pence: Reversing Sanctions Requires Russia to Change
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Voice of America

VP Pence says Trump will sign Russia sanctions soon
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Embassy Reductions Won't Deter U.S., Pence Says
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31 July 2017
New York Times

Vice President Pence in Europe: Georgia
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During Whirlwind Week in Washington, VP Pence Comforts East European Allies
By Emily Tamkin
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The Cable: Foreign Policy

Pence Says U.S. Backs Georgia in NATO Over Russian Objection
By Helena Bedwell
1 August 2017
Bloomberg

Vice President Mike Pence said the U.S. "strongly" supports Georgia's ambition of joining NATO, even as Russia remains hostile to the military alliance expanding its influence in Moscow's former Soviet backyard.

"We see Georgia as a key strategic partner and stand by your territorial integrity and your aspirations to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," Pence said at talks with Prime

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Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, on Tuesday. U.S. President Donald Trump "asked me to extend greetings to you this morning and to say we are with you," Pence said.

The vice president is also attending joint military exercises involving as many as 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops during his visit. The Noble Partner 2017 drills, which also include German, U.K., Turkish, Slovenian, Ukrainian and Armenian forces, are the largest in the Caucasus republic since Georgia fought a brief war with Russia in 2008 over the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Pence arrived in Georgia Monday after delivering a similar message in Estonia to leaders of Baltic nations facing the "specter of aggression" from Russia, which he called the greatest threat to their security as NATO members. Georgia wants to join NATO against opposition from Russia, whose annexation of Crimea and involvement in the conflict in eastern Ukraine has strained ties with the U.S. and Europe the most since the Cold War. Russia accuses NATO of seeking to undermine its security by expanding the alliance's presence near its borders.

Spiraling Tensions

The U.S. is monitoring preparations for major Russian exercises planned on NATO's eastern border amid concerns about the scale of the military buildup, the New York Times reported on Tuesday. Some 13,000 troops are to take part in joint military drills from Sept. 14-20 in Russia and neighboring Belarus, according to the Belarusian Defense Ministry, which said Russia will also send about 280 military vehicles to the Zapad 2017 exercises.

Pence's visits to Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro are taking place amid spiraling tensions with Russia after President Vladimir Putin said the U.S. must slash staff at its diplomatic mission by 755, or nearly two-thirds, in retaliation for new sanctions approved by Congress.

Trump "will sign the Russian sanctions bill soon," Pence said at a news conference later with Kvirikashvili. While the U.S. wants better relations, "Russia has to change its behavior" before this can be achieved, he said.

Kvirikashvili said Georgia's facing "daily provocations" from Russia, which has encroached deeper into its territory in recent weeks by shifting the dividing lines with the breakaway regions established after the war. Russia has stationed thousands of troops in Abkhazia and South Ossetia after recognizing them as independent republics. The international community considers the regions as part of Georgia.

'Important Milestone'

NATO declared at a summit shortly before the 2008 war that Georgia will become a member at some point. While it hasn't agreed to accept Georgia since then, partly out of concern about antagonizing Russia, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said in Tbilisi in September that the alliance is committed to the goal and that "the bonds between NATO and Georgia are stronger than ever."

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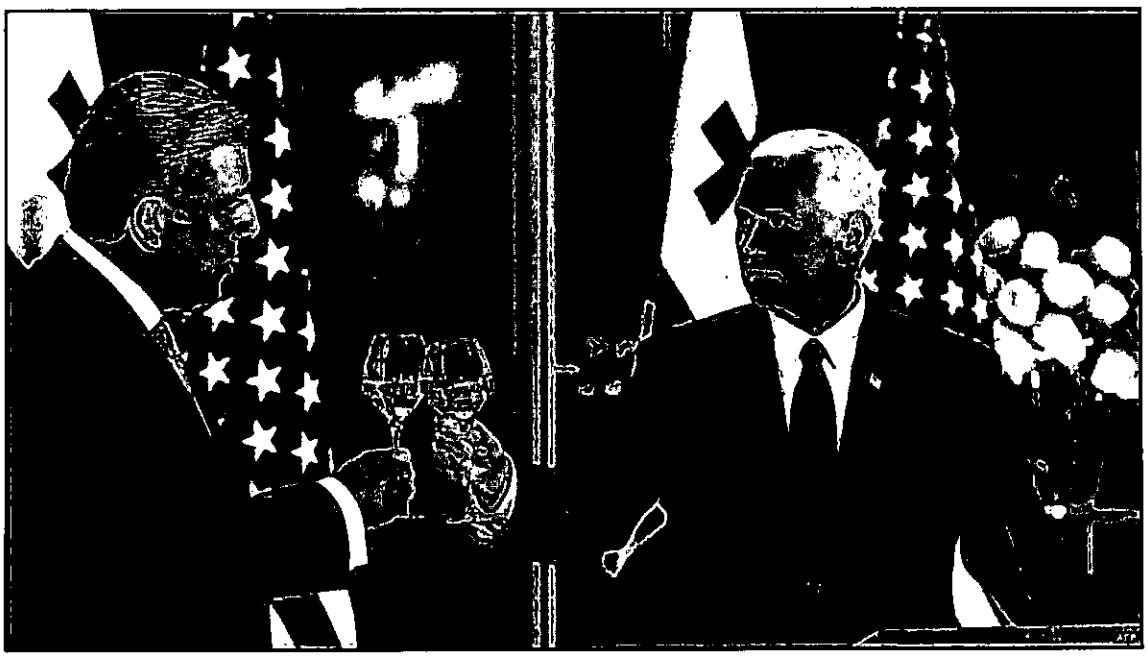
Pence's visit "is an important milestone in the bilateral relationship as we work to further strengthen security, economic, and trade cooperation," Kvirikashvili said Monday after the vice president's arrival.

Two-thirds of Georgians support joining NATO while 23 percent are opposed, according to a survey conducted by the Caucasus Resource Research Centers for the National Democratic Institute. The poll of 2,261 respondents was conducted between June 18 and July 9 with a margin of error of no more than 2.2 percentage points.

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Pence Conveys U.S. Support For Georgia In Visit To Tbilisi

1 August 2017
Radio Free Europe



U.S. Vice President Mike Pence conveyed a message of support from U.S. President Donald Trump to Georgian leaders at an official dinner in Tbilisi late on July 31.

The United States stands with Georgia, Pence said, as he toasted the Caucasus nation for fighting for freedom over the centuries, just as America has.

Pence said America hopes that Georgia prospers and becomes a strong country.

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Pence was greeted by thousands of people when he arrived in Tbilisi, where he will meet on August 1 with Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili, President Giorgi Margvelashvili, Patriarch Ilia II, and representatives of the Georgian opposition.

Pence is also planning to attend joint NATO military exercises being conducted in Georgia. About 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the Noble Partner 2017 drills there.

Pence was greeted at the Tbilisi airport by Kvirikashvili, who said that the visit is "an important milestone in the bilateral relationship as we work to further strengthen security, economic, and trade cooperation between our two countries."

"Vice President Pence's visit sends a strong message about the enduring strength of the relationship between Georgia and the United States," Kvirikashvili said in comments released by the Georgian government.

Pence arrived in the Georgian capital from Estonia, where earlier in the day he reaffirmed Washington's solidarity with the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders" and "undermine democracies."

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions, as have Georgia and the third ally on Pence's itinerary: new NATO member Montenegro.

"No threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said. "At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another."

Article 5 Support

Pence said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty -- the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

In Georgia, officials said Pence will highlight U.S. support for the Caucasus nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity before continuing on to Montenegro.

Georgia has seen Russian encroachment on its territory and has expressed hopes of joining the Western military alliance.

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The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

Margvelashvili said on July 27 that Pence's visit will demonstrate that the United States continues to support Georgia in building a stronger military force.

He highlighted the joint military exercises that will include troops from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, and Armenia.

"The vice president's presence here is definitely showing that this is not only about military exercises, but it is also showing unification with our values, with our foreign policy targets, and showing a clear message that we are together," Margvelashvili said.

On the last stop, Pence will welcome NATO's newest member with his stop in Montenegro, whose accession to the alliance in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica, U.S. officials said.

Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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Pence pledges support for Georgia, condemns Russian moves
By Nataliya Vasilyeva
1 August 2017
Associated Press

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence pledged support Tuesday for the former Soviet republic of Georgia, his second stop on a European trip backing nations that feel threatened by Russian aggression.

Russia and Georgia fought a brief war in 2008, which lead to two breakaway Georgian regions, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, declaring independence. Russia has since been supporting the regions both financially and militarily.

The U.S. "strongly condemns Russia's occupation on Georgian soil," Pence said Tuesday at a joint news conference with the Georgian prime minister in Tbilisi, the Georgian capital. "We will reject any claim at any time by any nation that undermines this enduring principle."

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The visit comes a day after Pence met with the presidents of three NATO countries — Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania — in the Estonian capital of Tallinn and pledged that "an attack on one of us is an attack on us all."

Georgia and the three Baltic nations were all occupied for nearly five decades by Soviet troops before regaining their independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Later on Tuesday Pence will inspect troops taking part in joint U.S.-Georgian military exercises.

Pence's European trip comes several days after the U.S. Senate voted last week to approve the new financial sanctions against Moscow. The legislation bars U.S. President Donald Trump from easing or waiving the penalties on Russia unless Congress agrees.

Pence told reporters on Tuesday that Trump would sign a bill on a new package of U.S. sanctions against Russia, adding the package was "improved significantly."

The bill underwent revisions to address concerns voiced by American oil and natural gas companies that sanctions specific to Russia's energy sector could backfire on them to Moscow's benefit. U.S. lawmakers said they also made adjustments so the sanctions on Russia's energy sector didn't undercut the ability of U.S. allies in Europe to get access to oil and gas resources outside of Russia.

Russia on Friday ordered the U.S. Embassy and three U.S. consulates in Russia to drastically cut its personnel there. President Vladimir Putin said on Sunday that means 755 staffers have to go. Russia also ordered to shut down the U.S. Embassy's recreational compound on the outskirts of Moscow. The Russian leader warned that he has more tricks up his sleeve to hurt the U.S., but he voiced hope that he wouldn't need to use them.

Pence indicated the U.S. was willing to improve ties with Russia but for that to happen "Russia has to change its behavior," he said, referring to Russia's support for separatists in eastern Ukraine and for Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Russia is planning Zapad 2017 military exercises with 13,000 troops near the Baltic states' borders in September, a move that may further strain relations.

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During Whirlwind Week in Washington, VP Pence Comforts East European Allies

By Emily Tamkin
1 August 2017
Foreign Policy

Amid chaos in Washington, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence is in Eastern Europe assuring American allies that the United States is committed to protecting them.

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"We are with you. We stand with the people and nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania — and we always will," Pence said at a joint press availability with the Baltic leaders in Tallinn, even as, back home, President Donald Trump has yet to comment on Russian expulsion of U.S. diplomatic staff.

The vice president participated in a listening session on cyber and innovation with the president of Estonia in Tallinn, and travelled on Tuesday to Tbilisi, where he met with the Georgian prime minister for their third substantive meeting since Pence took office.

"We see Georgia as a key strategic partner and stand by your territorial integrity and your aspirations to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," Pence said at a dinner with Prime Minister Kvirikashvili in Tbilisi. At a joint press conference with Georgia's prime minister, Pence noted that Russia occupies one-fifth of Georgian Territory.

Back in Washington, in the meantime, President Trump has yet to comment personally on a bill that Congress passed imposing tougher sanctions on Russia. The White House press secretary said Friday in a statement that Trump would sign the bill.

Speaking in Tbilisi, Pence said the bill would be signed soon.

From Tbilisi, Pence traveled to the newest NATO member, Montenegro. In May at a NATO summit, President Trump appeared to push Montenegro's prime minister aside during a photo session.

Pence's staid tour abroad is in stark contrast to the roller coaster in Washington this week. On Monday, U.S. President Donald Trump lost a communications director who was brought on roughly a week prior; Jared Kushner, his son in law and advisor, told White House interns the Trump team was too disorganized to have colluded with Russia; and the Washington Post reported the president had dictated a misleading message to his son about a meeting with a Russian lawyer.

Trump's is not the first administration to send a vice president abroad in the president's stead, or to develop relations with diplomats and dignitaries from particular countries — former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden was known as Ukraine's man in Washington.

"Vice President Pence's visit sent a clear message about the enduring strength of the relationship between Georgia and the United States," Georgian Ambassador to the United States David Bakradze told Foreign Policy by email. "This is an important milestone in the bilateral relationship."

The embassies of Estonia and Montenegro did not immediately respond to request for comment.

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VP Pence says Russia's stance must change before ties improve
By Margarita Antidze
1 August 2017
Reuters

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence said on Tuesday that relations with Russia would not improve until Moscow changed its stance on Ukraine and withdrew support for "regimes like Iran and Syria and North Korea".

The U.S. Congress voted last week for new sanctions on Russia and, at a news conference in Georgia's capital Tbilisi, Pence said the "lifting of sanctions will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place".

"Russia's destabilizing activities in Ukraine, their support for rogue regimes like Iran and Syria and North Korea ... their posture has to change," he said at a joint news conference with Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili.

Pence said U.S. President Donald Trump would sign the new sanctions on Russia into law this week and said that Trump and Congress were "speaking with a unified voice".

Keeping to previous U.S. administrations' line, Pence also condemned Russia's presence in Georgia.

Moscow, whose annexation of Crimea in 2014 prompted U.S. and EU sanctions, still has troops stationed in Georgia after a 2008 war over the breakaway region of South Ossetia, backing Georgia's Abkhazia, a region also controlled by pro-Russian separatists.

Pence also said the U.S. was still behind Georgia's application to become a member of NATO.

"We'll continue to work closely with this prime minister and the government of Georgia broadly to advance the policies that will facilitate becoming a NATO member," he said.

NATO promised Georgia membership in 2008, and three ex-Soviet Baltic nations - Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania - are already members. Pence has reassured them during this tour that Washington firmly backs NATO's doctrine of collective defense.

In the Estonian capital of Tallinn on Monday, he assured them of U.S. support if they faced aggression from Russia.

Asked about Pence's visit, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said nations had the right to choose their partners.

"The only problem for us, is when this involves the expanding of various alliances and their infrastructure toward our borders. This is a cause of concern for us," Peskov told reporters on a conference call.

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During his visit, Pence attended Georgian-American military exercises, which began in Georgia on Sunday. About 2,800 soldiers from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, Armenia and Georgia are taking part in the maneuvers, which will last for two weeks.

On Wednesday, Pence visits Montenegro, which joined NATO in June. The tiny Balkan nation won praise from Washington for joining despite pressure against the move from Russia.

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In Georgia, Pence says Trump will back toughened sanctions on Russia
By Allen Cone
1 August 2017
UPI

Vice President Mike Pence on Tuesday pledged U.S. support for Georgia, a former Soviet republic, and said President Donald Trump "very soon" will approve stronger sanctions against Russia.

Georgia, which fought a brief war with Russia in 2008, is among Eastern European nations that feel threatened by the Russian regime, which annexed Crimea from Ukraine in 2014. That aggression led to existing U.S. sanctions against the Kremlin, which Congress moved to strengthen last week.

"At this very moment, just 40 miles from where we stand, Russian tanks stand on occupied territory in South Ossetia," Pence said at a joint news conference in Tbilisi Tuesday, the Georgian capital, with Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili. "Today, Russia continues to occupy one-fifth of Georgian territory.

"So to be clear: The United States of America strongly condemns Russia's occupation on Georgia's soil."

On Monday, Pence met with the presidents of three NATO countries -- Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania -- and said "an attack on one of us is an attack on us all."

The three Baltic nations, along with Georgia, were all occupied for nearly five decades by Soviet troops before regaining independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Pence also met U.S. and Georgian troops taking part in a joint military exercise called "Noble Partner".

"America first does not mean America only," Pence said. "We are here to tell our friends in Georgia, we are with you. We stand with you and will stand with you as you pursue membership in NATO."

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Pence said Trump will sign legislation to "strengthen and codify" U.S. sanctions against Russia. The proposal, overwhelmingly approved by the House and Senate, bars Trump from easing or waiving penalties on Russia unless Congress agrees.

Pence said that legislation "improved significantly" when it moved through Congress, and added the sanctions are stronger but are "giving the president of the United States and our State Department the ability and the flexibility to be able to administer American foreign policy as appropriate."

On Sunday, Russian President Vladimir Putin told the United States it must reduce its diplomatic staff by 755 to match the reduction of Russians in the United States.

"As always, our country prefers a constructive relationship with Russia based on cooperation and common interests," Pence said Tuesday. "But the president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia: A better relationship, the lifting of sanctions will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place.

"We hope for better days, and we hope for better relations with Russia, but the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow I can assure will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, to that of our allies, and to freedom-loving nations around the world like Georgia."

Besides working with Georgia "to reduce your vulnerabilities and counter Russian aggression," the vice president said the United States wants to work with the nation "to deepen our ties of commerce."

Pence next visits Montenegro, also a NATO member.

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Trump Will Sign Russia Sanctions Law 'Very Soon,' Pence Says
By Sewell Chan
1 August 2017
New York Times

President Trump will "very soon" sign a law limiting his ability to lift sanctions against Russia, even though he has "concerns" about the measure, Vice President Mike Pence said on Tuesday.

The announcement during a visit to Tbilisi, Georgia, comes as no surprise, because the Trump administration had signaled it would not stand in the law's way. But it nonetheless carries significance: It is the first time that Congress, with both houses controlled by Mr. Trump's fellow Republicans, has imposed its will on the administration on a major policy matter, and the legislation has helped bring relations between Russia and the United States to one of its lowest points since the Cold War.

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At least in terms of diplomatic policy, the bet Russia might have made when, according to American intelligence agencies, it interfered in last year's presidential election in the United States has backfired in spectacular fashion. The legislation was revised, however, to address concerns by American oil and natural gas companies that do business with Russia's energy sector.

Though he was asked by a reporter about the election interference, Mr. Pence did not explicitly address it, reiterating instead the administration's concerns about Russia's "destabilizing activities," including "efforts to support rogue regimes."

In a brief visit to the Georgian capital, Mr. Pence delivered a message of reassurance to Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili. Russia and Georgia, both former republics of the Soviet Union, fought a brief war in August 2008; since then, Russia has continued to occupy the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in violation of international law.

"In a sign of our commitment, very soon, President Trump will sign legislation to strengthen and codify the United States' sanctions against Russia," Mr. Pence said. "As always, our country prefers a constructive relationship with Russia based on cooperation and common interests."

But, Mr. Pence said, the current state of the relationship between the United States and Russia demanded a different approach. "The president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia," he said. "A better relationship, the lifting of sanctions will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place."

On Sunday, in retaliation for the sanctions legislation, President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia ordered the dismissal of 755 employees from the United States diplomatic missions in the country. Most of the employees will be local Russians working in the embassy in Moscow and consulates in three other cities, but diplomats are bracing for what a former ambassador has called "a shock to the system."

Mr. Pence said on Tuesday that Mr. Putin's actions would not sway the United States, echoing a message he delivered on Monday in Estonia, where he reassured leaders of the three Baltic nations — the others are Lithuania and Latvia — of the American commitment to NATO's collective defense clause, known as Article 5.

"We hope for better days, and we hope for better relations with Russia, but the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow, I can assure, will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, to that of our allies and to freedom-loving nations around the world like Georgia," Mr. Pence said.

While in Georgia, Mr. Pence inspected troops taking part in a joint United States-Georgian military exercise, which Mr. Pence called "a visible sign of our commitment to Georgia's sovereignty and to her internationally recognized borders."

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Mr. Pence also responded to reports that the Russian military was preparing to send as many as 100,000 troops to neighboring Belarus, on the eastern edge of NATO territory, at the end of the summer, as part of a show of force.

"The current Russian exercises, which news reports today suggest will move up to 100,000 Russian troops into Belarus, is simply a confirmation of the importance of clarity within the NATO partnership," Mr. Pence said.

He portrayed the legislation on sanctions as "a very clear message that we mean what we say and say what we mean: that Russia's destabilizing activities in Ukraine, their support for rogue regimes like Iran and Syria and North Korea, that their posture has to change."

Mr. Pence also reiterated criticisms that Mr. Trump had frequently made of his predecessor, President Barack Obama. "It's been a lack of clarity and commitment by the United States that's created much of the instability in the world today," he said.

He then referred to the "red line" warning that Mr. Obama made to Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, in 2012 over the use of chemical weapons. Mr. Assad's forces carried out such an attack the next year in a Damascus suburb, largely without repercussions.

"When in the past America had spoken of red lines and not followed through on red lines, many argue that that emboldened others to act in ways that they would not have," Mr. Pence said.

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Pence Reaffirms U.S. Solidarity With Georgia, Denounces Russian 'Aggression'
1 August 2017
Radio Free Europe

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence has reaffirmed Washington's support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity during a visit to Tbilisi and denounced Russia's "aggression" and "occupation" of Georgian territory.

"America stands with Georgia," Pence said on August 1 at a joint press conference with Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili.

"Today, Russia continues to occupy one-fifth of Georgian territory," Pence said. "So, to be clear -- the United States of America strongly condemns Russia's occupation on Georgia's soil."

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

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"The United States supports Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders," Pence added. "And under President Donald Trump, the United States of America will object to any claim at any time by any nation that undermines this enduring principle."

Pence said Trump will "very soon" sign legislation that would impose additional economic sanctions on Russia.

The sanctions bill was overwhelmingly passed by Congress last week, and in response Moscow demanded that Washington drastically reduce its diplomatic staff in Russia.

"We hope for better relations with Russia," Pence said. "But the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow, I can assure you, will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, that of our allies, and the freedom-loving nations around the world, like Georgia."

The relationship between Washington and Moscow has been badly damaged by Russia's aggression in Ukraine, its role in the war in Syria, and its alleged interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Pence also reiterated that the United States "strongly" supports the Caucasus country's aspirations to become a NATO member.

"I commended the prime minister for Georgia's democratic development, which has brought Georgia closer to unity with Europe and membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," he said. "Further progress on the goals that the prime minister has set will bring Georgia even closer and NATO even closer to your grasp and it will strengthen the bond between our nations."

Pence also met on August 1 with the leaders of the Georgian opposition and addressed troops participating in NATO joint military exercises being conducted in Georgia, saying, "We stand here today in the gap -- on a front line of freedom, a front line compromised by Russian aggression nearly a decade ago."

Pence met earlier on August 1 with the leaders of the Georgian opposition and was also planning to attend NATO joint military exercises being conducted in Georgia. About 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the Noble Partner 2017 drills there.

At an official dinner in the Georgian capital late on July 31, Pence said, "We stand with you, for your freedom and for our shared values."

Kvirikashvili said the United States "has a dedicated friend in Georgia, a stable geopolitical ally, and a strategic partner."

In comments released earlier by the Georgian government, Kvirikashvili described Pence's visit as "an important milestone in the bilateral relationship as we work to further strengthen security, economic, and trade cooperation between our two countries."

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Pence arrived in Tbilisi from Estonia, where he reaffirmed Washington's solidarity with the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders" and "undermine democracies."

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions, as have Georgia and the third ally on Pence's itinerary: new NATO member Montenegro.

"No threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said. "At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another."

Pence also said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty -- the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica, U.S. officials said.

Montenegro accession to NATO in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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In Georgia, Pence Assures Eastern Europe of US Backing
By Nana Sajaia
1 August 2017
Voice of America

On the latest leg of his first official tour of Eastern Europe, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence assured regional allies the United States will stand by their side.

Facing a crowd of Georgian and international journalists at government offices in Tbilisi, Pence, standing alongside his host, Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili, said America first does not mean America alone.

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"President Trump has sent me with the simple message to you and to the people of Georgia, we are with you, we stand with you ... America stands with Georgia," said Pence.

The vice president came to Georgia, the only non-NATO member country on his itinerary, from Estonia, a model of a successful EU-leaning transformation, before heading to Montenegro, NATO's newest member.

Pence is the highest-ranking American official of the current administration to visit Georgia and the larger Caucasus region.

"Thanks to your help, Georgia is no longer a Soviet or a post-Soviet country," said Kvirikashvili at Tuesday's joint press conference. "Today we are a democracy closely associated with the European Union."

Kvirikashvili's comments, in which he touted Georgia's role as "a key strategic partner of America," come amid an ongoing partial Russian occupation.

About 60 kilometers from the news conference, Russian tank units maintain control over 20 percent of Georgian terrain, a holdover from the August 2008 five-day war.

Pence reiterated the U.S. non-recognition policy regarding the Russian-occupied zone, condemning Moscow's presence on Georgian soil, what many observers describe as an evolving, "creeping" occupation.

"President Trump has called on Russia to cease its destabilizing activities," Pence said, adding that President Donald Trump will soon sign sanctions against Russia.

"Our country prefers a constructive relations with Russia, based on cooperation and common interest. But the president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia: a better relationship, lifting of sanctions, will require Russia to reverse actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place."

'Reset' jitters

Former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden visited Georgia about a year after the 2008 war. Biden's visit came shortly after the Obama administration's "reset" policy with Russia, which caused concern among many Europeans that the United States would give Moscow a pass for its invasion of Georgia.

Years later, Russia annexed Crimea and destabilized Eastern Ukraine, which led the West to unilaterally impose sanctions on Russia.

Both Georgia and Ukraine are aspiring NATO members. Some observers argue Georgia's 2008 war and Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea could have been avoided if those countries hadn't been denied Membership Action Plan status at NATO's Bucharest summit in April, 2008.

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"President Trump and I stand by the 2008 NATO Bucharest statement, which made it clear that Georgia, one day, will become a member of NATO," said Pence.

According to recent nationwide polls carried by National Democratic Institute, 66 percent of Georgia's population approves of the government's stated goal to join NATO. Sixty-two percent of Georgians say the country should join the European Union. Both organizations are largely seen as security instruments that would protect Georgia independence and development.

2017 represents the 25th anniversary of U.S.-Georgian diplomatic relations.

George W. Bush is the only U.S. president who has visited Georgia, which he called "a beacon of democracy."

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Mike Pence promises US and NATO support for Georgia in Tbilisi
By Dan Alexe
1 August 2017
New Europe

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence pledged Washington's support to Georgian leaders as he met with Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili in Tbilisi.

"We see Georgia as a key strategic partner and stand by your territorial integrity and your aspirations to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," Pence said.

Georgia has been going through Russian occupation of parts of its territory and has expressed hopes of joining NATO.

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

Kvirikashvili said the United States "has a dedicated friend in Georgia, a stable geopolitical ally, and a strategic partner."

Vice president Pence is also planning to attend the NATO joint military exercises being conducted in Georgia. About 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the Noble Partner 2017 drills there.

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Pence arrived in Tbilisi from Estonia, where he reaffirmed Washington's solidarity with the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders" and "undermine democracies."

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions, as have Georgia and the third ally on Pence's itinerary: new NATO member Montenegro.

Pence said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty — the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

On the last stop, Pence will visit Montenegro, whose accession to NATO in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica.

Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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Pence: Reversing Sanctions Requires Russia to Change
1 August 2017
Voice of America

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence says diplomatic actions taken by Russian in response to fresh sanctions will not deter U.S. commitment to its security and that of its allies.

Speaking Tuesday during a visit to Georgia, Pence said the sanctions bill President Donald Trump will soon sign sends a "very clear message" that with Russia's activities in Ukraine and its support for Iran and Syria, its "posture has to change."

Congress overwhelmingly passed the sanctions bill punishing Russia for interference in the 2016 U.S. election, while also imposing new measures on Iran and North Korea. Russia responded by ordering the U.S. to cut its overall staff of more than 1,200 in Russia by 755 people.

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"The president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia: a better relationship, the lifting of sanctions, will require Russia to reverse the actions that required sanctions to be imposed in the first place," Pence said.

Pence is on a multi-nation tour meant to show U.S. support for its allies in the region.

He said after a meeting with Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili in Tbilisi that the United States will work with Georgia to counter Russian aggression and "seek a peaceful resolution" that restores the country's internationally recognized borders.

In 2008, Russia intervened militarily in Georgia, and later recognized the breakaway republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states. A few other countries also recognize that independence, though the vast majority of nations consider the areas still as part of Georgia.

"The United States supports Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders, and under President Donald Trump the United States of America will reject any claim at any time by any nation that undermines this enduring principle," Pence said.

The vice president is also traveling Tuesday to Montenegro, NATO's newest member.

No response yet to Putin

Russia's retaliation for the U.S. sanctions is believed to be the single largest cut ever imposed on the U.S. embassy in Moscow and consulates elsewhere in Russia, although many of those to be dismissed are likely Russians working in support positions.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said the cuts would leave both Russia and the U.S. with the same number of staff and diplomats in Washington and Moscow, respectively - 455.

President Donald Trump has been silent on the issue since Putin announced his action. Asked about this Monday, White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said, "Right now we are reviewing our options, and when we have something to say on it we will let you know."

The U.S. State Department said the order to reduce the number of American diplomats in Russia was "a regrettable and uncalled for act." A spokesman said U.S. officials are assessing how to respond to Putin.

A Russian analyst, Nikolai Petrov of the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, said the move reflects the Kremlin's disillusionment with President Trump: "These measures are tough, and it is linked to a deep disappointment that came after the euphoria linked to the arrival of Donald Trump [to power], and to the idea that today we will start our relations anew."

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Another Russian analyst, Gleb Pavlovsky, said a return to Cold War-era hostilities with the U.S. will only boost Putin's popularity at home ahead of another likely bid for the Russian presidency next year.

Pavlovsky, a former political consultant for the Kremlin who is now president of the Foundation for Effective Politics in Moscow, explained how U.S. efforts to "punish" Putin may have the opposite effect: "American sanctions naturally are causing a definite mass reaction [in Russia] - an anti-American, pro-Putin reaction." If Putin wished, Pavlovsky added, he could make the American sanctions the centerpiece of his re-election campaign next year.

Russians will feel cutback

Other experts say the vital work of the U.S. embassy in Moscow will continue despite the massive cuts. Steven Pifer, a former U.S. diplomat now with the Brookings Institution, told VOA that Russians also may discover some unintended consequences of their president's crackdown on U.S. diplomacy.

"My assumption is hundreds of Russians are going to lose their jobs now," Pifer said. "And when you're looking at priority functions of the embassy, you know, visa functions are important but they're not as important as other functions. So my guess is that those Russians [who] want to travel to the United States are going to find that visa processing is going to take longer than usual because of reduced staff in the consular section."

Pifer was assigned to the U.S. embassy in Moscow in 1986, at a time when there were several back-and-forth expulsions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. He later served on the National Security Council under former President Bill Clinton, and was ambassador to Ukraine from 1998-2000.

During his time in the Russian capital, Pifer said, American staff were called upon for "all-purpose duty" at times when Russian support staff were unavailable for political reasons.

"So, five or six days out of every seven, I would work on my normal portfolio, which is arms control," Pifer recalled. "And then one day, I'd drive a truck. And the embassy got by. There was actually this incredible spirit in the embassy that we were going to show the Soviets that this kind of action was not going to cramp the embassy."

Pifer said he expects the same determined spirit from U.S. embassy personnel now.

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VP Pence says Trump will sign Russia sanctions soon
1 August 2017
Associated Press

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence says President Donald Trump will sign a bill on a new package of sanctions against Russia.

The Senate voted last week to approve the new financial sanctions against Moscow. The legislation bars Trump from easing or waiving the penalties on Russia unless Congress agrees.

Pence, who is visiting the former Soviet republic of Georgia Tuesday, said the Trump administration "had concerns" about the bill when it was drafted in the Senate, but that Trump will sign it soon.

Russia on Friday ordered the U.S. Embassy and three U.S. consulates in Russia to drastically cut its personnel there. President Vladimir Putin said on Sunday it would mean 755 staffers will have to be dismissed.

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Embassy Reductions Won't Deter U.S., Pence Says
By Michael Shear
31 July 2017
New York Times

Vice President Mike Pence responded aggressively on Monday to the decision by President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia to order the shedding of 755 positions at the United States Embassy in Moscow, even as President Trump remained silent on the escalating diplomatic row.

Traveling in Eastern Europe, Mr. Pence delivered a blunt message for Mr. Putin, noting that "recent diplomatic actions taken by Moscow will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, that of our allies and to freedom-loving nations around the world."

Mr. Pence said that while Mr. Trump remains "open to a better relationship" with Russia, he warned that "the United States rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation or malign influence in the Baltic States or against any of our treaty allies."

Mr. Putin over the weekend ordered that the embassy work force be trimmed by Sept. 1, responding to legislation approved last week by Congress to impose new sanctions on Russia for its meddling in the 2016 presidential election. The legislation also imposes additional sanctions on Iran and North Korea.

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Mr. Trump passed up several public opportunities on Monday to condemn the action, which includes American diplomats and Russian employees. As president, his posture toward Mr. Putin has been closely watched during a congressional inquiry into Russian election meddling and a special counsel investigation on the issue.

"Right now we're reviewing our options, and when we have something to say on it, we'll let you know," said Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the White House press secretary.

Ms. Sanders also declined to say when Mr. Trump planned to sign the sanctions legislation, which passed with overwhelming, veto-proof majorities in both the House and the Senate. On Friday, the White House said the president would sign the bill but had initially suggested it was an improper attempt by Congress to exercise the president's foreign policy powers.

Mr. Trump's silence on the new dispute with Russia struck some veteran foreign policy experts as a sign of weakness as he faces a dramatic diplomatic offense by a major adversary.

"Why is he not denouncing? It's a very weak signal that he's sending," said Michael McFaul, a Stanford University professor who served as ambassador to Russia under former President Barack Obama.

Mr. McFaul said that removing 755 people from the United States Embassy in Moscow — about two-thirds of the personnel in the compound — would severely affect the work that American diplomats do there. That includes processing visa applications for Russians seeking to visit the United States.

He also noted that a statement by the State Department called the Russian action "regrettable and uncalled-for." But Mr. McFaul said that previous administrations would have condemned the expulsion more strenuously and would have made sure the American president responded directly to his counterpart in Russia.

"That he chose not to was striking to me," Mr. McFaul said. "He's on Twitter all the time. If he has something to say, it would take him 10 seconds to say it."

Russian officials said over the weekend that Mr. Putin's diplomatic move was retaliation for the sanctions legislation, promising to go even further if the United States imposed additional economic restrictions in the future.

"This retaliation is long, long overdue," Sergei Ryabkov, Russia's deputy foreign minister, said on ABC's "This Week" on Sunday. Mr. Ryabkov called the sanctions legislation "completely weird and unacceptable" and said that in response to any more moves by the United States, "we will respond in kind."

"We will mirror this," he added. "We will retaliate."

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While Mr. Trump remained silent on Monday, Mr. Pence used his trip to Estonia to underscore a tougher stance for the Baltic nations toward Russia and its aggression in the region. He will visit Georgia and Montenegro later on his trip.

In a speech at Kadriorg Palace in Tallinn, the presidential residence of Estonia, Mr. Pence said he brought a message from Mr. Trump that "we are with you." In the speech, Mr. Pence reiterated the president's call for Russia to end "destabilizing activities in Ukraine and elsewhere."

"The United States will continue to hold Russia accountable for its actions — and we call on our European allies and friends to do the same," Mr. Pence said.

The vice president also explicitly promised that the United States would meet its obligations under NATO's Article 5 mutual defense pledge to come to the aid of a member nation who is attacked. Mr. Trump made a similar statement this summer after earlier refusing to say so directly.

Mr. Pence said that Mr. Trump would sign the sanctions legislation "very soon."

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Vice President Pence in Europe: Georgia
By Office of the Vice President
1 August 2017
The White House

Vice President Mike Pence's next stop on his visit to Eastern Europe was Georgia. Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili and the Vice President met to discuss how the United States, under President Donald Trump, strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgia's soil. Following his meetings, the Vice President and Second Lady Karen Pence toured the Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition, a symbol of the ancient faith that fills Georgia's ancient land, with Patriarch Ilias II and Father Giorgi Zviadadze. Vice President Pence also addressed American and Georgian troops at Exercise Noble Partner where he discussed our shared commitment to promote security and stability across the wider world. Following his speech, the Vice President departed for Montenegro, the last stop of his visit to Eastern Europe.

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During Whirlwind Week in Washington, VP Pence Comforts East European Allies
By Emily Tamkin
1 August 2017
The Cable: Foreign Policy

Amid chaos in Washington, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence is in Eastern Europe assuring American allies that the United States is committed to protecting them.

"We are with you. We stand with the people and nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania — and we always will," Pence said at a joint press availability with the Baltic leaders in Tallinn, even as, back home, President Donald Trump has yet to comment on Russian expulsion of U.S. diplomatic staff.

The vice president participated in a listening session on cyber and innovation with the president of Estonia in Tallinn, and travelled on Tuesday to Tbilisi, where he met with the Georgian prime minister for their third substantive meeting since Pence took office.

"We see Georgia as a key strategic partner and stand by your territorial integrity and your aspirations to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," Pence said at a dinner with Prime Minister Kvirikashvili in Tbilisi. At a joint press conference with Georgia's prime minister, Pence noted that Russia occupies one-fifth of Georgian Territory.

Back in Washington, in the meantime, President Trump has yet to comment personally on a bill that Congress passed imposing tougher sanctions on Russia. The White House press secretary said Friday in a statement that Trump would sign the bill.

Speaking in Tbilisi, Pence said the bill would be signed soon.

From Tbilisi, Pence traveled to the newest NATO member, Montenegro. In May at a NATO summit, President Trump appeared to push Montenegro's prime minister aside during a photo session.

Pence's staid tour abroad is in stark contrast to the roller coaster in Washington this week. On Monday, U.S. President Donald Trump lost a communications director who was brought on roughly a week prior; Jared Kushner, his son in law and advisor, told White House interns the Trump team was too disorganized to have colluded with Russia; and the *Washington Post* reported the president had dictated a misleading message to his son about a meeting with a Russian lawyer.

Trump's is not the first administration to send a vice president abroad in the president's stead, or to develop relations with diplomats and dignitaries from particular countries — former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden was known as Ukraine's man in Washington.

"Vice President Pence's visit sent a clear message about the enduring strength of the relationship between Georgia and the United States," Georgian Ambassador to the United States David Bakradze told Foreign Policy by email. "This is an important milestone in the bilateral relationship."

"In short," a representative from the Estonian Embassy in Washington, D.C. relayed to FP, "we consider the trip a great success."

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The embassy of Montenegro did not immediately respond to request for comment.

Update, Aug. 1 2017, 4:16 pm ET: This piece was updated to include comment from the Estonian Embassy.

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Social Media Coverage

Prominent Facebook Posts on the VP Trip

Vice President Mike Pence

Vice President Mike Pence added 4 new photos.
2 hrs

#VPinEurope Photos of the Day: Karen and I landed in Georgia last night and were welcomed by Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili and his wife, Maia. Today, the Prime Minister and I met and I told him that the United States of America, under President Donald J. Trump, strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgia's soil. Following our productive discussions, we toured the Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition, a symbol of the ancient faith that fills Georgia's ancient land, with Patriarch Ilias II and Father Giorgi Zviadadze. To conclude our visit to Georgia, I spoke with American and Georgian troops at Exercise Noble Partner and discussed our shared commitment to promote security and stability across the wider world. Today we recommit ourselves to the cause of security, prosperity, and freedom for the people of Georgia.



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PRESS RELEASE: Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and U.S. Vice President Mike Pence Agree to Further Enhance Georgia-US Security and Economic Cooperation

Tbilisi, 1st August 2017 – Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili today met with United States Vice President Mike Pence to discuss expanding future security and economic cooperation between Georgia and the U.S. Last night, Kvirikashvili hosted Vice President Pence and the American delegation for dinner in Tbilisi.

"Vice President Pence's visit so shortly after taking office bears witness to his and President Trump's great desire to deepen the strategic partnership and friendship with Georgia, for which I am very grateful," stated Prime Minister Kvirikashvili. "The Georgian nation deeply appreciates the American people's friendship, solidarity, and strong support."

During their meeting, Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and Vice President Pence discussed the U.S.-Georgian security partnership in depth. Following the meeting, the Vice President met with Georgian and U.S. soldiers participating in the Noble Partner exercise, a U.S. Army-led exercise to support the training, evaluation and eventual certification of Georgia's second light infantry company contribution to the NATO Response Force (NRF).

"The Vice President's meeting with Georgian and American service members participating in the Noble Partner exercises is an unmistakable demonstration of the strong U.S. support for spurring our country's sovereignty and integration into NATO," affirmed Prime Minister Kvirikashvili. "The special bonds and extraordinary sacrifices of our two militaries -- currently fighting extremism together -- is something to behold. Georgia and the U.S. are truly brothers in arms."

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and Vice President Pence also held productive discussions about furthering the economic and trade partnership between Georgia and the U.S. Georgia's Anaklia Deep Sea Port on the Black Sea, which will become a focal point in trade between Europe and Asia, is being built by an American-Georgian consortium, led by U.S. company Conti. SSA Marine, another U.S. company, will operate it.

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During the visit, Vice President Pence also reaffirmed U.S. support for continued progress toward Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

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For more information contact:

Levan Karumidze

Media Adviser

Department of Public Relations

Administration of the Government of Georgia

Phone: +995 599 969610

E-mail: lkarumidze@geo.gov.ge ; levankarumi@gmail.com

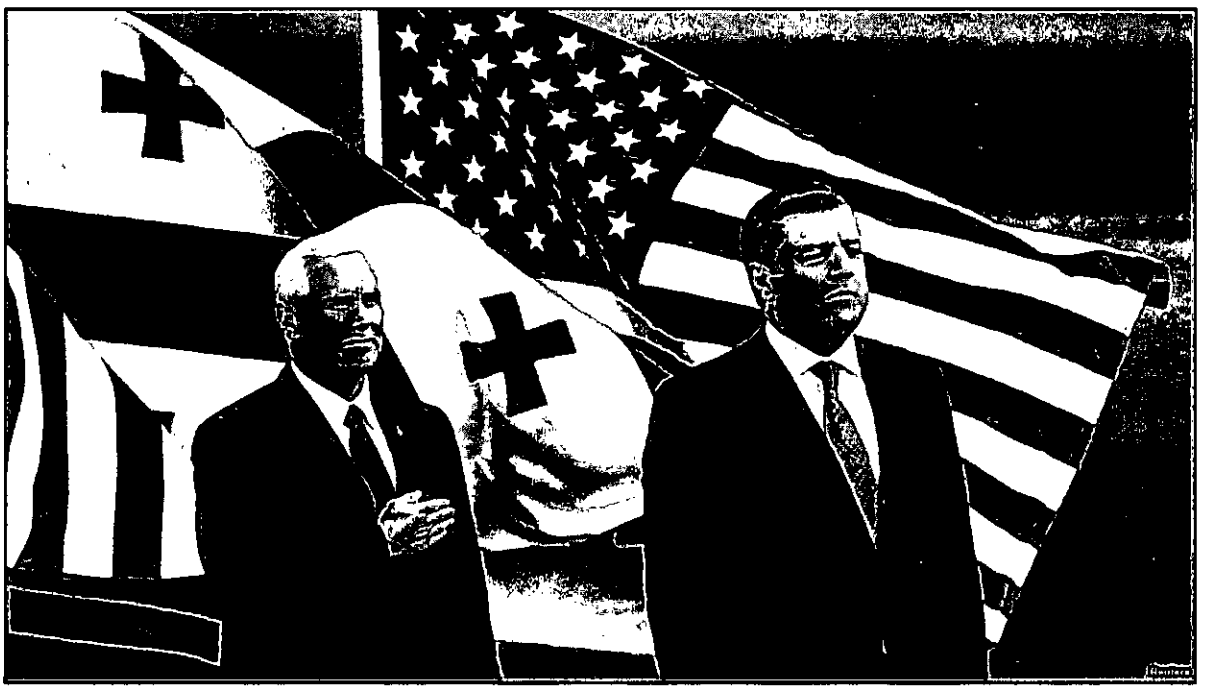
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Vice President Pence Trip to Georgia Coverage Report for July 31, 2017



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Pence Arrives In Georgia In Bid To Reassure U.S. Allies
31 July 2017
Radio Free Europe

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence arrived in Georgia on July 31 for the second leg of his three-day trip aimed at reassuring allies in Eastern Europe in the face of what the United States calls Russia's efforts to destabilize the region.

Pence was greeted at the Tbilisi airport by Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili just hours after the U.S. vice president reaffirmed Washington's solidarity with the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders" and "undermine democracies."

"We stand with the people and nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and we always will," Pence said in Tallinn, where he met with the three Baltic presidents -- Kersti Kaljulaid, Raimonds Vejonis, and Dalia Grybauskaite, respectively.

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions, as have Georgia and the third ally on Pence's itinerary: new NATO member Montenegro.

"No threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said. "At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another."

The United States "rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation, or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies," he also said.

Article 5

Pence said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty -- the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

He also pledged that the United States would not be deterred from its goals by Moscow's demand for drastic cuts in staff levels at U.S. diplomatic facilities in Russia.

"Recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter commitment of the United States to our security, the security of our allies, and the security of freedom-loving nations around the world," he said.

After Pence began his visit to Estonia on July 30, Prime Minister Juri Ratas said the U.S. vice president raised the possibility of deploying the Patriot antimissile defense system in the country.

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"We spoke about it today, but we didn't talk about a date or time," Ratas told state broadcaster ERR.

The U.S. Patriot defense system is a mobile, ground-based system designed to intercept missiles and warplanes.

Ratas also said the two leaders talked about the upcoming Russian military maneuvers planned for near the Estonian border, "and how Estonia, the United States, and NATO should monitor them and exchange information."

'Very Clear' Message

Estonian Foreign Minister Sven Mikser told Current Time TV, the Russian-language network run by RFE/RL in cooperation with Voice of America (VOA), that Pence's visit was "an extremely important event."

"The message from the vice president was very clear: The U.S. stands by all its allied obligations and commitments, and the U.S. is truly committed to being there for us, for all of its NATO allies," Mikser said.

Pence planted an English oak before departing Tallinn aboard Air Force Two en route to Georgia's capital, Tbilisi, where he was greeted at the airport by Prime Minister Giorgi Kvrikashvili later on July 31.

Officials said Pence will highlight U.S. support for the Caucasus nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity before continuing on to Montenegro, the newest NATO member.

Georgia, which has expressed hopes of joining the Western alliance, has seen Russian encroachment on its territory.

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili said on July 27 that Pence's visit will demonstrate that the United States continues to support Georgia in building a stronger military force.

During Pence's visit, 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the previously planned Noble Partner 2017 exercises.

Troops from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, and Armenia were taking part.

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"The vice president's presence here is definitely showing that this is not only about military exercises, but it is also showing unification with our values, with our foreign policy targets, and showing a clear message that we are together," Margvelashvili said.

Pence was to participate in an official dinner hosted by Kvrikashvili. State media in Georgia reported that Margvelashvili was expected to join them.

On the last stop, Pence will welcome NATO's newest member with his stop in Montenegro, whose accession to the alliance in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica, U.S. officials said.

Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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Pence to Visit Estonia, Georgia, Montenegro on NATO, Russia
By Laurie Kellman
28 July 2017
Associated Press

Vice President Mike Pence visits three countries in Russia's neighborhood beginning Monday to signal support for them and NATO while drawing a line against aggression.

Pence's trip to Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro is viewed as a follow-up to President Donald Trump's visit to Europe earlier this month. Then, Trump used stops in Poland and Germany to try to pull off a tricky balancing act of improving ties with Moscow while also presenting the U.S. as a check against Russia's moves in the region.

Pence's mission will be encouraging those countries to continue to ally with the West and resist Russia's attempts to splinter the NATO alliance.

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson have previously been dispatched to try to allay the concerns of countries near Russia that the U.S. really will stand behind NATO and support the sovereignty of non-member former Soviet republics.

The concerns stem from Trump's suggestion during the campaign that the U.S. might not defend NATO allies and his apparent desire for closer relations with Russia. Trump received criticism on his

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first European trip for passing up the chance to affirm the NATO mutual defense commitment clause known as Article 5, which frames an attack on one as an attack on all. Trump did affirm U.S. support for Article 5 on his second trip to Europe.

The vice president is expected to deliver a message of support for U.S. trade and investment with the countries while underscoring the U.S. commitment to the security of the three nations, according to senior administration officials who briefed reporters about the trip on the condition that they not be identified by name. Pence also will stress the values of freedom of speech, democracy and religious tolerance.

In Estonia, Pence is expected to highlight bilateral ties with the U.S., particularly on trade, investment and cyber issues. Pence also is expected to thank Estonian officials for their approach to "burden-sharing," diplomatic speak for agreeing to spend a full share of 2 percent of their GDP on defense, the administration officials said.

The vice president also is expected to underscore the U.S. commitment to NATO, which sees Russia as a security threat and offers protection to concerned member states near Russia's borders.

In Georgia, Pence is expected to highlight U.S. support for its sovereignty and territorial integrity, the officials said. Georgia is the only country on the trip that is not a NATO member and, like Ukraine, has seen Russian encroachment on its territory. The administration officials said the U.S. is encouraging Georgia to continue to make reforms to its judiciary and expand anti-corruption efforts.

In Montenegro, Pence will celebrate that nation as the newest NATO ally.

On Wednesday, he'll attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Podgorica, Montenegro, to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and underscore the importance of good governance, political reforms and rule of law. Also expected to attend are the leaders of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia.

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VP Pence, in the Baltics, voices support for mutual defense in NATO
By David Mardiste, Andrius Sytas
31 July 2017
Reuters

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence on Monday assured the Baltic states of U.S. support if they faced aggression from Russia, telling them that Washington firmly backs NATO's doctrine of collective defense.

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Pence's comments to the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, ahead of Russian war games on their doorstep, were clearly intended to reassure following Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine and U.S. President Donald Trump's early lukewarm support for NATO.

During a visit to NATO's Brussels headquarters in May, Trump jarred allies by not restating U.S. support for a critical portion of the alliance's charter and instead berated some members for not spending enough on defense.

Trump has since said he supports the NATO charter's Article 5, the requirement that each member of the alliance defend each other if they come under attack.

"A strong and united NATO is more necessary today than at any point since the collapse of communism a quarter-century ago and no threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said at news conference with the three Baltic presidents.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States stands firmly behind our Article 5 pledge of mutual defense. An attack on one of us is an attack on us all."

Russia is scheduled next month to hold large-scale military maneuvers with its ally Belarus. The U.S. army's top general in Europe said this month that the Zapad war games could be a "Trojan horse" resulting in military equipment being left in Belarus.

He warned that Russia continues to "seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine democracies of sovereign nations and divide the free nations of Europe, one against another".

Lithuania's President Dalia Grybauskaite told Lithuanian radio that NATO's air-policing missions would be doubled during the Russian-led Zapad exercise.

Pence is also due to visit Montenegro, the alliance's newest member, and make a stop in Georgia, an aspiring member, which fought a brief war with Russia in 2008.

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Pence: Baltic States' Greatest Threat Comes from Russian Aggression
31 July 2017
Voice of America

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence said Monday there is no larger threat to Baltic states than the "specter of aggression" by Russia, as he pledged support for NATO allies Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 08/03/2017 7:59:37 PM

Pence met in Tallinn with the presidents of all the Baltic states — Estonia's Kersti Kaljulaid, Latvia's Raimonds Vejonis and Lithuania's Dalia Grybauskaite — and afterward summarized the U.S. position on Russia's "destabilizing" activities:

"At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine democracies of sovereign nations and divide the free nations of Europe one against another. Under President Donald Trump, the United States of America rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies."

During his public remarks in Estonia's capital, the U.S. vice president also expressed hope for improved relations with Russia. He said the Kremlin decree this week ordering most American diplomats to leave their posts in Moscow will not deter the U.S. commitment to its allies' security.

Pence praised Estonia for meeting the NATO alliance target for defense spending of at least 2 percent of its gross domestic product, and he noted Latvia and Lithuania would hit that level by the end of next year. Trump has repeatedly called on NATO members to boost defense spending.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania all have asked for tangible demonstrations of U.S. military support. Concerns about Russian expansionism have increased sharply in the Baltic region since Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine three years ago.

From Estonia, Pence traveled later Monday to Georgia, where troops from the United States and other NATO partners are conducting military exercises that began Sunday.

Welcoming him to Tbilisi, Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili said, "Vice President Pence's visit sends a strong message about the enduring strength of the relationship between Georgia and the United States."

Pence praised the Georgian people for their strong "commitment to independence and freedom." He and Kvirikashvili dined together Monday and will hold talks Tuesday.

Following his visit to Georgia, Pence's three-nation tour of Eastern Europe will conclude in Montenegro, NATO's newest member.

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Pence Says U.S. Will 'Always Stand' With Baltic Nations
31 July 2017
Radio Free Europe

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence has reaffirmed Washington's support for the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders " and "undermine democracies."

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"We stand with the people and nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and we always will," Pence said on July 31 in the Estonian capital, Tallinn, where he met with the three Baltic presidents -- Kersti Kaljulaid, Raimonds Vejonis, and Dalia Grybauskaite.

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries and other allies in Eastern Europe have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions in their respective regions.

"No threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said. "At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another."

The United States "rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation, or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies," he also said.

Pence said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty -- the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

He also pledged that the United States would not be deterred from its goals by Moscow's demand for drastic cuts in staff levels at U.S. diplomatic facilities in Russia.

"Recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter commitment of the United States to our security, the security of our allies, and the security of freedom-loving nations around the world," he said.

After Pence began his visit to Estonia on July 30, Prime Minister Juri Ratas said the U.S. vice president raised the possibility of deploying the Patriot antimissile defense system in the country.

"We spoke about it today, but we didn't talk about a date or time," Ratas told state broadcaster ERR.

The U.S. Patriot defense system is a mobile, ground-based system designed to intercept missiles and warplanes.

Ratas also said the two leaders talked about the upcoming Russian military maneuvers planned for near the Estonian border, "and how Estonia, the United States, and NATO should monitor them and exchange information."

Estonian Foreign Minister Sven Mikser told Current Time TV, the Russian-language network run by RFE/RL in cooperation with Voice of America (VOA), that Pence's visit was "an extremely important event."

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"The message from the vice president was very clear: The U.S. stands by all its allied obligations and commitments, and the U.S. is truly committed to being there for us, for all of its NATO allies," Mikser said.

Pence planted an English oak before departing Tallinn aboard Air Force Two later on July 31, en route to Georgia's capital, Tbilisi, for the second leg of his trip.

Officials said Pence will highlight U.S. support for the Caucasus nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity before continuing on to visit the newest NATO member, Montenegro.

Georgia, which has expressed hopes of joining the Western alliance, has seen Russian encroachment on its territory.

Georgia, which has expressed hopes of joining the Western alliance, has seen Russian encroachment on its territory.

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili said on July 27 that Pence's visit will demonstrate that the United States continues to support Georgia in building a stronger military force.

During Pence's visit, 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the previously planned Noble Partner 2017 exercises.

Troops from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, and Armenia were taking part.

"The vice president's presence here is definitely showing that this is not only about military exercises, but it is also showing unification with our values, with our foreign policy targets, and showing a clear message that we are together," Margvelashvili said.

Pence was due to arrive in Tbilisi in the evening of July 31 and participate in an official dinner hosted by Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvrikashvili.

On the last stop, Pence will welcome NATO's newest member with his stop in Montenegro, whose accession to the alliance in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica, U.S. officials said.

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Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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Georgia begins U.S.-led military exercise a day before Vice President Pence visit
By Margarita Antidze
30 July 2017
Reuters

The Georgian army began two weeks of military exercises with the United States and other partner countries on Sunday, a day before U.S. Vice President Mike Pence visits the ex-Soviet nation.

About 2,800 soldiers from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, Armenia and Georgia were taking part in the maneuvers, with Washington dispatching an entire mechanized company including several Bradley infantry fighting vehicles and M1A2 Abrams main battle tanks.

Georgia's Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili said the drills were an important event for the South Caucasus republic.

"These exercises will help Georgia to get closer to NATO standards and to strengthen stability in the whole region," Kvirikashvili said at the opening ceremony on Sunday.

The "Noble Partner" exercises are being held in Georgia for the third time. Russian officials had not commented on the event yet, but in previous years Moscow warned that drills could destabilize the region, a charge denied by Georgian officials and U.S. diplomats.

"This exercise is not directed against any country. It's about to help Georgia to grow its capacity to interoperate in international operations," U.S. Ambassador Ian Kelly told Reuters.

Russia and Georgia fought a war in August 2008 over the breakaway Georgian region of South Ossetia. Moscow continues to garrison troops there and to support another breakaway region, Abkhazia.

The exercises were being run out of the Vaziani military base near Georgia's capital, Tbilisi.

Russian forces used to be based there until they withdrew at the start of the last decade under the terms of a European arms reduction agreement.

Pence plans to attend the drills and address participants on Tuesday.

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The United States has spoken favorably of the idea that Georgia might one day join NATO, something Russia firmly opposes.

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U.S. backing of Georgian military sends strong message to Russia: Margvelashvili
By Margarita Antidze
27 July 2017
Reuters

The United States has continued to support Georgia in building more resilient military forces, training and equipping its army, Georgian president Giorgi Margvelashvili said on Thursday.

He added that these issues would be "one of the main" topics discussed during U.S. Vice President Mike Pence's visit to the ex-Soviet country.

Margvelashvili also said the Georgian army will start two weeks of military exercises with the United States and other partner countries on Sunday, the day before Pence's visit to Tbilisi, to send an important message to Russia about their common values and political targets.

"The vice-president's presence here is definitely showing that this is not only about military exercises, but it is also showing unification with our values, with our foreign policy targets and showing a clear message that we are together," Margvelashvili told a news conference.

Russia defeated Georgia in a short war in 2008 over the breakaway Georgian region of South Ossetia, and Moscow continues to station troops there and to support another breakaway region, Abkhazia.

"This is an important message especially in the environment when (Russia's) training and exercises going on the occupied territories of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region (South Ossetia)," Margvelashvili added.

Pence plans to visit Georgia as a part of his trip to Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro.

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U.S., U.K., Ukraine, Others Begin Massive Military Drills In Georgia
30 July 2017
Radio Free Europe

Some 2,800 troops from host Georgia, the United States, and six other countries have begun a major military exercise in the South Caucasus nation.

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Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili and other leaders on July 30 said they see the event as a substantial step toward their goal of one day joining NATO.

"These exercises will help Georgia to get closer to NATO standards and to strengthen stability in the whole region," Kvirikashvili said at the opening ceremonies at the Vaziani military base near the capital, Tbilisi.

Georgia's defense minister, Levan Izoria, called the scale of exercises "unprecedented" and said they "make clear the support for Georgia by the NATO member states, especially the U.S."

U.S. officials in the past have spoken favorably toward Georgian hopes of eventually joining NATO, a move Russia vehemently opposes.

At a 2008 summit in Bucharest, NATO leaders made a formal pledge that Georgia "will become a NATO member," but alliance leaders have moved warily toward that goal in the face of Moscow's opposition.

About 1,600 U.S. troops and 800 Georgian soldiers are taking part in the two-week exercises, dubbed Noble Partner.

Troops from Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, and Armenia are also participating, with the United States deploying a mechanized company, including several Bradley infantry fighting vehicles and M1A2 Abrams battle tanks.

It is the third time the exercises have been held in Georgia, a country that has seen much-larger rival Russian encroach on its territory since its independence from the Soviet Union.

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway areas of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008, and Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

In previous years, Moscow warned that the drills could destabilize the region, a notion that Georgia and the United States have dismissed.

"This exercise is not directed against any country. It's about to help Georgia to grow its capacity to interoperate in international operations," U.S. Ambassador Ian Kelly told Reuters news agency, citing missions such as the current one in Afghanistan.

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence is scheduled to visit Georgia on July 31 after a stop in Estonia to meet with Baltic leaders also concerned about Russia's intensions in their region. He will meet with U.S. troops on August 1.

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During his stop in Tallinn, Pence said, "Our message to the Baltic states -- my message when we visit Georgia and Montenegro -- will be the same: To our allies here in Eastern Europe, we are with you, we stand with you on behalf of freedoms."

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US and Georgia hold military drills, as Russia shows off naval strength
30 July 2017
BBC

The US and Georgia have launched their biggest ever joint military exercises, as the Caucasus nation seeks to push its bid to join Nato.

US Vice-President Mike Pence will visit this week and is expected to back the plan, which Russia strongly opposes.

Georgia and Russia have had fractious relations over two breakaway republics and fought a brief war in 2008.

Russia staged its own show of force on Sunday with President Putin joining a naval display in St Petersburg.

The US-Georgia military drills, dubbed Noble Partner, involve some 1,600 US and 800 Georgian troops.

The US has also deployed M1A2 Abrams main battle tanks and M2 Bradley infantry vehicles for the exercises, which will go on until 12 August.

A number of other nations, including the UK, are involved.

Georgian Defence Minister Levan Izoria said the "unprecedented" exercises would "make clear the support for Georgia by the Nato member states, especially the US".

Although Georgia is not a member of Nato, it does voluntarily contribute to the Nato Response Force (NRF), the multinational force of land, air, navy and special operations units the alliance can deploy quickly when needed.

The Russo-Georgian War in August 2008 led to Moscow occupying the Russian-backed self-proclaimed republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Meanwhile on Sunday, President Vladimir Putin attended a show of might on Russia's annual Navy Day.

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Some 50 warships and submarines were on displayed in the Gulf of Finland and on the Neva river around St Petersburg.

He said in an address: "The navy is not only dealing with its traditional tasks but also responding with merit to new challenges, making a significant contribution to the fight against terrorism and piracy."

There were other displays around the country, and Russia also showed off its naval hardware at its Syrian base of Tartus.

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Mike Pence arrives in Estonia, kicking off Eastern Europe trip
By David Caplan
30 July 2017
ABC News

Vice President Mike Pence and second lady Karen Pence arrived in Estonia Sunday afternoon, kicking off a three-country visit of Eastern Europe.

The Pences, who left from Joint Base Andrews in Maryland Saturday night, were greeted at the Tallinn airport by U.S. ambassador to Estonia James D. Melville and Estonian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sven Mikser. The group shook hands and spoke briefly before the vice president's motorcade headed to the Pences' hotel.

"On behalf of @POTUS, arrived in Tallinn, Estonia with @SecondLady to meet w/ leaders of Baltic States on security & prosperity #VPinEurope," Pence tweeted upon his arrival.

In explaining the purpose of the trip, a senior Trump administration official told reporters last week, "This builds upon the administration's engagement. The Secretary of Defense had been there recently, and it builds upon the Vice President's trip when we addressed some of these leaders at the Munich Security Conference when he met with the three Baltic Presidents then. And he has since hosted the Prime Minister of Georgia here at the White House, as did the President. And then on Montenegro's accession into NATO, we also hosted leadership here in the White House."

The office of Estonian Prime Minister Juri Ratas said in a press release Saturday that Ratas and Pence will meet at 5:30 p.m. local time, to "discuss cooperation in defence, digital issues and cyber defence, as well as cooperation between the US and the EU in connection with the Estonia Presidency of the Council of the European Union."

Ratas said in a statement, "The contribution of the US to the security of the Baltic States and also the whole of Europe is vital, and I certainly wish to thank the Vice President for that. Besides that, we plan to speak about the Estonian digital solutions that are of interest to the US, and developing

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cooperation in cyber defence at our meeting. Another important topic that will be on the table, is the cooperation between the EU and the US."

A senior White House administration official told reporters last week that while in Estonia, Pence "will highlight our strong bilateral ties, including by trade and investment. And particularly with Estonia, successes in the cyber realm, and their current partnership on cyber issues, and their leading not only in that region, but globally."

On Thursday, Karen Pence expressed her enthusiasm for the trip, tweeting "Looking forward to our visit to Eastern Europe where I highlight my iniative, art therapy. What an honor!"

According to the second lady's office, she will tour a medical center in Tallinn, and participate in a roundtable discussion with art therapists.

The senior administration official said in Georgia, the vice president will "highlight our commitment to the U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership, our strong support Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity ... and its internationally recognized borders, and our support for Georgia and their Euro-Atlantic aspirations."

While in Georgia, Karen Pence will visit with patients of an art therapy program in Tbilisi.

On Wednesday, Pence will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Podgorica, Montenegro, to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and underscore the importance of good governance, political reforms and rule of law. Also expected to attend are the leaders of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia.

In Podgorica, Montenegro, the second lady will tour a honey farm, where she will learn about a local family's beekeeping business.

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Pence travels to Baltic states to reassure allies and send message to Russia
By Ashley Parker
31 July 2017
Washington Post

Vice President Pence touched down in Estonia on Sunday on the eve of President Trump's expected signing of legislation to impose broad sanctions against Russia, and said he came bearing a message from the president: "Russia's destabilizing activities, its support for rogue regimes, its activities in Ukraine, are unacceptable."

Speaking briefly with reporters in Town Hall Square here in Tallinn's old town, Pence reaffirmed the president's decision to sign the sanctions bill but also held out the possibility that the implementation

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of the penalties — for which Russia has already retaliated — might actually improve relations between the two countries, saying he and Trump "expect Russian behavior to change."

"The president and I remain very hopeful that we'll see different behavior by the Russian government, with regard to Ukraine, with regard to supporting rogue regimes in Iran and North Korea," Pence said. "We continue to believe that if Russia will change its behavior, our relationship can change for the good and improve for the interests in both of our countries and the interest of peace and stability in this region and around the world."

Russia has rejected the idea that the sanctions will in any way improve relations, with its U.S. embassy tweeting on Saturday: "Washington still doesn't get the fact that pressure never works against @Russia, bilateral relations can hardly be improved by sanctions."

Russian President Vladi-mir Putin said Sunday that the U.S. diplomatic missions in Russia will have to reduce their staffs by 755 people.

Pence's long-planned, 3½-day trip to Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro was originally intended to reaffirm the United States' commitment to NATO — Estonia is one of five countries meeting its defense spending commitment — and touch on the United States' commitment to the security of the Baltic states. All three countries have been the targets of Russian aggression.

But in the wake of Trump's decision to sign the legislation — which passed the Senate on Thursday on an overwhelming 98 to 2 vote — the vice president's trip has taken on a clear Russia focus, senior administration officials said. Nearly all of Pence's remarks and speeches are likely to address the challenges Russia poses in this part of the world.

But Pence's rhetoric abroad so far seems slightly out of sync with some of his boss's previous comments and actions on the topics of both Russia and NATO.

Despite the firm conclusion of his own intelligence community that Russia interfered in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Trump has repeatedly refused to fully accept that determination. When he has acknowledged that Russia did meddle, he has played down Moscow's role, saying other state or individual actors could have played a role as well.

When asked how the Baltic states can accept Pence's reassurances that the United States will support them against Russian aggression and interference in their domestic politics when Trump has frequently taken a softer line, the vice president said, "The president has confirmed repeatedly that we believe Russia did meddle in U.S. elections. I think he has also said it could have been other actors as well."

His message throughout Eastern Europe, Pence added, is a simple one. "While our policy is America-first, it's not America-alone, and that our allies in Eastern Europe can be confident that the United States of America stands with them," he said. "We are committed to NATO, we are committed to our common defense."

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Trump's comments and actions have at times raised questions about his commitment to the alliance, despite statements of strong support from Pence and other administration officials.

While attending a ceremony at NATO headquarters in Brussels in May on his first trip abroad, Trump delivered a speech from which he specifically removed a roughly 20-word section intended to reaffirm U.S. support for the treaty's Article 5, which says an attack on one member is an attack on all members. He later committed to NATO's collective defense ideal, which is the cornerstone of the treaty, but the earlier omission worried European leaders.

Pence on Sunday again tried to play down the president's previous uncertainty on Article 5, arguing Trump has never wavered in his commitment.

"From the time the president sent me to speak at the Munich Security Conference, we made it clear that the policy of our administration is to stand firmly with our NATO allies and to stand firmly behind our Article 5 commitment that an attack on one is an attack on all," Pence said. "The president has made it clear from the outset of our administration and will continue to make it clear to all our allies in the region."

Trump was initially reluctant to accept the Russia sanctions legislation, which curbs his ability to lift them on his own without consent from Congress. But he finally agreed to sign it after revisions, which also include sanctions on Iran and North -Korea.

In many ways, the president had no choice. Trump would have encountered a fierce political backlash — as well as faced the threat of a veto override from a Republican-controlled Congress — had he refused to sign the bill. Rejecting the legislation also would have raised further questions about his seeming reluctance to confront Putin.

Pence's trip also comes as Trump is facing growing scrutiny at home over Russia, in the form of special counsel Robert S. Mueller III's widening investigation. In addition to looking into whether Trump's associates colluded with Russians in the 2016 election, Mueller's probe has grown to include questions about the finances of Trump and his family, as well as possible attempts to obstruct the investigation.

Michael McFaul, the ambassador to Russia under former president Barack Obama, said that Pence's tough-on-Russia message will be "welcome" in each of the countries he's visiting — but may disguise a deeper uncertainty about what the Trump administration's true policy is toward Moscow.

"It will be easy for him to have positive bilateral meetings when he goes there," McFaul said. "But of course he has a very convoluted message on what they're doing on Russia."

All three countries have struggled for years with Russian aggression. In 2007, Estonia faced a cyberattack that hobbled dozens of corporate and government websites — an attack for which it blames Russia, though the Kremlin denies the charge. In 2008, Russia invaded Georgia, and

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Montenegro has accused Russian agents of an attempted coup in 2016, aimed at preventing the nation from joining NATO.

"Most certainly all three of these countries have felt the influence — the coercive influence — of Russia on their domestic politics, so from my point of view, that's an interesting and positive set of countries for him to go to, with the caveat that I don't know what their Russia policy is," McFaul said. "I follow it pretty closely, and I could not tell you what the strategy is."

But Sunday afternoon, in the sun-soaked town square, Pence seemed to only have one overarching message — that he and the president are in policy lockstep, and that he is just a humble emissary spreading Trump's greetings abroad.

The vice president stopped to shake hands with a few of the people who had gathered to watch the spectacle, many of them — like Pence — tourists in Estonia. As each individual introduced themselves, Pence often tied their comments back to Trump, telling a man from Paris, "The president was just in Paris for Bastille Day," and telling a couple from Poland, "The president was just in Warsaw."

Then, he ducked into his motorcade and pulled away.

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Pence Delivers Tough Speech on 'Unpredictable' Russia
By Peter Nicholas
31 July 2017
Wall Street Journal

Vice President Mike Pence issued one of the Trump administration's toughest attacks to date on Russia, coming to a nation on Russia's border to warn against aggression from the "unpredictable neighbor to the east."

Mr. Pence said Monday that President Donald Trump would sign a bill passed by Congress that imposes new sanctions on Russia, despite earlier reservations from the White House and a promise from Moscow to expel hundreds of U.S. diplomats in return.

Mr. Pence said the Russia must be held accountable for its actions, saying the U.S. wouldn't lift sanctions until it sees as a reversal of "the actions that caused the sanctions in the first place."

"At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe one against another," he said.

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Mr. Pence is in the midst of a three-day overseas trip that includes stops in two other countries that Moscow has seen as its traditional sphere of influence: the former Soviet state of Georgia and the Balkan state of Montenegro. His repeated message is that the U.S. won't abandon allies living in Russia's shadow.

The vice president delivered his remarks outside Estonia's defense headquarters, surrounded by symbols of military resolve. Flanking him were armored tanks and standing in front of the stage were hundreds of U.S., British, French and Estonian troops, hands clasped behind their backs.

Moscow has accused the U.S. of threatening Russia by pushing for the expansion of NATO up to its borders through the admittance of the Baltic states and the inclusion of Ukraine and Georgia.

Before the speech, Mr. Pence and the presidents of the three Baltic states, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, received a private military briefing that opened with an officer referencing the "eastern flank of NATO."

Mr. Pence praised Estonia for being one of just five in the NATO alliance to devote 2% of its gross domestic product to defense. The country of 1.3 million has pushed for more U.S. air cover for the region, but NATO officials say its 183-mile border with Russia would be hard to defend against a determined Russian assault. A Rand Corp. study last year showed that Russia could beat back NATO forces reach the outskirts of Tallinn, the capital, in just a few days.

In his 2016 presidential campaign, Mr. Trump often spoke of more cooperative dealings with Russia, and described NATO as obsolete. But he has since toughened his line on Russia, and Mr. Pence's remarks signaled again that the U.S. supported NATO's common-defense provision, known as Article 5.

"The United States rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation or malign influence in the Baltic States or against any of our treaty allies—and under President Donald Trump, the United States of America will stand firmly behind our (NATO) Article 5 pledge of mutual defense—and the presence of U.S. Armed Forces here today proves it," Mr. Pence said.

Mr. Trump in recent months has described relations with Russia at an all-time low point. After insisting he didn't believe Russia interfered in the 2016 presidential race, he has said Russia was "probably" involved, though he has also said China and other actors could have been. Russia has denied interfering in the election.

Mr. Pence, talking to reporters during a visit to Old Town Square, said that Mr. Trump's feelings on the matter are clear.

"The president has confirmed repeatedly that we believe Russia did meddle in U.S. elections." Mr. Pence said. "I think he has also said it could have been other actors as well. But he's confirmed his belief and our intelligence that Russia was involved in meddling in U.S. elections."

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Having chided Russia for its actions, Mr. Pence held open the possibility of a thaw. "President Trump has made it clear: America is open to a better relationship with Russia," he said.

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The Latest: US VP Wants Better Relations With Russia
31 July 2017
Associated Press

The Latest on U.S-Russian tensions (all times local):

2:50 p.m.

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence says that despite what the State Department described as "a regrettable and uncalled-for act" when the Kremlin ordered the U.S. to cut embassy and consulate staff in Russia, America wants to improve relations with Moscow.

Pence told reporters during a visit to Estonia that "we hope for better days, and better relations with Russia."

Speaking to the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania — all former Soviet republics bordering Russia — he said Monday that "the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, the security of our allies, and the security of freedom-loving nations around the world."

Pence was speaking on the first leg of a European tour that continues to Georgia and Montenegro.

On Sunday, Russian President Vladimir Putin said the U.S. would have to cut 755 of its embassy and consulate staff in Russia — a sweeping reduction that he described as a response to new U.S. sanctions.

—

1:10 p.m.

The Kremlin says Washington needs to show "political will" for Russia-U.S. relations to recover.

President Vladimir Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said Monday that it will take time for the U.S. to rid itself of what he called "political schizophrenia." He added that Russia remains interested in constructive cooperation with the U.S.

On Sunday, Putin said the U.S. would have to cut 755 of its embassy and consulate staff in Russia — a sweeping reduction which he described as a response to new U.S. sanctions. The Russian Foreign

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Ministry also announced closing down a U.S. recreational retreat on the outskirts of Moscow as well as warehouse facilities.

Moscow's move showed that its earlier hopes for an improvement in Russia-U.S. ties after Donald Trump's victory in the U.S. presidential election have withered.

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Russian President Vladimir Putin has demanded that United States cut its embassy and consulate staff in Russia by 755 people, heightening tensions between Washington and Moscow three days after the U.S. Congress approved sanctions against Russia.

The U.S. State Department called Putin's move "a regrettable and uncalled-for act."

The announcement Sunday also came hours after U.S. Vice President Mike Pence landed in Estonia, which borders Russia, for talks with the country that holds the rotating European Union presidency.

Russian's Foreign Ministry on Friday first ordered a reduction by Sept. 1 in U.S. diplomatic personnel in Russia to 455 people in response to a new package of American sanctions.

The sanctions seek to punish Moscow for meddling in the 2016 U.S. election and for its aggression in Ukraine and Syria.

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Pence: We will 'hold Russia accountable for its actions'
By Louis Nelson
31 July 2017
Politico

Amid a fresh wave of sanctions and renewed tension between the United States and Russia, Vice President Mike Pence reassured NATO's Baltic member states that the U.S. stands firmly behind its mutual-defense commitment in the face of stepped-up aggression from Moscow.

"The United States stands with the nations and people of the Baltic States — and we always will. We stand with our NATO allies in our commitment to your security," Pence said Monday in remarks at the headquarters of Estonia's defense forces. "Today we stand where East meets West — on a great frontier of freedom. No threat looms larger in the Baltic States than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east."

Pence's remarks came before members of the U.S., French, British and Estonian militaries and followed a meeting between the vice president and the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

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Pence offered optimism that the U.S.-Russia relationship might improve but said that any warming would come with a shift in Moscow's behavior. The vice president reaffirmed President Donald Trump's commitment to signing sanction legislation targeting Russia passed overwhelmingly last week by Congress.

In response to the forthcoming sanctions measure, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the U.S. to reduce the number of diplomats stationed in Russia by more than 700. The dueling diplomatic maneuvers marked a new low in already frosty relations for the former Cold War rivals.

Trump's presidency brought with it the possibility of improved relations with Russia after the president spent much of the 2016 campaign speaking warmly of Putin and expressing optimism that he would be able to build a strong relationship with the Kremlin. Instead, relations have worsened amid investigations into Russia's efforts to interfere in last year's election, continued Russian military activity in Ukraine as well as Moscow's support for Syrian dictator Bashar Assad.

Trump, too, has shifted his rhetoric in regards to Russia, drawing a relatively tougher line even if some critics would prefer him to take an even more aggressive approach. And after characterizing NATO as "obsolete" and questioning the U.S.'s willingness to comply with the treaty's all-for-one, one-for-all defense agreement, Trump has more recently reaffirmed his nation's commitment while also urging member states to increase their defense spending.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States will continue to hold Russia accountable for its actions — and we call on our European allies and friends to do the same," Pence said Monday in Estonia. "President Trump has made it clear: America is open to a better relationship. But the president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia — a better relationship, and the lifting of sanctions, will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place."

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Pence: Administration policy is 'America first,' not 'America alone'
By Julia Manchester
31 July 2017
Hill

Vice President Mike Pence looked to reassure NATO allies on his trip to Eastern Europe on Sunday, saying President Trump's "America first" policies are not meant to isolate U.S. allies.

"President Trump sent me to eastern Europe with a very simple message, that is America first doesn't mean America alone," Pence said in an interview with Fox News during a stop in Tallinn, Estonia.

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"Our message to the Baltic states, my message when we visit Georgia and Montenegro will be the same. To our allies in Eastern Europe, we are with you, we stand with you on behalf of freedom," he continued.

Pence's visit comes as tensions between NATO member states and Russia continue to rise. He arrived in Estonia on Sunday to showcase support for NATO allies in the Baltic region and Eastern Europe.

It also comes as Trump prepares to sign legislation that would slap brand new sanctions on Russia.

"The president has made it very clear that Russia's destabilizing activities and support for rogue regimes and its activities in Ukraine are unacceptable. The president made it clear that very soon he will sign sanctions from the Congress to reinforce that," Pence said Sunday.

"But at the same time as we make our intentions clear that we expect Russian behavior to change, the president and I remain very hopeful that we'll see very different behavior from the Russian government," he added.

Russia caught the attention of NATO and its allies earlier this month, when when it sent 2,500 troops to the Latvian and Estonian borders as a part of a military drill in the Pskov region.

It's also at the heart of the election meddling investigations that have expanded to include questions about possible Trump campaign contact with Moscow.

The vice president will also make stops in Montenegro, which became a NATO member earlier this year, and Georgia, which has attempted to join the alliance in the past.

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Vice President Mike Pence: Russian 'Aggression' Makes NATO Necessary
By Eoghan Macquire
31 July 2017
NBC News

The "specter of aggression" from Russia makes a strong and united NATO more important now than at any time since the Soviet Union's collapse, Vice President Mike Pence said Monday.

"Russia seeks to redraw international borders by force, undermine democracies of sovereign nations and divide the free nations of Europe," Pence said after meeting the leaders of the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

The three European countries are now members of NATO but were part of the Soviet Union and still feel the pressure of Russian influence after gaining independence in the early 1990s.

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"A strong and united NATO is more necessary today than at any point since the collapse of communism a quarter-century ago and no threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States of America rejects any attempts to use force, threats, intimidation or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies," he added.

Pence made the comments in the Estonian capital, Tallinn, the first stop on a three-day trip that will also take in Georgia and Montenegro.

Some in the Baltic nations have fretted they could be in Russia's sights after its annexation of Crimea and backing of pro-Moscow separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Although Pence stated that U.S. still wanted to foster "better relations" with Russia, he reiterated that the U.S. would continue to adhere to Article 5 of the alliance's charter — a tenet of collective defense.

President Trump had previously caused concern among NATO members by saying the organization was "obsolete" and declining to promise that America would defend fellow members if they did not up their military spending.

No other president since NATO was founded in 1949 had questioned that principle — until Trump, although he recently expressed support for NATO's Article 5.

Pence also stated that "recent diplomatic action" by Russia will not impact American commitments to the security of its NATO allies.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said Sunday that he was ordering the U.S. to reduce its diplomatic staff in the country by 755.

The move came in the wake of new sanctions voted through by the U.S. Congress last week which aim to punish Moscow for interfering in the 2016 presidential election and for its military aggression in Ukraine and Syria.

"Recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter the commitment of the United States of America to our security, the security of our allies and the security of freedom loving nations around the world," Pence said.

"[The U.S.] stands firmly behind our Article 5 pledge of mutual defense and an attack on one of us is an attack on us all," he added.

Estonian president, Kersti Kaljulaid, said the presence of Pence in Tallinn "underlined the credibility of Article 5."

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President Dalia Grybauskaitė of Lithuania, meanwhile, praised the decision of the U.S. Congress to pass new sanctions against Russia, describing it as a "very good message."

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The Testing Ground for Trump's Russia Policy
By Uri Friedman
30 July 2017
Atlantic

At the moment, U.S.-Russian relations could be thought of as a live experiment in the "Great Man" theory of history, which attributes historical change to the actions of exceptional individuals rather than impersonal forces that transcend any man or woman. If it were up to Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump, it seems, Russia and the United States would be teaming up to defeat terrorism, leaving the bitter days of sanctions and election meddling and proxy wars behind them.

The evidence to date, however, suggests it's mostly not up to the two men. Despite all the speculation about the American president cozying up to the Kremlin, the United States under Trump has repeatedly done the opposite. Yes, Trump has echoed Putin talking points, wavered on clearly committing to defend NATO allies, and ended some U.S. funding for rebels fighting Russia's ally in Syria, President Bashar al-Assad. Yet since Trump took office, the U.S. government has also attacked Assad's forces, admitted another country to the NATO military alliance over Russian objections, and advanced new sanctions to punish Russia for interfering in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign.

Many members of Congress and Trump's own administration, including the president's defense secretary and national-security adviser, consider Russia a U.S. adversary. Many Americans, amid investigations into whether the Trump campaign colluded with the Russian government to undermine Hillary Clinton's candidacy, are suspicious of any White House concession to the Kremlin. And so far, these views, as well as the clashing geopolitical goals of the two world powers, have proven stronger than Trump's desire to pursue friendlier relations with Moscow.

In the latest sign of the Russia hawks prevailing over the Russia doves, Vice President Mike Pence departs Sunday for a four-day trip to Eastern Europe, where he'll seek to reassure U.S. allies who see nearby Russia as a threat—and to shore up NATO in particular as a bulwark against that threat.

In Estonia, he'll meet with the leaders of the three Baltic countries, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, who are among NATO's easternmost members. In Georgia, an aspiring NATO member, he'll visit troops involved in a NATO-affiliated military exercise. And in Montenegro, a new NATO member that has never before received such a high-ranking U.S. official, he'll attend a summit of current and potentially future NATO members.

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According to the White House, Pence is making the trip "at the direction of President Trump." And surely there's some truth to that. But the direction of President Trump—especially when it comes to Russia—is far from clear. The countries on Pence's itinerary offer examples for how the administration's perplexing, bifurcated approach to Russia could be poked and prodded in the coming months and years. Small nations such as Estonia, Georgia, and Montenegro, which straddle East and West, literally test the limits of the America-First president's commitment to U.S. allies and to fundamentally changing America's relationship with Russia. And unlike another testing ground for Trump's Russia policy—his response to Russia's alleged intervention in the U.S. election—the one in Eastern Europe will yield results that don't primarily affect Americans. It isn't all about "us."

It's also very much about Estonians and Georgians and Montenegrins: The vice president is visiting a region that is "somewhere in between the EU and NATO and Russia," Vesko Garcevic, a former Montenegrin ambassador to NATO, told me. "Therefore, for Russia, this is really a battleground—a place where Russia can influence countries."

Or consider the view from Moscow: "The Baltic states right now are seen as a U.S./NATO foothold close to Russia's main [power] centers; Georgia is a U.S. ally in the Caucasus and the Black Sea region, a sensitive area in security terms," Dmitri Trenin, the director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, wrote in an email. As the Kremlin sees it, Pence "will be visiting the new U.S. sphere of influence. Russian conventional thinking maintains that the U.S. is supporting the Balts, Georgians, and Ukrainians not because they are democratic or strive for democracy but because they are vehemently anti-Russian and are only too happy to lease their territory to the Pentagon, CIA, et al."

In each country that Pence is visiting, the perceived threat from Russia looks different. In Georgia, which fought a war with neighboring Russia in 2008 that left two Georgian breakaway regions in de facto Russian control, there are fears that the Kremlin could do what it did in Ukraine in 2014: support separatists and seize control of just enough territory to keep the country in Russia's sphere of influence and out of the West's. Moscow currently seems content to nibble around the edges of Georgian territory, in what Georgian officials have condemned as "creeping occupation."

In Montenegro, the threat is more political than military. The former Yugoslav republic joined NATO in June despite Russian vows to retaliate against its onetime ally for taking a "hostile course"—one that would cut the Russian navy off from the Adriatic Sea and reduce Russia's sway in the Balkans. And several Serbian and Russian nationals will soon go on trial in Montenegro for allegedly planning a coup last fall that would have overthrown the nation's pro-West government, brought the pro-Russia opposition to power, and thwarted Montenegro's bid to become part of NATO and eventually the European Union. Montenegrin authorities claim the Russian government was involved in the plot, which the Kremlin denies. Montenegro is a young, fragile democracy, Garcevic observed, and Russia has exploited its "democratic deficiencies" to "gain greater geopolitical influence in the region."

In Estonia, a former Soviet republic that is now a thriving democracy ensconced in NATO and the EU, the main concern is Russia manipulating Estonian politics and policy by, for instance, launching cyberattacks, tampering with energy supplies, engaging in information warfare, or carrying out

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limited military provocations. The present preoccupation involves Russia's plans to stage large-scale military drills, known as Zapad ("West"), in Belarus this fall, ahead of which NATO has rotated troops through the Baltics and Poland. Baltic leaders are now increasing their defense budgets—already among NATO's most robust—and asking the alliance to permanently deploy anti-aircraft weapons in their countries as further deterrents against Russian aggression.

The wide open question, however, is the extent to which Pence's reassurance tour can really reassure these countries.

"People here, politicians, are puzzled with the new administration's position toward Russia," said Garcevic. There are moments when that position "seems to be very friendly and forthcoming to Putin," which suggests the United States is "turning its back to the Balkans," he explained, and other moments when it appears to be a "more traditional American approach" of fully supporting NATO and America's European alliances.

"Sometimes it seems like an unguided missile," Garcevic mused. "You don't know what's going to happen next."

Since Montenegrin officials "are interested in having good relations with the U.S.," they try to "minimize and downplay, water down, what President Trump says, particularly in his tweets," Garcevic added. But when I presented him with a scenario—Pence tells the Montenegrin government everything it wants to hear, only for Trump to complain about NATO on Twitter a couple days later—Garcevic acknowledged the limits of this approach. "If Trump says this, this would be like a cold shower," he responded. "This will cast a shadow over what I'm assuming the vice president will do in the Balkans."

I found Toomas Hendrik Ilves, who left office as Estonia's president shortly before Trump was elected, similarly mystified. "There will be cyber cooperation [between the U.S. and Russia], there won't be cyber cooperation, now there is cyber cooperation," he said. You have Trump and his supporters "trying to dream up some kind of conspiracy on the part of Ukraine against Trump and then you have [Trump's Ukraine envoy] Kurt Volker saying ... there are more Russian tanks in Ukraine than there are tanks in Western Europe."

"Were I to be in office right now, the concern would be trying to [determine] what is exactly the [U.S.] policy that we're going to have to count on," Ilves told me. So, I asked, how would he describe that policy?

He laughed. "I don't know. I don't know. I don't think anyone really does."

It's wrong to picture Estonian leaders panicking, Ilves said, but they're probably confused. "How do we proceed?" he asked. "Do we spend more money on [defense]? Do we start pushing for something in the European Union? Do we want NATO to have a shift in focus?"

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It used to be that "when the [American] president says something, it becomes policy," noted Ilves, who served as Estonia's president for 10 years, spanning the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Now he's unsure, especially when it comes to Trump's tweets. "I think that they don't reflect policy," he said.

Trenin, for his part, dismissed the idea behind much of the unease in Eastern European capitals: that Russia is poised to act aggressively against another country in its neighborhood, as it did in Ukraine. The worry is based on the assumption that Russia has some inherent desire to "expand, invade, [and] subjugate others," Trenin argued, and that assumption is mistaken. "From the Kremlin's standpoint, Russia's intervention in Ukraine [after a revolution overthrew Ukraine's pro-Russia President Viktor Yanukovych] was a defensive move. The importance of Ukraine to Russia's security and the Russian psyche can hardly be overestimated."

There "is only one Ukraine," Trenin added.

Nearby countries such as the Baltic nations will remain fearful of Russia, Trenin conceded, but those fears have less to do with Russia itself than with the West, whose leaders failed to protect them during the World War II era. (The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, a 1939 agreement in which Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union secretly staked out spheres of influence in the Baltics and elsewhere in the region, is "the big national scar" for Estonia and the other plundered countries, Ilves told me. From the Estonian perspective, great powers made a deal "about you," he explained. This left a legacy of "paranoia" that "is always a subcurrent" of the public's thinking on Russia-related matters.)

"In 1939-40, Britain and France did not much help [these countries] against the Nazis," Trenin wrote to me. "Now they are not sure whether the United States would defend them against a nuclear superpower. During the Cold War, the unanswered question was whether Washington would REALLY risk losing Chicago for Hamburg. Would it do so now for Tallinn? Since there can be no clear answer, there will always be fears"—whether Donald Trump is in office or not.

As for the Trump administration's contradictory Russia policy, and the latest move in Congress to impose additional sanctions on Russia in legislation that also slaps sanctions on Iran and North Korea, Trenin had this to say: "I think the Kremlin views the U.S. as a dysfunctional polity, with its political class at war with itself and its society deeply divided along cultural fault lines. Under these circumstances one hardly expects a consistent policy."

"The president has to bow to the prevailing anti-Russian consensus in the policy establishment," he continued. "The new sanctions bill, which puts Russia into the same category of U.S. worst enemies as Iran and North Korea, is a very candid statement that virtually nothing positive can be achieved between the U.S. and Russia for a long time to come," despite the hopes of a U.S.-Russian rapprochement that initially followed Trump's election.

"Bad as they are now, U.S.-Russian relations continue to get worse, edging ever closer to a kinetic collision between their armed forces somewhere: in Syria, over the Baltic and Black Seas, or Ukraine," Trenin warned. Putin's decision this week to retaliate against America's retaliation for

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Russian interference in the 2016 election, which included the seizure of U.S. diplomatic properties and a demand that the United States cut its diplomatic staff in the country, "will usher in a new and harsher round of rivalry" between the two countries, he predicted. On Sunday, Mike Pence wades into the territory where that rivalry is fiercest.

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VP Pence: Attack on 1 NATO ally is attack on all
By Jari Tanner
31 July 2017
Associated Press

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence on Monday strongly pledged America's commitment to protecting NATO allies against attacks, including the Baltic states, which have anxiously watched a growing Russian military presence in the region.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States stands firmly behind our Article 5 pledge of mutual defense — an attack on one of us is an attack on us all," Pence told reporters after meeting with the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the Estonian capital of Tallinn.

Mutual defense is a vital issue for the three small former Soviet states that border Russia, which were all occupied for nearly five decades by Soviet troops before regaining their independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The United States never recognized the claim by Soviet leader Josef Stalin on the three countries — which have a combined population of 6 million — allowing Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to maintain independent diplomatic missions and have their national flags stored at the State Department throughout the occupation.

Saying that Trump "knows security is the foundation of our prosperity," Pence said America and the Baltic countries would seek new ways to increase prosperity by increasing two-way trade that currently amounts to $3.5 billion and by increasing their mutual investments.

Earlier, he met Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid, Latvian President Raimonds Vejonis and Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaite at the baroque 18th-century Kadriorg Palace, which was built by the Russian Emperor Peter the Great.

Energy is one way that Washington is seeking to tighten its commercial ties with the Baltic countries. It closed a deal in June to sell liquefied natural gas (LNG) directly from the United States to the region.

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A Lithuanian state-owned gas trading company will receive the first delivery of U.S. imported LNG in August — something that Pence said will "benefit not only our prosperity, but regional security. And I am confident that this deal will only be the first of many."

Pence said he and Trump were pleased with the deal that will help the Baltic states to reduce their reliance on Russian gas.

Later Monday, Pence met with NATO troops from Britain, France and the United States that are stationed in Estonia. The alliance has deployed some 4,000 troops and military hardware in the three Baltic states and Poland to counter Russia's presence in the Baltic Sea region.

Before departing for Georgia, Pence took shovel and planted an English oak outside the headquarters of the Estonian defense forces together with the leaders of Latvia and Lithuania.

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Sunday ordered the U.S. to cut its embassy and consulate staff in Russia by 755 people. On Monday, Pence said America wants to improve bilateral relations with Russia "despite the recent diplomatic action by Moscow."

"We hope for better days and better relations with Russia," Pence told reporters.

Yet Russia's upcoming Zapad 2017 military exercises with 13,000 troops near the Baltic states' borders in September may further strain relations.

Grybauskaite told Lithuanian national radio on Monday that the U.S. would double the number of military jets and increase American troops on her country's soil during the Russian drills to signal that Washington is monitoring the Baltics situation closely.

Estonia — which currently holds the rotating presidency of the 28-nation European Union — is the first leg of Pence's European tour. The U.S. vice president flew later Monday to Georgia, another former Soviet republic, and will also visit new NATO member Montenegro, two countries facing strong pressure from Russia.

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Mike Pence Wants Sanctions to Change Russia's 'Behavior' as Putin Orders Expulsion of Hundreds of U.S. Diplomatic Staff
By Harriet Sinclair
31 July 2017
Newsweek

Vice President Mike Pence said he hopes the decision to place sanctions on Russia will prompt "different behavior" from Moscow, as President Vladimir Putin announced the U.S. would have to cut 755 diplomatic staff from Russia.

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After the White House on Friday confirmed the sanctions on Russia, Putin responded by announcing the cuts, but Pence appears optimistic about the future relationship between the two countries.

Speaking from his European tour on Sunday, Pence said he hoped the sanctions would prompt Moscow to reconsider its position on a number of issues, including North Korea.

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"The President and I remain very hopeful that we'll see different behavior by the Russian government, with regard to Ukraine, with regard to supporting rogue regimes in Iran and North Korea," Pence said in comments reported by Fox News.

"We continue to believe that if Russia will change its behavior, our relationship can change for the good and improve for the interests in both of our countries and the interest of peace and stability in this region and around the world," he said.

Pence also took the opportunity to stress that President Trump does accept the intelligence community's conclusion that Russia attempted to "meddle" in the U.S. election, despite the president previously making contradictory statements on the topic.

"The President has confirmed repeatedly that we believe Russia did meddle in U.S. elections," Pence told Fox News.

"I think he has also said it could have been other actors as well. But he's confirmed his belief and our intelligence that Russia was involved in meddling in US elections and it's part of what inspired the bipartisan action in the Congress to codify the sanctions that our administration has been implementing against Russia and will continue to advance that," he added.

But any U.S. hopes that sanctions would prompt any cooperation from Moscow appear to have been dashed after Putin announced the U.S. would lose diplomatic staff in Russia, and warned about further retaliation over the sanctions.

"We were waiting for quite a long time that maybe something would change for the better, were holding out hope that the situation would change somehow. But it appears that even if it changes someday it will not change soon," Putin said in comments carried by Russian state media.

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Pence pressures China on North Korea, talks Russia sanctions, election meddling
By Deena Zaru
30 July 2017
CNN (Excerpt)

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Pence's visit to Estonia is the first leg of an Eastern European trip that will also take him to Georgia and Montenegro to show US support for them and NATO in the face of what the administration has called Russia's destabilizing activities in Ukraine and elsewhere and its efforts to undermine the alliance. The trip comes amid rising tensions between the US and Russia over a new sanctions bill that easily cleared Congress last week and that the White House says Trump is expected to sign.

Passage of the bill prompted Russia to retaliate by cutting US diplomatic missions by 755 people, which Moscow announced Friday -- an in-kind response to penalties that would be codified by the legislation, including the ejection of Russian diplomatic staff and closure of two Russian compounds in the US, for its alleged meddling in last year's election and aggression in Ukraine.

"We waited a long time for things to perhaps change for the better," Russian state media quoted Russian President Vladimir Putin as saying Sunday. "We had such hope that the situation would change, but judging by the situation that will not be soon."

On taking retaliatory measures, Putin said, "I thought it was time for us to show that we will not leave this without an answer. As for other possible measures, or whether it is a lot or not, this is quite sensible from the point of view of the work of the diplomatic department. ..."

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov threatened further retaliation against the US on Sunday morning, saying that if that US goes through with the sanctions, "we will respond in kind," but he would not specify how Russia plans to respond.

Pence said Sunday that he hopes that slapping new sanctions on Russia would lead Russia to change its behavior with regard to Ukraine and end its support for Iran and North Korea.

"The President and I remain very hopeful that we'll see different behavior by the Russian government, with regard to Ukraine, with regard to supporting rogue regimes in Iran and North Korea," Pence said. "We continue to believe that if Russia will change its behavior, our relationship can change for the good and improve for the interests in both of our countries and the interest of peace and stability in this region and around the world."

Pressed on how to square the purpose of his trip with Trump's position on Russia's alleged efforts to influence last year's election, Pence defended the President. He insisted Trump is in agreement with US intelligence services on Russian meddling despite newly appointed White House communications director Anthony Scaramucci telling CNN last week that Trump is still unsure.

"The President has confirmed repeatedly that we believe Russia did meddle in US elections," Pence said. "I think he has also said it could have been other actors as well. But he's confirmed his belief and our intelligence that Russia was involved in meddling in US elections and it's part of what inspired

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the bipartisan action in the Congress to codify the sanctions that our administration has been implementing against Russia and will continue to advance that."

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Pence vows U.S. resistance to Russia during Estonia visit
By S.A. Miller
31 July 2017
Washington Times

Vice President Mike Pence on a visit to Estonia pledged Monday unwavering support of NATO allies and steadfast resistance to Russia aggression, especially in Baltic states that have been feeling intense pressure from Moscow.

Mr. Pence said he was in Eastern Europe to deliver a message from President Trump that the "the United States of America is with you."

"At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another," Mr. Pence said in a speech after meeting with the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuiana.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States of America rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation, or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies," he said.

The tough talk came amid mounting tension between Washington and Moscow. Russian President Vladimir Putin expelling 755 U.S. diplomats in retaliation for new sanctions legislation Mr. Trump is expected to sign.

"To be clear: We hope for better days, and better relations with Russia, recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, the security of our allies, and the security of freedom-loving nations around the world," Mr. Pence said.

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Pence's tricky trip has Russia hanging over it
By Andrew Hammond
30 July 2017
Gulf News (Opinion)

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US Vice-President Mike Pence started an important Eastern European tour yesterday that will last until tomorrow. The visit, whose subtext is that of the future of United States-Russia relations under US President Donald Trump, will see stops in Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro, and comes in the wake of the US Senate and House of Representatives' landmark votes to impose new sanctions on Moscow, which has already drawn Russian retaliation.

Key agenda items in Pence's tricky trip include a visit to see US and Georgian troops participating in the Noble Partner Nato-related exercise, which also features troops from the United Kingdom, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Armenia, and Slovenia. And the US vice-president will also participate, in Montenegro, with leaders across the Western Balkans in the Adriatic Charter Summit.

The immediate backdrop for Pence's visit is the continuing controversy over Russia and the Trump team. The US Senate and House voted overwhelmingly in recent days to impose sanctions on Moscow, and Trump now has to sign it into law or, in what would be a remarkable move, veto it. The legislation, whose restrictions would include on oil-and-gas projects in Russia, has been condemned by the country's Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergei Ryabkov, who asserts it would plant a "dangerous mine" under bilateral relations that could explode in coming months. Already, Moscow has retaliated to the congressional votes by ordering US diplomatic staff out of Russia and seizing two US diplomatic properties in the country.

The bill, which would also impose sanctions on North Korea and Iran, puts Trump in an awkward position, given his apparent pro-Moscow leanings. The president, who already has congressional and FBI investigations underway into his team's alleged ties with Russia, has only vowed at this stage to "study" the legislation, but is under strong pressure to sign it into law.

Trump's decision on this issue will be watched closely, not just in Moscow, but across Eastern Europe where Pence is visiting. Part of the nervousness that key US allies in Europe have about the Trump's positioning on Russia is what it potentially may mean for US commitments in the region and Nato. Trump has flip-flopped on this issue, describing the military alliance last year as "obsolete", and then this year as "not obsolete", sowing the seeds of confusion over what his true beliefs are.

Already, uncertainty over Trump's Nato policy is spurring the European Union to seek to reverse around a decade of defence spending cuts, totalling around 10 per cent in real terms. Moreover, a new European Defence Action Plan was agreed earlier this year by the EU, which will see greater continental military cooperation too.

For Trump, the key strategic question now on Russia is whether recent developments have destroyed the window of opportunity that may have existed for a warming of relations between Washington and Moscow. The US president has previously given multiple indications that he believes Russia is not a serious threat to America, hinting in January that he could even drop existing economic sanctions if the country "is helpful". Specifically, he appears to believe there were multiple common interests over issues such as preventing Iran from securing nuclear weapons, and combating terrorism.

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Trump's proposed repositioning of relations with Russia now looks, at the least, to have been put on ice. Here it is not only the fact that any new US sanctions will make relations frostier, but also that the Trump team is under significant pressure over the congressional and FBI investigations, and this issue has already claimed the scalp of national security adviser Michael Flynn.

'Complicit' or 'incompetent'

Should Trump be forced to sign the sanctions legislation, it will reassure the allies in Eastern Europe that Pence is visiting. However, it will complicate US foreign policy in other theatres, including potentially the Middle East, where Russian relations are relevant.

Already this year, there were tensions between Moscow and Washington here, which saw US missile strikes targeted at Syria, following an earlier poison gas attack on citizens in a rebel-held town allegedly by the Damascus regime, which killed at least 80 people, including around two dozen children. Russia — highly implausibly, given the nature of the chemicals involved — asserted that they were released inadvertently when Syrian planes struck a terrorist laboratory.

The ratcheting up of tensions has widened differences between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin over the future of Syrian President Bashar Al Assad after they had seemed to be getting closer to an agreement to potentially bring an end to Syria's six-year civil war that has left half a million people dead and triggered floods of refugees, while letting Al Assad stay in power. Rhetorically, at least, Trump appeared to move away from the latter and called for the Syrian president to be ousted, and US Ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, said that the Trump administration was ready to take further military steps in the country if needed.

US Defence Secretary James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson were also forceful in their criticism of Moscow. For instance, Tillerson said that "either Russia has been complicit or simply incompetent" in Syria, referring to Moscow's apparent inability to prevent the Al Assad regime from using chemical weapons, despite a 2013 agreement under which Russia was a guarantor, to remove these stockpiles from the country.

The spike in Washington-Moscow tensions over Syria even saw Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev saying the two countries were "one step away from war" and had "totally ruined" relations. Signs of rising tensions include Moscow's suspension of an agreement with Washington to share communications about US and Russian aircraft conducting missions over Syria. The Admiral Grigorovich, the frigate warship was dispatched from Crimea to the Syrian port of Tartus.

Taken overall, as Pence undertakes his trip to reassure Eastern European allies, Trump now finds himself in a big bind over Russia. Despite his desire for warming of relations between Washington and Moscow, the window of opportunity for that may be narrowing significantly and this could have implications across the world, including in Syria.

(Andrew Hammond is an Associate at LSE IDEAS at the London School of Economics.)

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Vice President Pence's Trip: An Opportunity to Advance U.S. Leadership in Europe
By Luke Coffey, Daniel Kochis
20 July 2017
Heritage Foundation (Opinion)

From July 30 to August 2, Vice President Mike Pence will travel to Estonia, Georgia, and Montenegro. This trip is the perfect follow-up to President Donald Trump's visit to Poland for the "Three Seas" conference—a meeting focused on the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic Seas—in early July. Vice President Pence should use his trip to affirm U.S. commitment to these three important countries, and to strengthen U.S. focus on the key regions in which they reside. While in Europe, it is important for the Vice President to underscore U.S. commitment to NATO, Baltic security, and U.S. engagement in the Balkans and the Black Sea region, while taking a hard line on Russian aggression.

The Baltic Sea

In Estonia, Vice President Pence will meet with Estonian Prime Minister Jüri Ratas as well as the three Baltic leaders, President Kersti Kaljulaid of Estonia, President Raimonds Vējonis of Latvia, and President Dalia Grybauskaitė of Lithuania.

The U.S. has a long history of championing the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Baltic states dating back to the interwar period of the 1920s. After regaining their independence from Russia in the early 1990s, the Baltic states have been staunch supporters of the transatlantic relationship.

Estonia is the regional leader in defense matters and is currently one of only five NATO countries that spend the required 2 percent of gross domestic product on defense. In terms of economic freedom, the Baltic region is a beacon of hope for Europe and the rest of the world. The region is proof that pursuing policies of economic liberalization and growth works. Estonia ranks first in the eurozone, and sixth in the world, in the 2017 Index of Economic Freedom, published by The Heritage Foundation.

The Baltic states face an existential threat from Russia, and are concerned about the upcoming Russian Zapad 17 exercises. In addition to Zapad, the Vice President's arrival will come just as Russia and China will have wrapped up joint exercises in the Baltic Sea.

The keystone of NATO's new deterrence measures are multinational battalions stationed in each of the Baltic countries and Poland to deter Russian aggression. The Alliance has also increased the number of aircraft taking part in Baltic Air Policing. While in Estonia, Vice President Pence should reiterate U.S. commitment to the transatlantic alliance, NATO, and the Article V security guarantee.

The Black Sea

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In Georgia, the Vice President will meet with President Giorgi Margvelashvili and Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili. In addition, he will visit U.S. and Georgian troops participating in the Noble Partner exercise. Vice President Pence's visit provides a perfect opportunity to strengthen the bilateral relationship with Tbilisi.

Georgia is a staunch ally of the United States. Since regaining its independence in 1991, successive Georgian governments have pursued an agenda of liberalizing the economy, cutting bureaucracy, fighting corruption, and embracing democracy—and in doing so, Georgia and its people have shown a firm and unwavering commitment to the transatlantic community.

Georgia is located in a dangerous and important geopolitical neighborhood for NATO. After the Russian invasion in 2008 and the subsequent Russian occupation of 20 percent of Georgia's territory, Georgia has transformed its military and has been steadfast in its support of overseas security operations. Georgia has contributed thousands of troops to Afghanistan (with 870 currently serving there) and Iraq, and hundreds of peacekeepers to the Balkans and in the Central African Republic.

The Adriatic Sea

In Podgorica, Montenegro, the Vice President will meet with Montenegrin President Filip Vujanović and Prime Minister Duško Marković. Vice President Pence will also participate with leaders from across the western Balkans in an Adriatic Charter Summit. Montenegro is the newest member of NATO, and an important U.S. ally in a region that is becoming increasingly unstable due to malign Russian influence, poor economic opportunities, and the rise of Islamist extremism.

The Balkans is home to unfinished business in Europe. In addition to historic, ethnic, religious, and cultural tensions, the Balkans are caught between Russia's destabilizing influence and pockets of Islamist extremism in the region. Montenegro is a poignant example.

Over the past seven years, Montenegro—a U.S. ally—has reformed itself in preparation for NATO membership. Last year, Russia, not happy with Montenegro's decision to join NATO, was suspected of having been behind a failed plot to break into parliament on election day, assassinate the former prime minister, and install a pro-Russian government in Podgorica, the nation's capital.

The U.S. has invested heavily in the Balkans since the end of the Cold War. Tens of thousands of U.S. service members have served in the Balkans, and billions of dollars in aid has been spent there, all in the hope of creating a secure and prosperous region that will someday be part of the transatlantic community. The Administration should articulate why the Balkan region remains important to the United States, and set out a clear policy to counter threats to the region.

The Way Forward

This trip offers a great opportunity to deepen three very important bilateral relations. To make this visit a success, Vice President Pence should:

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Reiterate America's commitment to NATO's Article V. The Vice President should echo President Trump's commitment made in Warsaw to NATO's Article V. The ultimate guarantor of security and stability in the Baltic region is the knowledge that the U.S. stands firmly by its mutual defense commitments as a member of NATO.

Make the case for a permanent military presence in the Baltic region. The U.S. and NATO need to show an enduring commitment to the region by permanently stationing armed forces in the Baltics and maintaining a robust maritime presence in the region.

Forcefully condemn Russian disinformation. Russia's disinformation measures are especially active in the region. In part, Russia has sought to undermine support for NATO's enhanced forward deployments by propagating false stories of abuse by troops serving in the multinational battalions, such as Canadian, British, or German soldiers. U.S. troops stationed in Poland for NATO's enhanced forward presence there have been targeted by similar Russian disinformation. Russia has also sought to delegitimize the Baltic nations as independent countries. The U.S. should forcefully condemn Russian disinformation and consider becoming a sponsoring nation at the NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence in Riga, the Latvian capital.

Empower global free-market energy policy. The U.S. should work immediately and comprehensively to eliminate remaining barriers to U.S. energy exports.

Push back against Nord Stream II. The Nord Stream II pipeline project that would connect Germany with Russia is neither economically necessary, nor is it geopolitically prudent. Vice President Pence should declare U.S. opposition to the pipeline, which in particular threatens allies in Eastern and Central Europe.

Ensure that the U.S. is clear on Georgia's future NATO membership. Vice President Pence should make it clear that Georgia's successful completion of subsequent Annual National Programs, the close relationship through the NATO–Georgia Commission, and the Substantial NATO–Georgia Package are the true markers of progress that will bring Georgia closer to ultimate membership.

Help the Georgians defend themselves. Georgia has the inherent right to self-defense. The U.S. should sell defensive anti-tank and anti-aircraft weaponry to Georgia.

Refer to the Russian military presence in Georgia as an occupation. During his visit, the Vice President should call the presence of several thousand Russian troops in South Ossetia and Abkhazia what it is: an illegal occupation.

Keep a focus on the Balkans. The Balkan nations are facing increased Russian interference and pressure with the aim of regional destabilization. In addition, the threat from Islamist ideology has not abated. The U.S. should look to take on a larger role within the region, and should seek to collaborate with NATO allies in the region to address growing instability.

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Offer political support for the Southern Gas Corridor project. As Europe seeks alternatives to Russian gas, the Southern Gas Corridor, which in part will run through Georgia and the Balkans, will play an important role.

Keep the door open to further NATO enlargement in the Balkans. NATO has helped promote democracy, stability, and security in the Balkans. It has also been a catalyst for reforms within candidate countries. Montenegro is just the latest example of this. The U.S. should ensure the door remains open to deserving Balkan nations, including Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.
Conclusion

Vice President Pence's trip, during which he will visit allies in the Adriatic, Baltic, and Black Sea regions, dovetails with President Trump's recent trip to Warsaw where he took part in the Three Seas conference. While each region faces threats from Russia, each also presents unique challenges, which demand robust attention. Estonia, Georgia, and Montenegro are important U.S. allies with basic common values. The success of the Trump Administration's policy in Europe will rest in large part on its ability to secure these important regions.

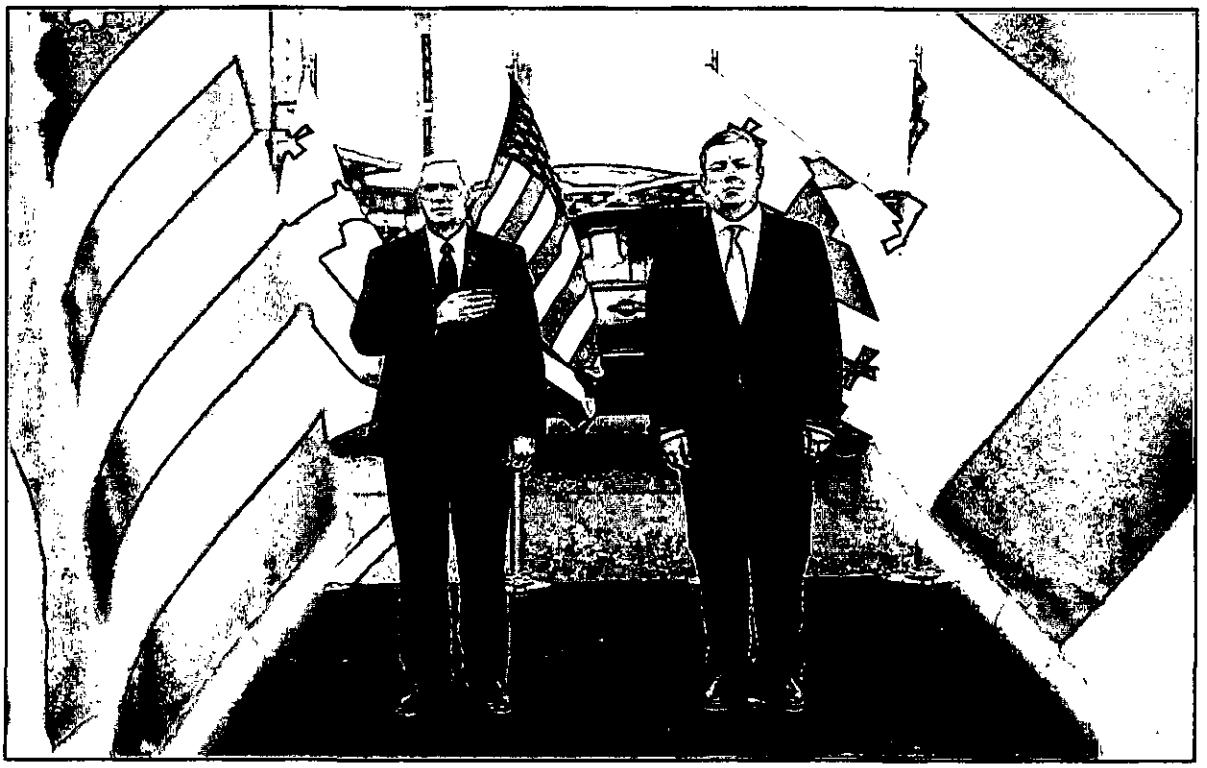
(Luke Coffey is Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation. Daniel Kochis is a Policy Analyst in European Affairs in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, of the Davis Institute)

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Vice President Pence Trip to Georgia Coverage Report for August 1, 2017



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Pence Says U.S. Backs Georgia in NATO Over Russian Objection
By Helena Bedwell
1 August 2017
Bloomberg

Vice President Mike Pence said the U.S. "strongly" supports Georgia's ambition of joining NATO, even as Russia remains hostile to the military alliance expanding its influence in Moscow's former Soviet backyard.

"We see Georgia as a key strategic partner and stand by your territorial integrity and your aspirations to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," Pence said at talks with Prime

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Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, on Tuesday. U.S. President Donald Trump "asked me to extend greetings to you this morning and to say we are with you," Pence said.

The vice president is also attending joint military exercises involving as many as 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops during his visit. The Noble Partner 2017 drills, which also include German, U.K., Turkish, Slovenian, Ukrainian and Armenian forces, are the largest in the Caucasus republic since Georgia fought a brief war with Russia in 2008 over the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Pence arrived in Georgia Monday after delivering a similar message in Estonia to leaders of Baltic nations facing the "specter of aggression" from Russia, which he called the greatest threat to their security as NATO members. Georgia wants to join NATO against opposition from Russia, whose annexation of Crimea and involvement in the conflict in eastern Ukraine has strained ties with the U.S. and Europe the most since the Cold War. Russia accuses NATO of seeking to undermine its security by expanding the alliance's presence near its borders.

Spiraling Tensions

The U.S. is monitoring preparations for major Russian exercises planned on NATO's eastern border amid concerns about the scale of the military buildup, the New York Times reported on Tuesday. Some 13,000 troops are to take part in joint military drills from Sept. 14-20 in Russia and neighboring Belarus, according to the Belarusian Defense Ministry, which said Russia will also send about 280 military vehicles to the Zapad 2017 exercises.

Pence's visits to Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro are taking place amid spiraling tensions with Russia after President Vladimir Putin said the U.S. must slash staff at its diplomatic mission by 755, or nearly two-thirds, in retaliation for new sanctions approved by Congress.

Trump "will sign the Russian sanctions bill soon," Pence said at a news conference later with Kvirikashvili. While the U.S. wants better relations, "Russia has to change its behavior" before this can be achieved, he said.

Kvirikashvili said Georgia's facing "daily provocations" from Russia, which has encroached deeper into its territory in recent weeks by shifting the dividing lines with the breakaway regions established after the war. Russia has stationed thousands of troops in Abkhazia and South Ossetia after recognizing them as independent republics. The international community considers the regions as part of Georgia.

'Important Milestone'

NATO declared at a summit shortly before the 2008 war that Georgia will become a member at some point. While it hasn't agreed to accept Georgia since then, partly out of concern about antagonizing Russia, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said in Tbilisi in September that the alliance is committed to the goal and that "the bonds between NATO and Georgia are stronger than ever."

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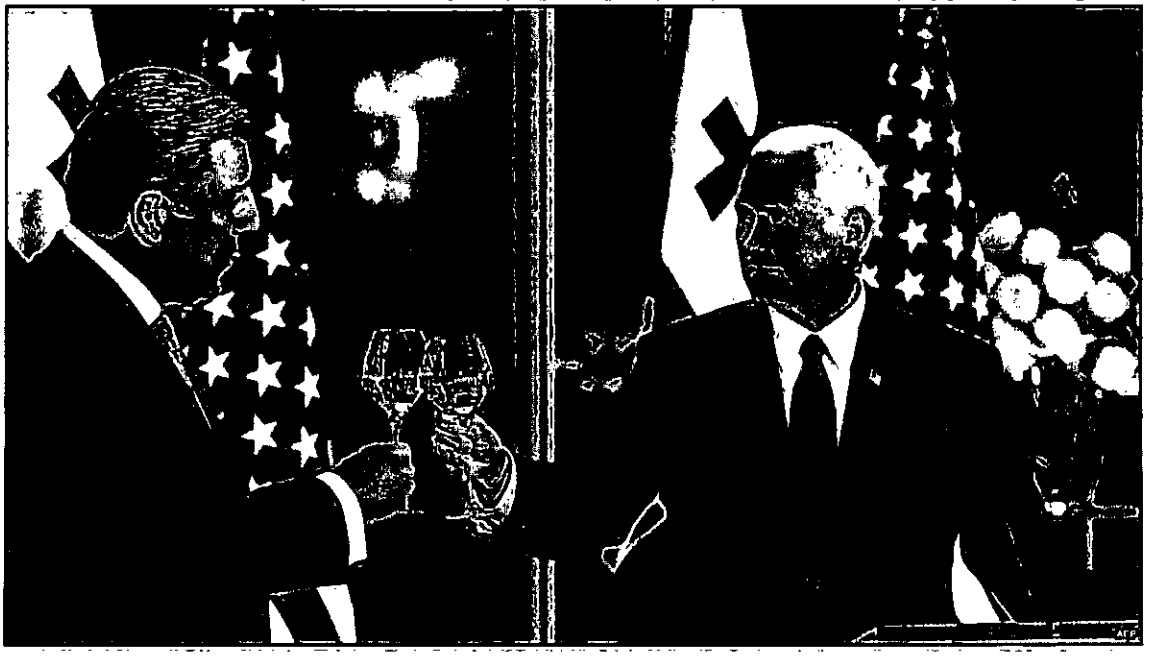
Pence's visit "is an important milestone in the bilateral relationship as we work to further strengthen security, economic, and trade cooperation," Kvirikashvili said Monday after the vice president's arrival.

Two-thirds of Georgians support joining NATO while 23 percent are opposed, according to a survey conducted by the Caucasus Resource Research Centers for the National Democratic Institute. The poll of 2,261 respondents was conducted between June 18 and July 9 with a margin of error of no more than 2.2 percentage points.

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Pence Conveys U.S. Support For Georgia In Visit To Tbilisi

1 August 2017
Radio Free Europe



U.S. Vice President Mike Pence conveyed a message of support from U.S. President Donald Trump to Georgian leaders at an official dinner in Tbilisi late on July 31.

The United States stands with Georgia, Pence said, as he toasted the Caucasus nation for fighting for freedom over the centuries, just as America has.

Pence said America hopes that Georgia prospers and becomes a strong country.

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Pence was greeted by thousands of people when he arrived in Tbilisi, where he will meet on August 1 with Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili, President Giorgi Margvelashvili, Patriarch Ilia II, and representatives of the Georgian opposition.

Pence is also planning to attend joint NATO military exercises being conducted in Georgia. About 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the Noble Partner 2017 drills there.

Pence was greeted at the Tbilisi airport by Kvirikashvili, who said that the visit is "an important milestone in the bilateral relationship as we work to further strengthen security, economic, and trade cooperation between our two countries."

"Vice President Pence's visit sends a strong message about the enduring strength of the relationship between Georgia and the United States," Kvirikashvili said in comments released by the Georgian government.

Pence arrived in the Georgian capital from Estonia, where earlier in the day he reaffirmed Washington's solidarity with the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders" and "undermine democracies."

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions, as have Georgia and the third ally on Pence's itinerary: new NATO member Montenegro.

"No threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said. "At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another."

Article 5 Support

Pence said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty -- the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

In Georgia, officials said Pence will highlight U.S. support for the Caucasus nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity before continuing on to Montenegro.

Georgia has seen Russian encroachment on its territory and has expressed hopes of joining the Western military alliance.

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The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

Margvelashvili said on July 27 that Pence's visit will demonstrate that the United States continues to support Georgia in building a stronger military force.

He highlighted the joint military exercises that will include troops from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, and Armenia.

"The vice president's presence here is definitely showing that this is not only about military exercises, but it is also showing unification with our values, with our foreign policy targets, and showing a clear message that we are together," Margvelashvili said.

On the last stop, Pence will welcome NATO's newest member with his stop in Montenegro, whose accession to the alliance in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica, U.S. officials said.

Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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Pence pledges support for Georgia, condemns Russian moves
By Nataliya Vasilyeva
1 August 2017
Associated Press

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence pledged support Tuesday for the former Soviet republic of Georgia, his second stop on a European trip backing nations that feel threatened by Russian aggression.

Russia and Georgia fought a brief war in 2008, which lead to two breakaway Georgian regions, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, declaring independence. Russia has since been supporting the regions both financially and militarily.

The U.S. "strongly condemns Russia's occupation on Georgian soil," Pence said Tuesday at a joint news conference with the Georgian prime minister in Tbilisi, the Georgian capital. "We will reject any claim at any time by any nation that undermines this enduring principle."

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The visit comes a day after Pence met with the presidents of three NATO countries — Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania — in the Estonian capital of Tallinn and pledged that "an attack on one of us is an attack on us all."

Georgia and the three Baltic nations were all occupied for nearly five decades by Soviet troops before regaining their independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Later on Tuesday Pence will inspect troops taking part in joint U.S.-Georgian military exercises.

Pence's European trip comes several days after the U.S. Senate voted last week to approve the new financial sanctions against Moscow. The legislation bars U.S. President Donald Trump from easing or waiving the penalties on Russia unless Congress agrees.

Pence told reporters on Tuesday that Trump would sign a bill on a new package of U.S. sanctions against Russia, adding the package was "improved significantly."

The bill underwent revisions to address concerns voiced by American oil and natural gas companies that sanctions specific to Russia's energy sector could backfire on them to Moscow's benefit. U.S. lawmakers said they also made adjustments so the sanctions on Russia's energy sector didn't undercut the ability of U.S. allies in Europe to get access to oil and gas resources outside of Russia.

Russia on Friday ordered the U.S. Embassy and three U.S. consulates in Russia to drastically cut its personnel there. President Vladimir Putin said on Sunday that means 755 staffers have to go. Russia also ordered to shut down the U.S. Embassy's recreational compound on the outskirts of Moscow. The Russian leader warned that he has more tricks up his sleeve to hurt the U.S., but he voiced hope that he wouldn't need to use them.

Pence indicated the U.S. was willing to improve ties with Russia but for that to happen "Russia has to change its behavior," he said, referring to Russia's support for separatists in eastern Ukraine and for Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Russia is planning Zapad 2017 military exercises with 13,000 troops near the Baltic states' borders in September, a move that may further strain relations.

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During Whirlwind Week in Washington, VP Pence Comforts East European Allies

By Emily Tamkin
1 August 2017
Foreign Policy

Amid chaos in Washington, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence is in Eastern Europe assuring American allies that the United States is committed to protecting them.

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"We are with you. We stand with the people and nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania — and we always will," Pence said at a joint press availability with the Baltic leaders in Tallinn, even as, back home, President Donald Trump has yet to comment on Russian expulsion of U.S. diplomatic staff.

The vice president participated in a listening session on cyber and innovation with the president of Estonia in Tallinn, and travelled on Tuesday to Tbilisi, where he met with the Georgian prime minister for their third substantive meeting since Pence took office.

"We see Georgia as a key strategic partner and stand by your territorial integrity and your aspirations to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," Pence said at a dinner with Prime Minister Kvirikashvili in Tbilisi. At a joint press conference with Georgia's prime minister, Pence noted that Russia occupies one-fifth of Georgian Territory.

Back in Washington, in the meantime, President Trump has yet to comment personally on a bill that Congress passed imposing tougher sanctions on Russia. The White House press secretary said Friday in a statement that Trump would sign the bill.

Speaking in Tbilisi, Pence said the bill would be signed soon.

From Tbilisi, Pence traveled to the newest NATO member, Montenegro. In May at a NATO summit, President Trump appeared to push Montenegro's prime minister aside during a photo session.

Pence's staid tour abroad is in stark contrast to the roller coaster in Washington this week. On Monday, U.S. President Donald Trump lost a communications director who was brought on roughly a week prior; Jared Kushner, his son in law and advisor, told White House interns the Trump team was too disorganized to have colluded with Russia; and the Washington Post reported the president had dictated a misleading message to his son about a meeting with a Russian lawyer.

Trump's is not the first administration to send a vice president abroad in the president's stead, or to develop relations with diplomats and dignitaries from particular countries — former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden was known as Ukraine's man in Washington.

"Vice President Pence's visit sent a clear message about the enduring strength of the relationship between Georgia and the United States," Georgian Ambassador to the United States David Bakradze told Foreign Policy by email. "This is an important milestone in the bilateral relationship."

The embassies of Estonia and Montenegro did not immediately respond to request for comment.

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VP Pence says Russia's stance must change before ties improve
By Margarita Antidze
1 August 2017
Reuters

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence said on Tuesday that relations with Russia would not improve until Moscow changed its stance on Ukraine and withdrew support for "regimes like Iran and Syria and North Korea".

The U.S. Congress voted last week for new sanctions on Russia and, at a news conference in Georgia's capital Tbilisi, Pence said the "lifting of sanctions will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place".

"Russia's destabilizing activities in Ukraine, their support for rogue regimes like Iran and Syria and North Korea ... their posture has to change," he said at a joint news conference with Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili.

Pence said U.S. President Donald Trump would sign the new sanctions on Russia into law this week and said that Trump and Congress were "speaking with a unified voice".

Keeping to previous U.S. administrations' line, Pence also condemned Russia's presence in Georgia.

Moscow, whose annexation of Crimea in 2014 prompted U.S. and EU sanctions, still has troops stationed in Georgia after a 2008 war over the breakaway region of South Ossetia, backing Georgia's Abkhazia, a region also controlled by pro-Russian separatists.

Pence also said the U.S. was still behind Georgia's application to become a member of NATO.

"We'll continue to work closely with this prime minister and the government of Georgia broadly to advance the policies that will facilitate becoming a NATO member," he said.

NATO promised Georgia membership in 2008, and three ex-Soviet Baltic nations - Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania - are already members. Pence has reassured them during this tour that Washington firmly backs NATO's doctrine of collective defense.

In the Estonian capital of Tallinn on Monday, he assured them of U.S. support if they faced aggression from Russia.

Asked about Pence's visit, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said nations had the right to choose their partners.

"The only problem for us, is when this involves the expanding of various alliances and their infrastructure toward our borders. This is a cause of concern for us," Peskov told reporters on a conference call.

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During his visit, Pence attended Georgian-American military exercises, which began in Georgia on Sunday. About 2,800 soldiers from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, Armenia and Georgia are taking part in the maneuvers, which will last for two weeks.

On Wednesday, Pence visits Montenegro, which joined NATO in June. The tiny Balkan nation won praise from Washington for joining despite pressure against the move from Russia.

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In Georgia, Pence says Trump will back toughened sanctions on Russia
By Allen Cone
1 August 2017
UPI

Vice President Mike Pence on Tuesday pledged U.S. support for Georgia, a former Soviet republic, and said President Donald Trump "very soon" will approve stronger sanctions against Russia.

Georgia, which fought a brief war with Russia in 2008, is among Eastern European nations that feel threatened by the Russian regime, which annexed Crimea from Ukraine in 2014. That aggression led to existing U.S. sanctions against the Kremlin, which Congress moved to strengthen last week.

"At this very moment, just 40 miles from where we stand, Russian tanks stand on occupied territory in South Ossetia," Pence said at a joint news conference in Tbilisi Tuesday, the Georgian capital, with Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili. "Today, Russia continues to occupy one-fifth of Georgian territory.

"So to be clear: The United States of America strongly condemns Russia's occupation on Georgia's soil."

On Monday, Pence met with the presidents of three NATO countries -- Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania -- and said "an attack on one of us is an attack on us all."

The three Baltic nations, along with Georgia, were all occupied for nearly five decades by Soviet troops before regaining independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Pence also met U.S. and Georgian troops taking part in a joint military exercise called "Noble Partner".

"America first does not mean America only," Pence said. "We are here to tell our friends in Georgia, we are with you. We stand with you and will stand with you as you pursue membership in NATO."

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Pence said Trump will sign legislation to "strengthen and codify" U.S. sanctions against Russia. The proposal, overwhelmingly approved by the House and Senate, bars Trump from easing or waiving penalties on Russia unless Congress agrees.

Pence said that legislation "improved significantly" when it moved through Congress, and added the sanctions are stronger but are "giving the president of the United States and our State Department the ability and the flexibility to be able to administer American foreign policy as appropriate."

On Sunday, Russian President Vladimir Putin told the United States it must reduce its diplomatic staff by 755 to match the reduction of Russians in the United States.

"As always, our country prefers a constructive relationship with Russia based on cooperation and common interests," Pence said Tuesday. "But the president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia: A better relationship, the lifting of sanctions will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place.

"We hope for better days, and we hope for better relations with Russia, but the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow I can assure will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, to that of our allies, and to freedom-loving nations around the world like Georgia."

Besides working with Georgia "to reduce your vulnerabilities and counter Russian aggression," the vice president said the United States wants to work with the nation "to deepen our ties of commerce."

Pence next visits Montenegro, also a NATO member.

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Trump Will Sign Russia Sanctions Law 'Very Soon,' Pence Says
By Sewell Chan
1 August 2017
New York Times

President Trump will "very soon" sign a law limiting his ability to lift sanctions against Russia, even though he has "concerns" about the measure, Vice President Mike Pence said on Tuesday.

The announcement during a visit to Tbilisi, Georgia, comes as no surprise, because the Trump administration had signaled it would not stand in the law's way. But it nonetheless carries significance: It is the first time that Congress, with both houses controlled by Mr. Trump's fellow Republicans, has imposed its will on the administration on a major policy matter, and the legislation has helped bring relations between Russia and the United States to one of its lowest points since the Cold War.

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At least in terms of diplomatic policy, the bet Russia might have made when, according to American intelligence agencies, it interfered in last year's presidential election in the United States has backfired in spectacular fashion. The legislation was revised, however, to address concerns by American oil and natural gas companies that do business with Russia's energy sector.

Though he was asked by a reporter about the election interference, Mr. Pence did not explicitly address it, reiterating instead the administration's concerns about Russia's "destabilizing activities," including "efforts to support rogue regimes."

In a brief visit to the Georgian capital, Mr. Pence delivered a message of reassurance to Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili. Russia and Georgia, both former republics of the Soviet Union, fought a brief war in August 2008; since then, Russia has continued to occupy the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in violation of international law.

"In a sign of our commitment, very soon, President Trump will sign legislation to strengthen and codify the United States' sanctions against Russia," Mr. Pence said. "As always, our country prefers a constructive relationship with Russia based on cooperation and common interests."

But, Mr. Pence said, the current state of the relationship between the United States and Russia demanded a different approach. "The president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia," he said. "A better relationship, the lifting of sanctions will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place."

On Sunday, in retaliation for the sanctions legislation, President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia ordered the dismissal of 755 employees from the United States diplomatic missions in the country. Most of the employees will be local Russians working in the embassy in Moscow and consulates in three other cities, but diplomats are bracing for what a former ambassador has called "a shock to the system."

Mr. Pence said on Tuesday that Mr. Putin's actions would not sway the United States, echoing a message he delivered on Monday in Estonia, where he reassured leaders of the three Baltic nations — the others are Lithuania and Latvia — of the American commitment to NATO's collective defense clause, known as Article 5.

"We hope for better days, and we hope for better relations with Russia, but the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow, I can assure, will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, to that of our allies and to freedom-loving nations around the world like Georgia," Mr. Pence said.

While in Georgia, Mr. Pence inspected troops taking part in a joint United States-Georgian military exercise, which Mr. Pence called "a visible sign of our commitment to Georgia's sovereignty and to her internationally recognized borders."

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Mr. Pence also responded to reports that the Russian military was preparing to send as many as 100,000 troops to neighboring Belarus, on the eastern edge of NATO territory, at the end of the summer, as part of a show of force.

"The current Russian exercises, which news reports today suggest will move up to 100,000 Russian troops into Belarus, is simply a confirmation of the importance of clarity within the NATO partnership," Mr. Pence said.

He portrayed the legislation on sanctions as "a very clear message that we mean what we say and say what we mean: that Russia's destabilizing activities in Ukraine, their support for rogue regimes like Iran and Syria and North Korea, that their posture has to change."

Mr. Pence also reiterated criticisms that Mr. Trump had frequently made of his predecessor, President Barack Obama. "It's been a lack of clarity and commitment by the United States that's created much of the instability in the world today," he said.

He then referred to the "red line" warning that Mr. Obama made to Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, in 2012 over the use of chemical weapons. Mr. Assad's forces carried out such an attack the next year in a Damascus suburb, largely without repercussions.

"When in the past America had spoken of red lines and not followed through on red lines, many argue that that emboldened others to act in ways that they would not have," Mr. Pence said.

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Pence Reaffirms U.S. Solidarity With Georgia, Denounces Russian 'Aggression'
1 August 2017
Radio Free Europe

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence has reaffirmed Washington's support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity during a visit to Tbilisi and denounced Russia's "aggression" and "occupation" of Georgian territory.

"America stands with Georgia," Pence said on August 1 at a joint press conference with Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili.

"Today, Russia continues to occupy one-fifth of Georgian territory," Pence said. "So, to be clear -- the United States of America strongly condemns Russia's occupation on Georgia's soil."

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

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"The United States supports Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders," Pence added. "And under President Donald Trump, the United States of America will object to any claim at any time by any nation that undermines this enduring principle."

Pence said Trump will "very soon" sign legislation that would impose additional economic sanctions on Russia.

The sanctions bill was overwhelmingly passed by Congress last week, and in response Moscow demanded that Washington drastically reduce its diplomatic staff in Russia.

"We hope for better relations with Russia," Pence said. "But the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow, I can assure you, will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, that of our allies, and the freedom-loving nations around the world, like Georgia."

The relationship between Washington and Moscow has been badly damaged by Russia's aggression in Ukraine, its role in the war in Syria, and its alleged interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Pence also reiterated that the United States "strongly" supports the Caucasus country's aspirations to become a NATO member.

"I commended the prime minister for Georgia's democratic development, which has brought Georgia closer to unity with Europe and membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," he said. "Further progress on the goals that the prime minister has set will bring Georgia even closer and NATO even closer to your grasp and it will strengthen the bond between our nations."

Pence also met on August 1 with the leaders of the Georgian opposition and addressed troops participating in NATO joint military exercises being conducted in Georgia, saying, "We stand here today in the gap -- on a front line of freedom, a front line compromised by Russian aggression nearly a decade ago."

Pence met earlier on August 1 with the leaders of the Georgian opposition and was also planning to attend NATO joint military exercises being conducted in Georgia. About 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the Noble Partner 2017 drills there.

At an official dinner in the Georgian capital late on July 31, Pence said, "We stand with you, for your freedom and for our shared values."

Kvirikashvili said the United States "has a dedicated friend in Georgia, a stable geopolitical ally, and a strategic partner."

In comments released earlier by the Georgian government, Kvirikashvili described Pence's visit as "an important milestone in the bilateral relationship as we work to further strengthen security, economic, and trade cooperation between our two countries."

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Pence arrived in Tbilisi from Estonia, where he reaffirmed Washington's solidarity with the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders" and "undermine democracies."

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions, as have Georgia and the third ally on Pence's itinerary: new NATO member Montenegro.

"No threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said. "At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another."

Pence also said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty -- the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica, U.S. officials said.

Montenegro accession to NATO in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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In Georgia, Pence Assures Eastern Europe of US Backing
By Nana Sajaia
1 August 2017
Voice of America

On the latest leg of his first official tour of Eastern Europe, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence assured regional allies the United States will stand by their side.

Facing a crowd of Georgian and international journalists at government offices in Tbilisi, Pence, standing alongside his host, Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili, said America first does not mean America alone.

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"President Trump has sent me with the simple message to you and to the people of Georgia, we are with you, we stand with you ... America stands with Georgia," said Pence.

The vice president came to Georgia, the only non-NATO member country on his itinerary, from Estonia, a model of a successful EU-leaning transformation, before heading to Montenegro, NATO's newest member.

Pence is the highest-ranking American official of the current administration to visit Georgia and the larger Caucasus region.

"Thanks to your help, Georgia is no longer a Soviet or a post-Soviet country," said Kvirikashvili at Tuesday's joint press conference. "Today we are a democracy closely associated with the European Union."

Kvirikashvili's comments, in which he touted Georgia's role as "a key strategic partner of America," come amid an ongoing partial Russian occupation.

About 60 kilometers from the news conference, Russian tank units maintain control over 20 percent of Georgian terrain, a holdover from the August 2008 five-day war.

Pence reiterated the U.S. non-recognition policy regarding the Russian-occupied zone, condemning Moscow's presence on Georgian soil, what many observers describe as an evolving, "creeping" occupation.

"President Trump has called on Russia to cease its destabilizing activities," Pence said, adding that President Donald Trump will soon sign sanctions against Russia.

"Our country prefers a constructive relations with Russia, based on cooperation and common interest. But the president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia: a better relationship, lifting of sanctions, will require Russia to reverse actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place."

'Reset' jitters

Former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden visited Georgia about a year after the 2008 war. Biden's visit came shortly after the Obama administration's "reset" policy with Russia, which caused concern among many Europeans that the United States would give Moscow a pass for its invasion of Georgia.

Years later, Russia annexed Crimea and destabilized Eastern Ukraine, which led the West to unilaterally impose sanctions on Russia.

Both Georgia and Ukraine are aspiring NATO members. Some observers argue Georgia's 2008 war and Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea could have been avoided if those countries hadn't been denied Membership Action Plan status at NATO's Bucharest summit in April, 2008.

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"President Trump and I stand by the 2008 NATO Bucharest statement, which made it clear that Georgia, one day, will become a member of NATO," said Pence.

According to recent nationwide polls carried by National Democratic Institute, 66 percent of Georgia's population approves of the government's stated goal to join NATO. Sixty-two percent of Georgians say the country should join the European Union. Both organizations are largely seen as security instruments that would protect Georgia independence and development.

2017 represents the 25th anniversary of U.S.-Georgian diplomatic relations.

George W. Bush is the only U.S. president who has visited Georgia, which he called "a beacon of democracy."

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Mike Pence promises US and NATO support for Georgia in Tbilisi
By Dan Alexe
1 August 2017
New Europe

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence pledged Washington's support to Georgian leaders as he met with Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili in Tbilisi.

"We see Georgia as a key strategic partner and stand by your territorial integrity and your aspirations to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," Pence said.

Georgia has been going through Russian occupation of parts of its territory and has expressed hopes of joining NATO.

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

Kvirikashvili said the United States "has a dedicated friend in Georgia, a stable geopolitical ally, and a strategic partner."

Vice president Pence is also planning to attend the NATO joint military exercises being conducted in Georgia. About 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the Noble Partner 2017 drills there.

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Pence arrived in Tbilisi from Estonia, where he reaffirmed Washington's solidarity with the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders" and "undermine democracies."

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions, as have Georgia and the third ally on Pence's itinerary: new NATO member Montenegro.

Pence said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty — the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

On the last stop, Pence will visit Montenegro, whose accession to NATO in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica.

Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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Pence: Reversing Sanctions Requires Russia to Change
1 August 2017
Voice of America

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence says diplomatic actions taken by Russian in response to fresh sanctions will not deter U.S. commitment to its security and that of its allies.

Speaking Tuesday during a visit to Georgia, Pence said the sanctions bill President Donald Trump will soon sign sends a "very clear message" that with Russia's activities in Ukraine and its support for Iran and Syria, its "posture has to change."

Congress overwhelmingly passed the sanctions bill punishing Russia for interference in the 2016 U.S. election, while also imposing new measures on Iran and North Korea. Russia responded by ordering the U.S. to cut its overall staff of more than 1,200 in Russia by 755 people.

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"The president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia: a better relationship, the lifting of sanctions, will require Russia to reverse the actions that required sanctions to be imposed in the first place," Pence said.

Pence is on a multi-nation tour meant to show U.S. support for its allies in the region.

He said after a meeting with Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili in Tbilisi that the United States will work with Georgia to counter Russian aggression and "seek a peaceful resolution" that restores the country's internationally recognized borders.

In 2008, Russia intervened militarily in Georgia, and later recognized the breakaway republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states. A few other countries also recognize that independence, though the vast majority of nations consider the areas still as part of Georgia.

"The United States supports Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders, and under President Donald Trump the United States of America will reject any claim at any time by any nation that undermines this enduring principle," Pence said.

The vice president is also traveling Tuesday to Montenegro, NATO's newest member.

No response yet to Putin

Russia's retaliation for the U.S. sanctions is believed to be the single largest cut ever imposed on the U.S. embassy in Moscow and consulates elsewhere in Russia, although many of those to be dismissed are likely Russians working in support positions.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said the cuts would leave both Russia and the U.S. with the same number of staff and diplomats in Washington and Moscow, respectively - 455.

President Donald Trump has been silent on the issue since Putin announced his action. Asked about this Monday, White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said, "Right now we are reviewing our options, and when we have something to say on it we will let you know."

The U.S. State Department said the order to reduce the number of American diplomats in Russia was "a regrettable and uncalled for act." A spokesman said U.S. officials are assessing how to respond to Putin.

A Russian analyst, Nikolai Petrov of the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, said the move reflects the Kremlin's disillusionment with President Trump: "These measures are tough, and it is linked to a deep disappointment that came after the euphoria linked to the arrival of Donald Trump [to power], and to the idea that today we will start our relations anew."

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Another Russian analyst, Gleb Pavlovsky, said a return to Cold War-era hostilities with the U.S. will only boost Putin's popularity at home ahead of another likely bid for the Russian presidency next year.

Pavlovsky, a former political consultant for the Kremlin who is now president of the Foundation for Effective Politics in Moscow, explained how U.S. efforts to "punish" Putin may have the opposite effect: "American sanctions naturally are causing a definite mass reaction [in Russia] - an anti-American, pro-Putin reaction." If Putin wished, Pavlovsky added, he could make the American sanctions the centerpiece of his re-election campaign next year.

Russians will feel cutback

Other experts say the vital work of the U.S. embassy in Moscow will continue despite the massive cuts. Steven Pifer, a former U.S. diplomat now with the Brookings Institution, told VOA that Russians also may discover some unintended consequences of their president's crackdown on U.S. diplomacy.

"My assumption is hundreds of Russians are going to lose their jobs now," Pifer said. "And when you're looking at priority functions of the embassy, you know, visa functions are important but they're not as important as other functions. So my guess is that those Russians [who] want to travel to the United States are going to find that visa processing is going to take longer than usual because of reduced staff in the consular section."

Pifer was assigned to the U.S. embassy in Moscow in 1986, at a time when there were several back-and-forth expulsions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. He later served on the National Security Council under former President Bill Clinton, and was ambassador to Ukraine from 1998-2000.

During his time in the Russian capital, Pifer said, American staff were called upon for "all-purpose duty" at times when Russian support staff were unavailable for political reasons.

"So, five or six days out of every seven, I would work on my normal portfolio, which is arms control," Pifer recalled. "And then one day, I'd drive a truck. And the embassy got by. There was actually this incredible spirit in the embassy that we were going to show the Soviets that this kind of action was not going to cramp the embassy."

Pifer said he expects the same determined spirit from U.S. embassy personnel now.

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VP Pence says Trump will sign Russia sanctions soon
1 August 2017
Associated Press

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence says President Donald Trump will sign a bill on a new package of sanctions against Russia.

The Senate voted last week to approve the new financial sanctions against Moscow. The legislation bars Trump from easing or waiving the penalties on Russia unless Congress agrees.

Pence, who is visiting the former Soviet republic of Georgia Tuesday, said the Trump administration "had concerns" about the bill when it was drafted in the Senate, but that Trump will sign it soon.

Russia on Friday ordered the U.S. Embassy and three U.S. consulates in Russia to drastically cut its personnel there. President Vladimir Putin said on Sunday it would mean 755 staffers will have to be dismissed.

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Embassy Reductions Won't Deter U.S., Pence Says
By Michael Shear
31 July 2017
New York Times

Vice President Mike Pence responded aggressively on Monday to the decision by President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia to order the shedding of 755 positions at the United States Embassy in Moscow, even as President Trump remained silent on the escalating diplomatic row.

Traveling in Eastern Europe, Mr. Pence delivered a blunt message for Mr. Putin, noting that "recent diplomatic actions taken by Moscow will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, that of our allies and to freedom-loving nations around the world."

Mr. Pence said that while Mr. Trump remains "open to a better relationship" with Russia, he warned that "the United States rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation or malign influence in the Baltic States or against any of our treaty allies."

Mr. Putin over the weekend ordered that the embassy work force be trimmed by Sept. 1, responding to legislation approved last week by Congress to impose new sanctions on Russia for its meddling in the 2016 presidential election. The legislation also imposes additional sanctions on Iran and North Korea.

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Mr. Trump passed up several public opportunities on Monday to condemn the action, which includes American diplomats and Russian employees. As president, his posture toward Mr. Putin has been closely watched during a congressional inquiry into Russian election meddling and a special counsel investigation on the issue.

"Right now we're reviewing our options, and when we have something to say on it, we'll let you know," said Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the White House press secretary.

Ms. Sanders also declined to say when Mr. Trump planned to sign the sanctions legislation, which passed with overwhelming, veto-proof majorities in both the House and the Senate. On Friday, the White House said the president would sign the bill but had initially suggested it was an improper attempt by Congress to exercise the president's foreign policy powers.

Mr. Trump's silence on the new dispute with Russia struck some veteran foreign policy experts as a sign of weakness as he faces a dramatic diplomatic offense by a major adversary.

"Why is he not denouncing? It's a very weak signal that he's sending," said Michael McFaul, a Stanford University professor who served as ambassador to Russia under former President Barack Obama.

Mr. McFaul said that removing 755 people from the United States Embassy in Moscow — about two-thirds of the personnel in the compound — would severely affect the work that American diplomats do there. That includes processing visa applications for Russians seeking to visit the United States.

He also noted that a statement by the State Department called the Russian action "regrettable and uncalled-for." But Mr. McFaul said that previous administrations would have condemned the expulsion more strenuously and would have made sure the American president responded directly to his counterpart in Russia.

"That he chose not to was striking to me," Mr. McFaul said. "He's on Twitter all the time. If he has something to say, it would take him 10 seconds to say it."

Russian officials said over the weekend that Mr. Putin's diplomatic move was retaliation for the sanctions legislation, promising to go even further if the United States imposed additional economic restrictions in the future.

"This retaliation is long, long overdue," Sergei Ryabkov, Russia's deputy foreign minister, said on ABC's "This Week" on Sunday. Mr. Ryabkov called the sanctions legislation "completely weird and unacceptable" and said that in response to any more moves by the United States, "we will respond in kind."

"We will mirror this," he added. "We will retaliate."

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While Mr. Trump remained silent on Monday, Mr. Pence used his trip to Estonia to underscore a tougher stance for the Baltic nations toward Russia and its aggression in the region. He will visit Georgia and Montenegro later on his trip.

In a speech at Kadriorg Palace in Tallinn, the presidential residence of Estonia, Mr. Pence said he brought a message from Mr. Trump that "we are with you." In the speech, Mr. Pence reiterated the president's call for Russia to end "destabilizing activities in Ukraine and elsewhere."

"The United States will continue to hold Russia accountable for its actions — and we call on our European allies and friends to do the same," Mr. Pence said.

The vice president also explicitly promised that the United States would meet its obligations under NATO's Article 5 mutual defense pledge to come to the aid of a member nation who is attacked. Mr. Trump made a similar statement this summer after earlier refusing to say so directly.

Mr. Pence said that Mr. Trump would sign the sanctions legislation "very soon."

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Vice President Pence in Europe: Georgia
By Office of the Vice President
1 August 2017
The White House

Vice President Mike Pence's next stop on his visit to Eastern Europe was Georgia. Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili and the Vice President met to discuss how the United States, under President Donald Trump, strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgia's soil. Following his meetings, the Vice President and Second Lady Karen Pence toured the Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition, a symbol of the ancient faith that fills Georgia's ancient land, with Patriarch Ilias II and Father Giorgi Zviadadze. Vice President Pence also addressed American and Georgian troops at Exercise Noble Partner where he discussed our shared commitment to promote security and stability across the wider world. Following his speech, the Vice President departed for Montenegro, the last stop of his visit to Eastern Europe.

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During Whirlwind Week in Washington, VP Pence Comforts East European Allies
By Emily Tamkin
1 August 2017
The Cable: Foreign Policy

Amid chaos in Washington, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence is in Eastern Europe assuring American allies that the United States is committed to protecting them.

"We are with you. We stand with the people and nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania — and we always will," Pence said at a joint press availability with the Baltic leaders in Tallinn, even as, back home, President Donald Trump has yet to comment on Russian expulsion of U.S. diplomatic staff.

The vice president participated in a listening session on cyber and innovation with the president of Estonia in Tallinn, and travelled on Tuesday to Tbilisi, where he met with the Georgian prime minister for their third substantive meeting since Pence took office.

"We see Georgia as a key strategic partner and stand by your territorial integrity and your aspirations to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," Pence said at a dinner with Prime Minister Kvirikashvili in Tbilisi. At a joint press conference with Georgia's prime minister, Pence noted that Russia occupies one-fifth of Georgian Territory.

Back in Washington, in the meantime, President Trump has yet to comment personally on a bill that Congress passed imposing tougher sanctions on Russia. The White House press secretary said Friday in a statement that Trump would sign the bill.

Speaking in Tbilisi, Pence said the bill would be signed soon.

From Tbilisi, Pence traveled to the newest NATO member, Montenegro. In May at a NATO summit, President Trump appeared to push Montenegro's prime minister aside during a photo session.

Pence's staid tour abroad is in stark contrast to the roller coaster in Washington this week. On Monday, U.S. President Donald Trump lost a communications director who was brought on roughly a week prior; Jared Kushner, his son in law and advisor, told White House interns the Trump team was too disorganized to have colluded with Russia; and the *Washington Post* reported the president had dictated a misleading message to his son about a meeting with a Russian lawyer.

Trump's is not the first administration to send a vice president abroad in the president's stead, or to develop relations with diplomats and dignitaries from particular countries — former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden was known as Ukraine's man in Washington.

"Vice President Pence's visit sent a clear message about the enduring strength of the relationship between Georgia and the United States," Georgian Ambassador to the United States David Bakradze told Foreign Policy by email. "This is an important milestone in the bilateral relationship."

"In short," a representative from the Estonian Embassy in Washington, D.C. relayed to FP, "we consider the trip a great success."

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The embassy of Montenegro did not immediately respond to request for comment.

Update, Aug. 1 2017, 4:16 pm ET: This piece was updated to include comment from the Estonian Embassy.

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Social Media Coverage

Prominent Facebook Posts on the VP Trip

Vice President Mike Pence

Vice President Mike Pence added 4 new photos
2 hrs

#VPinEurope Photos of the Day: Karen and I landed in Georgia last night and were welcomed by Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili and his wife, Maia. Today, the Prime Minister and I met and I told him that the United States of America, under President Donald J. Trump, strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgia's soil. Following our productive discussions, we toured the Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition, a symbol of the ancient faith that fills Georgia's ancient land, with Patriarch Ilias II and Father Giorgi Zviadadze. To conclude our visit to Georgia, I spoke with American and Georgian troops at Exercise Noble Partner and discussed our shared commitment to promote security and stability across the wider world. Today we recommit ourselves to the cause of security, prosperity, and freedom for the people of Georgia.



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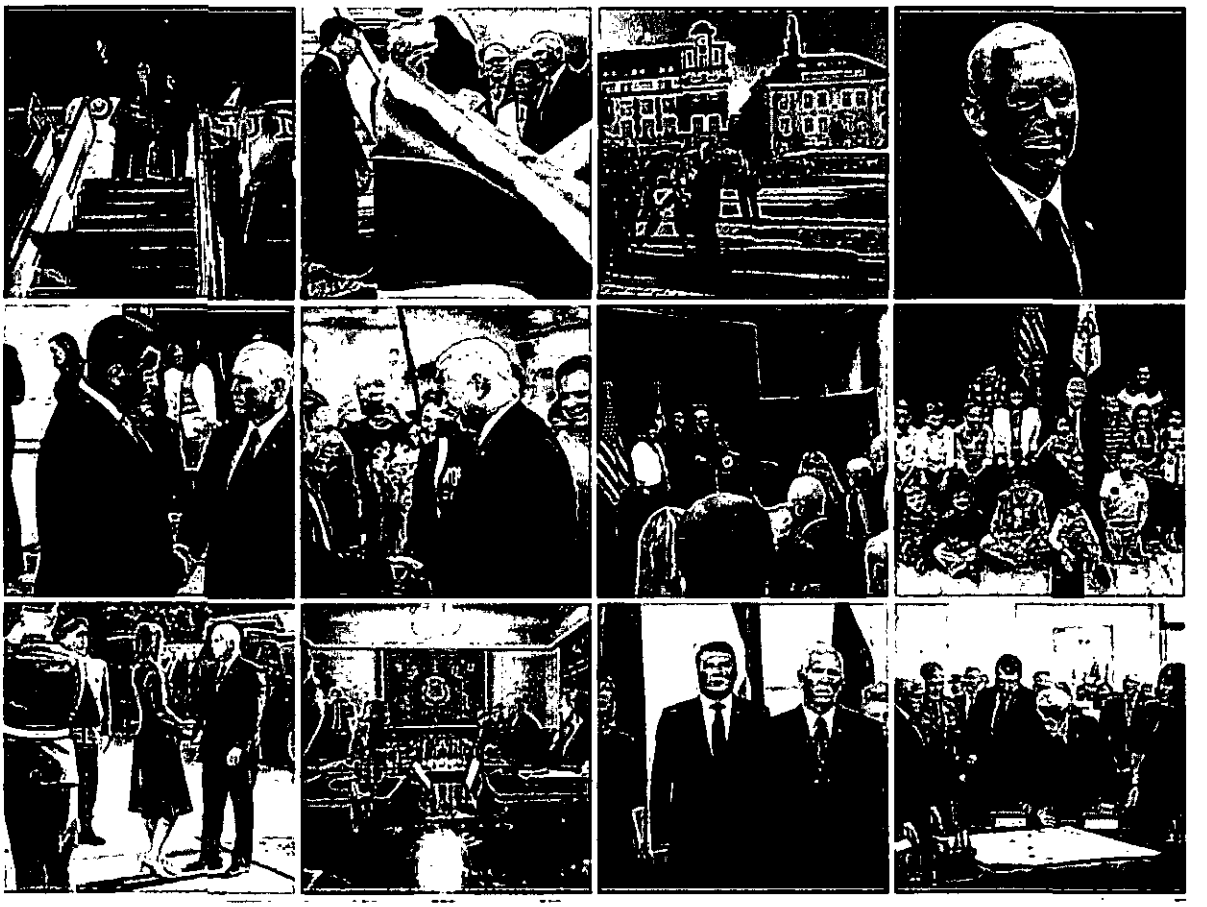
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White House Official Facebook Page

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Vice President Pence's Trip to Europe

24 Photos Updated 2 hours ago

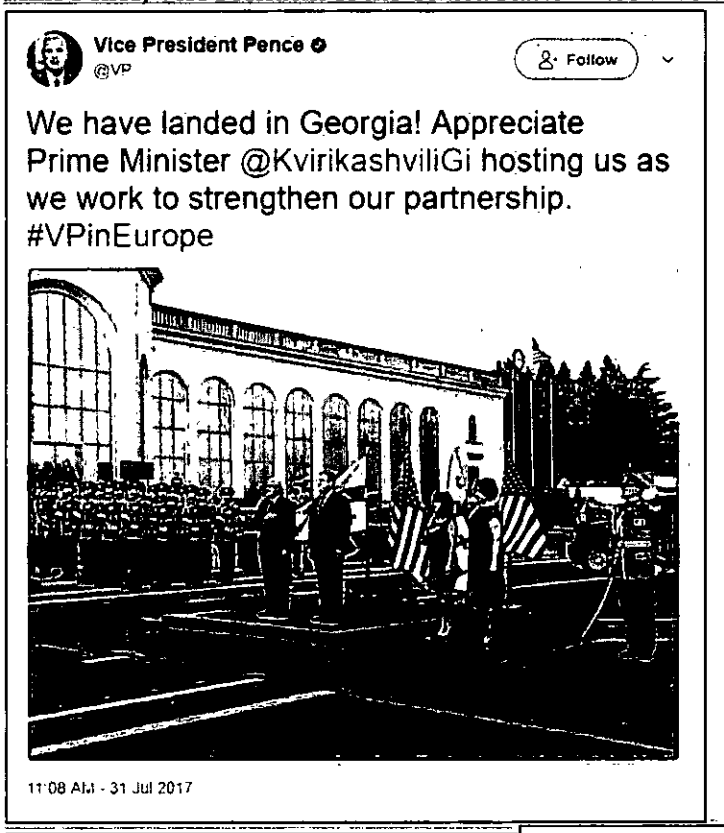


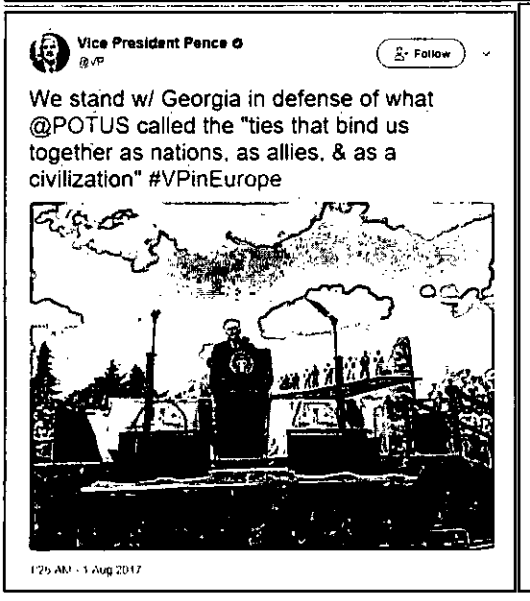
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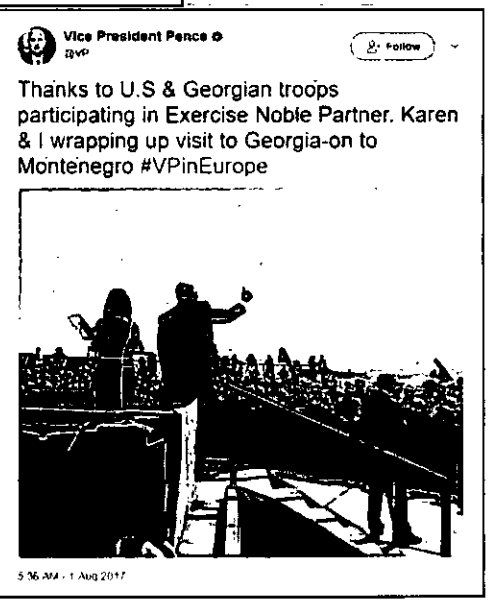
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Prominent Tweets on VP Visit

Mike Pence, Vice President of the United States – 4.08M Followers







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Vice President Pence ✪
@VP

Follow

Today, we recommit ourselves to the cause of security, prosperity, and freedom for the people of Georgia. #VPinEurope



4:34 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✪
@VP

Follow

A better relationship will require Russia to reverse actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place. #VPinEurope



4:32 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✪
@VP

Follow

We stand here today in the gap - on a front line of freedom, compromised by Russian aggression nearly a decade ago. #VPinEurope



4:32 AM - 1 Aug 2017

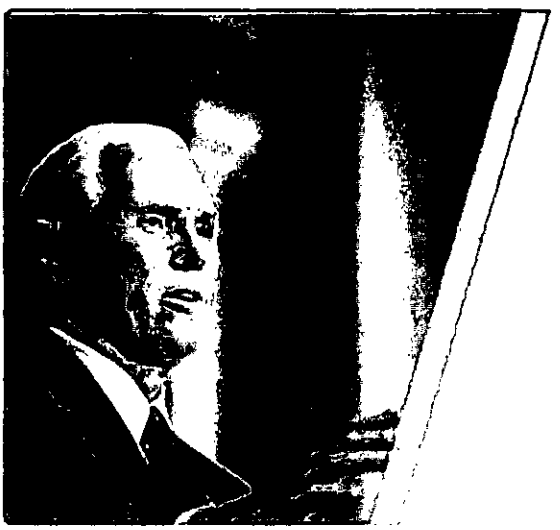
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Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

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The rise of adversaries new and old requires renewed strength and resolve by all who cherish freedom. #VPinEurope



4:31 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

Follow

Karen & I visited Sioni Cathedral a symbol of the faith that fills Georgia's ancient land. Thanks Patriarch Ilia II & Fr Zviadze #VPinEurope

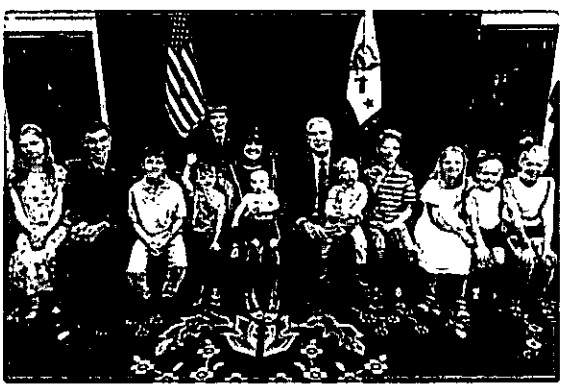


4:01 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

Follow

Karen & I spoke w/ dedicated @EmbassyTbilisi staff members & their families & thanked them for the great work they do for the US #VPinEurope



2:19 AM - 1 Aug 2017

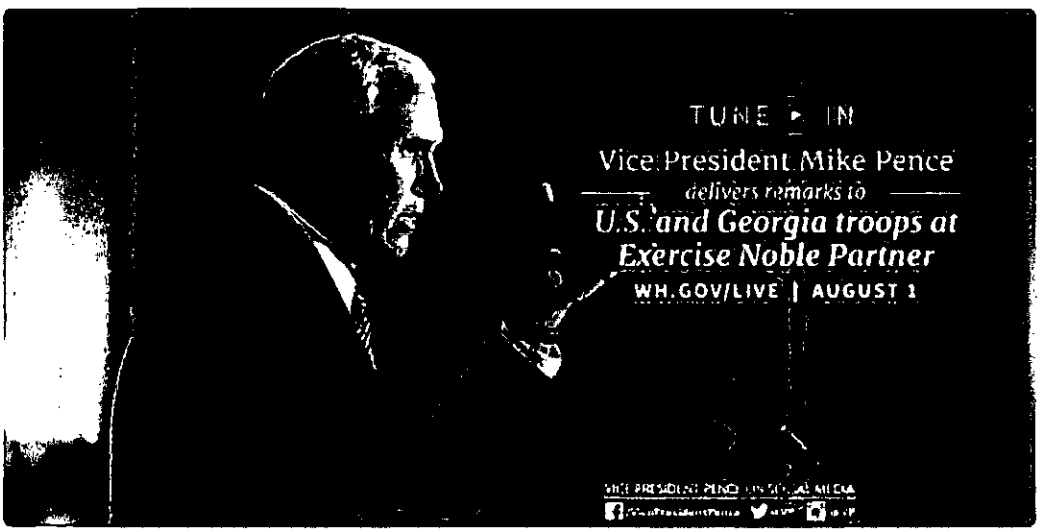
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Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

Follow

TUNE IN! I'm speaking to U.S. and Georgia troops at Exercise Noble Partner: 45.wh.gov/v3dhHa #VPinEurope



4:14 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

Follow

The United States will continue to work with Georgia to reduce vulnerabilities and counter Russian aggression. #VPinEurope

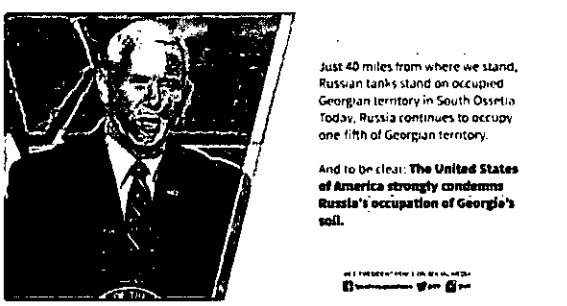


2:16 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

Follow

To be clear: the United States of America strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgia's soil. #VPinEurope



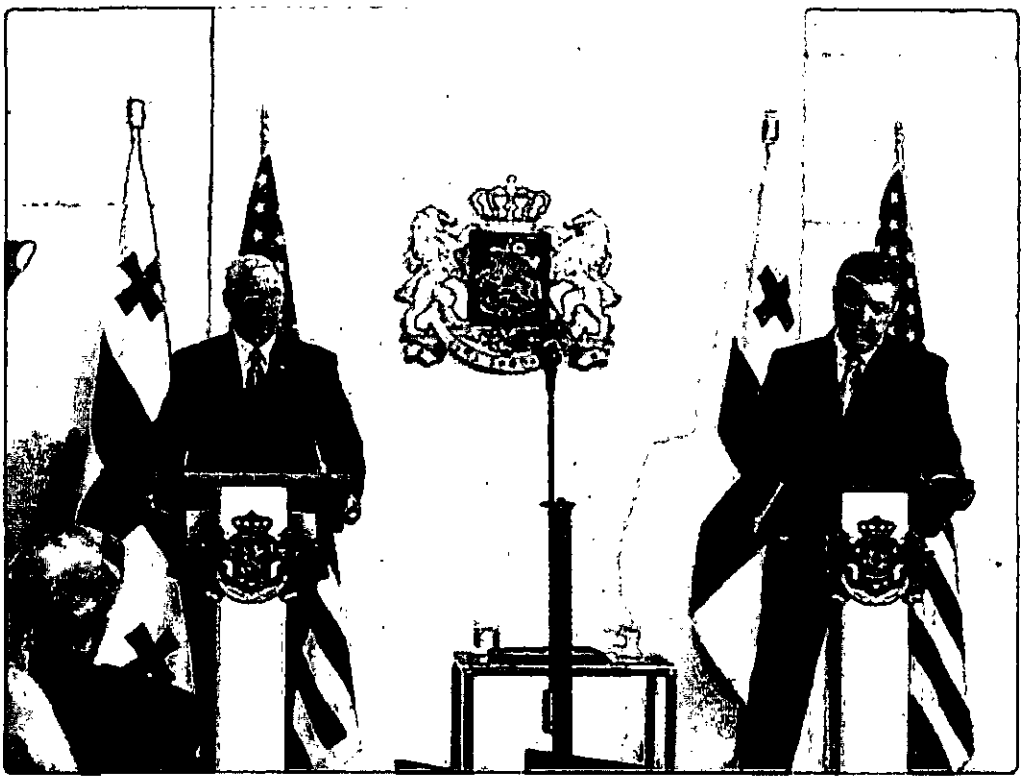
12:47 AM - 1 Aug 2017

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Vice President Pence @VP · 7h

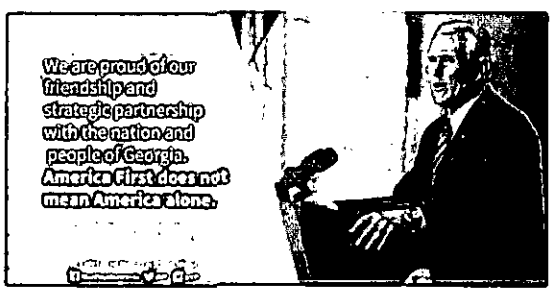
It is heartening to see that Georgia already exceeds NATO's goal of spending two percent of gross domestic product on defense. #VPinEurope



102 433 1.7K

Vice President Pence @VP Follow

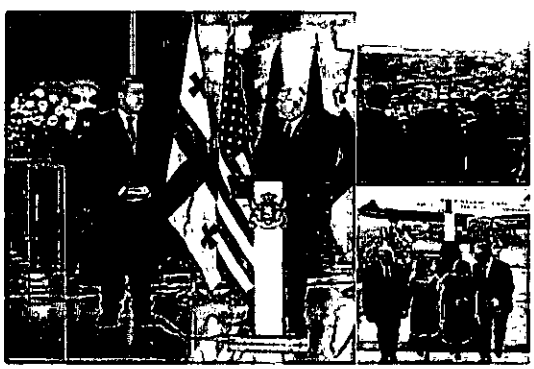
We are proud of our friendship and partnership with the nation and people of Georgia. America First does not mean America alone. #VPinEurope



12:45 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence @VP Follow

Thanks @KvirikashviliGi & Maia for welcoming Karen & I to Georgia yesterday. We enjoyed Tbilisi, looking forward to our meetings #VPinEurope



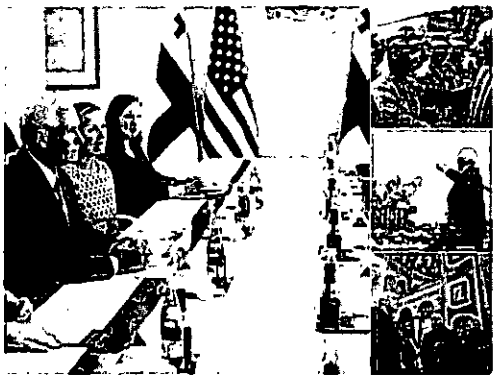
10:09 PM - 31 Jul 2017

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Vice President Pence
@VP
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#VPinEurope Day 3: Visited @EmbassyTbilisi families, met w/ PM @KvirikashviliGi & spoke to US & Georgia troops at Exercise Noble Partner



9:58 AM - 1 Aug 2017

White House Official Twitter – 15.1M Followers

The White House
@WhiteHouse
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Catch up with #VPinEurope:



Vice President Pence in Eastern Europe

Vice President Pence @VP

On behalf of President Donald Trump, Vice President Mike Pence is in Eastern Europe to meet with leaders from Estonia, Georgia, and Montenegro. Stay connected on his social media channels to follow...

Moments

11:21 AM - 1 Aug 2017

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Karen Pence, Second Lady of the United States – 235K Followers





John McCain, U.S. Senator – 2.39M Followers



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Mark Knoller, CBS News White House Correspondent – 301K Followers

Mark Knoller
@markknoller

Follow

In Tblisi, addressing US and Georgian troops. @VP declares the US "strongly condemns Russian occupation of Georgian soil."



4:35 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Mark Knoller
@markknoller

Follow

Declaring Georgia's "future is in the west," the @VP reaffirmed US support for Georgia's eventual membership in @NATO.



4:38 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Mark Knoller
@markknoller

Follow

Earlier, VP and Mrs Pence visited Tblisi's Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition. They toured, lit candles and spent a moment in prayer.



4:58 AM - 1 Aug 2017

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Government Statements and Releases

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and U.S. Vice President Mike Pence Agree to Further Enhance Georgia-US Security and Economic Cooperation
1 August 2017
Government of Georgia (Press Release)

Readout of Second Lady Karen Pence's Visit to Tbilisi, Georgia
Office of the Second Lady
1 August 2017
White House

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and U.S. Vice President Mike Pence Agree to Further Enhance Georgia-US Security and Economic Cooperation
1 August 2017
Government of Georgia (Press Release)

Tbilisi, 1st August 2017 – Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili today met with United States Vice President Mike Pence to discuss expanding future security and economic cooperation between Georgia and the U.S. Last night, Kvirikashvili hosted Vice President Pence and the American delegation for dinner in Tbilisi.

"Vice President Pence's visit so shortly after taking office bears witness to his and President Trump's great desire to deepen the strategic partnership and friendship with Georgia, for which I am very grateful," stated Prime Minister Kvirikashvili. "The Georgian nation deeply appreciates the American people's friendship, solidarity, and strong support."

During their meeting, Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and Vice President Pence discussed the U.S.-Georgian security partnership in depth. Following the meeting, the Vice President met with Georgian and U.S. soldiers participating in the Noble Partner exercise, a U.S. Army-led exercise to support the training, evaluation and eventual certification of Georgia's second light infantry company contribution to the NATO Response Force (NRF).

"The Vice President's meeting with Georgian and American service members participating in the Noble Partner exercises is an unmistakable demonstration of the strong U.S. support for spurring our country's sovereignty and integration into NATO," affirmed Prime Minister Kvirikashvili. "The special bonds and extraordinary sacrifices of our two militaries -- currently fighting extremism together -- is something to behold. Georgia and the U.S. are truly brothers in arms."

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and Vice President Pence also held productive discussions about furthering the economic partnership between Georgia and the U.S. Georgia's Anaklia Port on the Black Sea, which will become a focal point in trade between Europe and Asia, is being built by an American-Georgian consortium, led by U.S. company Conti. SSA Marine, another U.S. company, will

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operate it. The two leaders also discussed potential steps for moving forward with a bilateral free trade agreement between the two countries.

During the visit, Vice President Pence also reaffirmed U.S. support for continued progress toward Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

-/-

Readout of Second Lady Karen Pence's Visit to Tbilisi, Georgia
Office of the Second Lady
1 August 2017
White House

Second Lady Karen Pence started her day with the Vice President where they participated in a meet-and-greet with U.S. embassy employees and their families. Mrs. Pence continued her day to the National Parliamentary Library where she joined art therapists and patients from Kamara, a pscho-social rehabilitation center and leading provider of art therapy in Georgia. The Second Lady observed the patient's art therapy work before participating in a roundtable discussion with Kamara co-founders and art therapists, Natia Panjikidze and Nino Komakhidze, and art therapist Salome Panjikidze. After the art therapy program visit, the Second Lady enjoyed lunch at the Vinotel Restaurant with United States Marines who represented both the Marine Security Guard Detachment and Marines from the Georgia Deployment Program. After lunch, Mrs. Pence met with Georgian artist, Olesya Tavadze, who works in easel paintings and graphics. Mrs. Tavadze is passionate about American literature, in particular Robert Frost. Mrs. Pence viewed Mrs. Tavadze's exhibit of paintings inspired by Robert Frost's poems at the Tbilisi History Museum Karvasla. Following the museum visit, Mrs. Pence joined the Vice President to tour the Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition. After the tour, Mrs. Pence listened to the Vice President deliver remarks to U.S. and Georgian Noble Partner Participants at the Tbilisi Airport before departing to Podgorica, Montenegro.

"Art therapy is an emerging profession in Georgia with only a few professionally trained art therapists in the country," said Second Lady Karen Pence. "I will cherish my opportunity to meet with the leading art therapists in Georgia who are breaking new ground in the country by offering art therapy as an option for therapeutic treatment. They are doing great work and making a positive difference in Georgia."

Tomorrow, Wednesday, August 2nd, Mrs. Pence will wrap up her Eastern Europe visit with activities in Podgorica, Montenegro. To stay updated on Mrs. Pence's events, follow her on Twitter at, @SecondLady.

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From: Bethany Bassett
Sent: Thursday, August 03, 2017 3:55 PM
To: 'oumou_ly@schumer.senate.gov'
Subject: Pence/Georgia Trip

Hi Oumou-

Hope you are well. We do some work with the Government of Georgia and thought you might be interested in material covering Vice President Pence's recent trip to Georgia.

Let me know if you need anything else.

Thanks much-

Bethany

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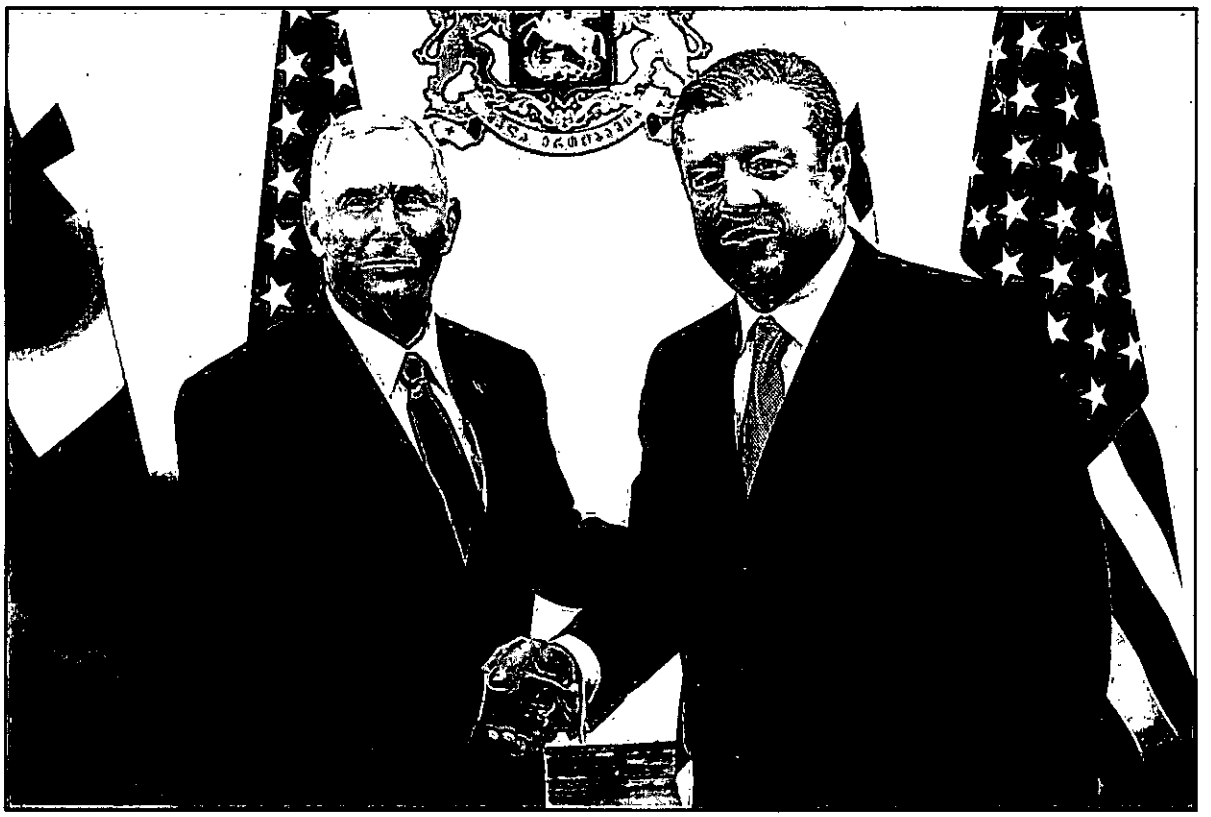
Bethany M. Bassett
Senior Vice President
Rasky Partners, Inc.
D: 202 530 7701
C: 617 458 1302
www.rasky.com

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VICE PRESIDENT MIKE PENCE'S VISIT WITH GOVERNMENT OF GEORGIA

July 31-August 1, 2017



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Transcript of the Press Conference of Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili and US Vice President Mike Pence

PM Kvirikashvili:

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a pleasure to host in Georgia Mr. Mike Pence, who is not only the Vice President of our country's key strategic partner, the United States of America, but also a great friend whom Georgia has made in such a short period. It is especially exciting that he is visiting Georgia in the company of his spouse.

After our brief introductory meeting in Munich, I was honored to hold meetings in Washington, at the invitation of the Vice President, and today we continue our dialogue in Tbilisi.

Mr. Vice President, your visit very shortly after taking office bears witness to your and President Trump's great desire to deepen your strategic partnership and friendship with Georgia, for which I am very grateful to you.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of our diplomatic relations. Throughout this time, America has played a vital role on our country's path toward democratic and economic development, safeguarding Georgia's sovereignty, and NATO membership.

Thanks to your assistance, today Georgia is neither a Soviet nor post-Soviet country. Today we are an EU associated European democracy. Together with the Americans, we are proudly standing guard protecting global security and making our contribution to regional stability.

The Georgian nation deeply appreciates the American people's friendship, solidarity, and strong support.

Mr. Vice President, today we discussed our strategic partnership further in depth. First, I would like to single out and welcome our defense and security cooperation. Your meeting with Georgian and American service members participating in the Noble Partner exercises is an unmistakable demonstration of the strong US support for spurring our country's sovereignty and integration into NATO alike.

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This year, we adopted the Joint Action Plan that ensures enhancing Georgia's resilience, which is so crucially important for maintaining the stability and sustainability of Georgia and the region.

The United States of America has provided Georgia with significant financial assistance over these 25 years, and today we are happy to be an increasingly attractive country for American businesses. Today we offer one of the best business environments, extremely low corruption and red-tape rates, and equally low taxes, which is the best opportunity for American businesses to benefit.

Our goal is to put in place the best platform in the region suitable for American business interests. Notably, American companies are taking interest in engaging in large-scale regional infrastructural projects implemented in our country. Along with the Conti Group joining the Anaklia Deep Sea Port Consortium, we welcome the signing of the document on cooperation between the Anaklia Deep Sea Port Consortium and SSA Marine, one of the leading American port operators in the world. According to this document, the SSA Marine will operate the container terminal and invest in this most valuable project in the country today. The foregoing reaffirms the growing interest of American businesses and our country's immense potential for becoming the regional hub.

In the past 25 years, we have implemented numerous energy projects in cooperation with the United States. These projects ensure sustainable Euro-Atlantic energy security, and we are committed to continuing our cooperation in this direction as well.

We are a partner ready for high-level trade and investment relations with the USA based on mutual economic benefits.

Georgia is America's important partner in the region, which, among others, stems from our shared values, such as democracy and human rights. America has played an important role in the building of our democratic institutions. Our democratic development, for its part, is a precondition for developing Georgia as a sustainable and stable state that ensures the protection of the rights of every citizen and preserves our cultural uniqueness.

US support is vital in peaceful resolution of Georgia-Russia conflict. We deeply appreciate the US strong and unwavering stance on Georgia's territorial integrity. The decisions made by President Trump, you personally, Mr. Vice President, and the new Administration and the Congress on Georgia's occupied territories have proved unprecedented.

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Today we discussed the serious challenges facing our country as a result of occupation. The US plays a tremendous role in the Geneva International Discussions format. Importantly, through high-level engagement, particular decisions must be sought for ensuring the de-occupation of and security in Georgia's territories, and for political conflict resolution.

In conclusion, I would like to reaffirm that Georgia has always been and will always be by the US' side when it comes to any challenge or threat facing the world. Our strategic partnership focuses equally on strengthening security in Georgia, regionally, and worldwide, on promoting peaceful and democratic development.

Once again, I emphasize the importance of this visit and its outcomes. We appreciate the fact that, despite more than one challenge in different parts of the world, the Vice President is visiting Georgia as part of his first European trip.

I am also thankful to our American colleagues for visiting Georgia and their special contribution to deepening our bilateral cooperation.

I am convinced that our joint efforts will further deepen our strategic partnership. At the same time, we are eager to introduce the Vice President, his spouse, and the American guests to Georgia's culture and historical heritage as the pride and joy of the Georgian nation.

Thank you.

VP Pence:

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili thank you so much for those words and for the hospitality you shown me and my family. It was an honor to welcome you to the White House just a few short months ago. And now it is my honor to be welcomed by you to the beautiful and storied nation of Georgia.

The President of the United States of America, President Donald Trump sent me here with a simple message for you and for the people of Georgia: we are with you; we stand with you; we are proud of our friendship and strategic partnership with the nation and the people of Georgia. In a word, I am here to say: America first does not mean America alone. And America stands with Georgia.

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the US diplomatic relationship with Georgia. Yet, this is a nation whose roots stretch back to the amiss of history. Sitting at the crossroads of

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empires and civilizations, where East meets West, where North meets South; Georgia has fostered your own language, your own traditions, your own identity over the millennia. Today the people of Georgia are renowned the world over for your vibrant culture, which, my wife and I enjoyed last night at our first super dinner featuring Georgian cuisine, and a lot of it and traditional song and dance from Abkhazia, South Ossetia and all across Georgia.

We have also been deeply inspired by the rich heritage of faith and my wife and I look forward to visiting the historic Sioni Cathedral and meeting the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church this afternoon. While this may be my first visit to this nation, the enduring courage and spirit of Georgian people have long inspired me. It was only a generation ago that Georgia was still imprisoned in then-Soviet Union. When that brutal regime collapsed, you reclaimed your independence and your freedom. You reached out our hand of friendship to Europe and United States of America and we were proud to reach back.

Today, I commended the Prime Minister for Georgia's democratic development, which has brought Georgia closer to unity with Europe and membership in North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Further progress on the goals that the Prime Minister has set will bring Georgia even closer and NATO even closer to your grasp and it will strengthen the bond between our nations.

Now, nowhere is the bond between our two nations stronger than in our shared effort to promote security and stability across the wider world. Georgia is the key strategic partner of the US. Since 2004, thousands of Georgians have served shoulder to shoulder with Americans in Kosovo, in Iraq and in Afghanistan. In Afghanistan alone, I say with grateful heart, Georgia has provided more troops on a per capita basis than any other country in the world. And 31 brave Georgian soldiers have given their lives for the cause of freedom. American people remember and mourn the sacrifice of your countrymen. They are heroes, all and they and their families will be enshrined in the hearts of American people forever. Later today I will meet with troops participating in the exercise Noble Partner. This initiative has brought together the armed forces of the US, Georgia and many other nations to train together and strengthen Georgia's ability to defend itself. It is only one of many examples of the US' commitment to Georgia's security.

President Trump and I stand by the 2008 NATO Bucharest statement, which made it clear that Georgia will one day become a member of NATO. As I expressed to the Prime Minister, it is heartening to see that Georgia already exceeds the NATO's goal of spending 2 % of its GDP on its national defense. But as we all know, Georgia's investment in defense is an

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investment born of necessity. At this very moment, just 40 miles from where we stand, Russian tanks stand on occupied territories at South Ossetia. Today, Russia continues to occupy one fifth of Georgian territory. So to be clear, the United States of America strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgian soil. The United States support Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders. Under President Trump the United States will reject any claim, at any time, by any nation that undermines this enduring principle. President Trump has called on Russia to seize its destabilizing activities. My purpose here is to reinforce that message to the people of Georgia.

In sign of our commitment President Trump will sign very soon legislation to solid and codify the United States' sanctions against Russia. As always, our country prefers a constructive relationship with Russia, based on cooperation and common interests, but President and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia: a better relationship, lifting of sanctions, will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place. We hope for better days and we hope for better relations with Russia. But the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow, I can assure you, will not deter the United States' commitment to our security, that of our allies and freedom loving nations around the world, like Georgia. The US will continue to work with Georgia to reduce your vulnerabilities and counter Russian aggression and so, too will we work with Georgia to deepen our ties of commerce of which the Prime Minister just spoke.

The United States has a keen interest in expanding our trade and investment relationship with Georgia. And your ongoing reforms Mr. Prime Minister have clearly demonstrated your openness and commitment to the stronger commercial partnership with the west. Today I thank the Prime Minister for his leadership focused on bringing greater economic opportunity to all of Georgian citizens. The Anaklia Deep Sea Port shows the potential of a stronger bilateral relationship between our nations. American companies are investing alongside with Georgian counterparts in this multibillion-dollar project. As we look toward the future of our two nations have untold opportunities to contribute even more to each other's prosperity. The US has stood with Georgia for quarter century and under president Trump we will continue to stand with you as partners, as friends and one day we will stand together as allies. Georgia's future is in the west and as the people of Georgia have long declared, our strength is now and always will be in our unity. So thank you Mr. Prime Minister, thank you for your hospitality here today and thank you for the strong leadership that you provide for this country. We look forward to working with you for the prosperity and the security of the people of Georgia and of our great nation.

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Q&A

Q: Greetings. I am Salome Kokiashvili, Public Broadcaster of Georgia. Mr. Vice President, you said during your visit to the Baltic States that the US always stands strong for freedom. In addition, the US has always been a staunch supporter of Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty. Given the continuous occupation of Georgia's regions—and we see that the fundamental rights of those living in these territories, of IDPs, are being violated on a daily basis—what steps Georgia can take together with its partners to deal with these problems?

VP Pence:

Well, as I said, the United States of America stands strong for the territorial integrity of Georgia. We have stood on that principle since the time that Russian tanks overtook Abkhazia and Ossetia in 2008. And we will continue to stand strong. The joint military operations that are taking place today, we hope, are a visible sign of our commitment to Georgia's sovereignty and to her internationally recognized borders.

We also believe that, in addition to security partnership, the stronger and more prosperous Georgia will lead to the restoration of a whole and free Georgia. So the United States will continue to look for ways where we can strengthen Georgia not only from the standpoint of its defense and security, but where we can strengthen Georgia economically, creating jobs and opportunity, and prosperity. Strengthening the hand of Georgia so that, one day, Georgia can once again celebrate its historical territorial integrity intact.

PM Kvirikashvili:

Thank you very much for the question. I would like to thank Mr. Vice President for his very clear message and the strong support Georgia enjoys from the US.

As mentioned earlier, our territorial integrity is a deep-rooted problem that requires a consistent approach in terms of Georgia's stability and economic and democratic development, on one hand, and Georgia's crucial defense and security partnership, on the other. I would like to reaffirm that this conflict can be resolved, and territorial integrity can be restored, only peacefully, consistently, through our economic development and with strong support from our strategic partners, especially from the US. Thank you.

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Q: Ashley Parker from the Washington Post. Mr. Vice President, in light of Russia's retaliation against sanctions, as well as Russia sending 100,000 troops to the eastern edge of NATO territory to drill, do you truly believe that better relationship that you and President Trump want with Russia is possible? And if things continue in this direction, can we be headed toward another cold war?

Mr. Prime Minister, you know better than anyone how real the threat of Russian aggression is. The Vice President just said that the US supports Georgia's aspirations into NATO, but what concrete assurances do you have that the US will defend you should Russia attack, as President Putin threatened?

VP Pence:

Thank you for your question. President Trump sent me on this journey to send a very clear message to the Baltic States, to the people of Georgia, and before the end of the day, Montenegro that the United States of America will stand with freedom-loving nations around the world. And that we will do so as Mr. President has said, not merely with words, but with actions. The presence of American forces in Poland, the presence of British forces—with whom I met—in Estonia, at the gathering yesterday, all give material evidence of the commitment of NATO in that region to live up to our Article 5 obligations. The current Russian exercises, which news reports today suggest will move up to 100,000 Russian troops into Belarus, is simply a confirmation of the importance of clarity within the NATO partnership.

President Trump and I believe that better relations with Russia may be possible. But as the President has said, we will see. But negotiations between parties always begin with the recognition of and respect for the position of each party. And with the sanctions President Trump will sign this week, codifying sanction that have been in place by the United States, our country is sending a very clear message and calling on our European allies to join in a very clear message that we mean what we say and say what we mean; that Russia's destabilizing activities in Ukraine, their support for rogue regimes like Iran, Syria, and North Korea, their posture has to change. But we believe by being clear and being strong that we can pursue a dialogue based on mutual understanding. President Trump holds the view that it has been a lack of clarity in the commitment by the US that has created much of the instability in the world today. When, in the past, America has spoken of red lines and not followed through on red lines. Many argue that it emboldened others to act in ways that they would not have. So President Trump believes that we can have peace through strength,

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and strong and clear positions, we believe, can create the foundation where authentic dialogue that may, we hope, result in better relations and in the resolution of long-standing disputes in Ukraine, Georgia, and other areas of the world.

PM Kvirikashvili:

Thank you. Thank you, Mr. Vice President, and thank you for the question. I think that a very clear and string message—we are with you!—tells everything. Georgia faces endless provocations daily along the occupation line, facing challenges of borderization, capturing, kidnapping of ethnic Georgians, and violating basic human rights of ethnic Georgians residing on the occupied territories. But the response to that is even more resolve and consistency, and dedication to the goals we set for ourselves. And integration into NATO is a process which matters for Georgia. Of course, the final goal to join NATO is set by the Georgian population, and we are following this very difficult path of reforming Georgia's military system and developing institutional democracy in Georgia. Believe me, through the consistency and dedication, clearness of our messages, and unity with our important strategic partners, it will be able for Georgia to reach this very important goal, to ensure long-term stability, and it is possible. We Georgians believe that.

Q: Reuters news agency, Margarita Antidze. Mr. Vice-President, what are the red lines Washington's red lines on Russia especially in regard with Georgia. And also you said in Estonia that in case of Russia's aggression against NATO alliance, members of the alliance, the US will intervene. What would be your reaction in case of Russia's aggression against Georgia, against NATO's partners? Thank you very much. Mr. Prime Minister do we have enough patience to wait NATO's partnership? We are waiting, you are waiting, and Georgia is waiting for a while? Thank you.

VP Pence:

Thank you for the question. Well, the essence of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization is a mutual defense. We agree that attack on one is an attack on all. What President wanted me to communicate as I traveled to the NATO countries, as later today I will visit the newest member of NATO is that the US says what it means and means what it says and we will live

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up our obligation under article 5. With regard to Georgia, we strongly support Georgia's aspiration to become a member of NATO and we will continue to work closely with this Prime Minister and the Government of Georgia broadly to advance the policies that will facilitate becoming a NATO member. We believe that Georgia has made an extraordinary progress not in just last twenty five years but over the last five years. There has been significant progress that we believe will strengthen the application for NATO membership. But with regard to the Russian aggression, which took place in 2008 which has... as we stand here today Russian tanks are parked on Georgian soil forty miles from where we stand. The US will continue to be unambiguous in our commitment to the territorial integrity of Georgia. We will stand for a strong and a whole Georgia, we will continue to provide support for the defense and security of Georgia and we will continue to seek a peaceful resolution that will reestablished internationally recognized borders of this nation.

PM Kvirikashvili:

Thank you Mr. Vice President. Thank you for the question. You said it is about patience, yes, it is about strategic patience, I would say, to stay consistent on the road where we are. Today we have all practical tools to advance toward NATO membership. We have substantial package, we are implementing it very successfully; we have Georgia Defense Readiness Programme jointly with the US, which is complementary to the Substantial Package; and it was said many times by the leaders of our strategic partners, the US first, of course and NATO leadership that no other country has a say to block the membership of Georgia to NATO. It is only NATO members and applicant countries, who decide about their future in NATO. And we have made our own decision. Thank you.

Q: Thank you, it is Peter Nicholas of the Wall Street Journal. Mr. Vice President, you have talked about the new Russian sanction's bill as an example of the US resolve in the face of Russian aggression. But did not the Trump's White House oppose this bill fearing that this bill relinquishes Presidential authority to Congress. What happened in this process that caused the White House to sign on?

Mr. Prime Minister, the US Intelligence community has concluded that Russia tried to interfere in our Presidential election. Living so close to Russia, having dealt with Russian provocations, do you have any advice to the US in how to cope with Russian efforts to intervene in our elections and influence voters in our country?

VP Pence:

Thank you, Peter, thank you. President Trump will sign the Russian sanctions bill soon. Our administration had concerns about this legislation that emerged from the US Senate. The concern was that the bill did not include traditional flexibility that is afforded to the State

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Department or any administration in the conduct of American foreign policy. I am pleased to report that the bill improved significantly as it moved through the House of Representatives and through the legislative process. And this legislation, we believe, will not only codify current Russian sanctions that our administration has upheld, but will also strengthen those sanctions, even while giving the President of the United States and our State Department the ability and a flexibility to be able to administer American foreign policy as appropriate. Let me say that in signing these sanctions, our President and our Congress are speaking in a unified voice that those matters that the President spoke about so eloquently in Warsaw, but Russian destabilizing activities, Russia's efforts to support rogue regimes, has to change. For there to be a change in our relationship with Russia, Russia has to change its behavior. By these sanctions, by my presence here, by the President's powerful affirmation of the objectives and the values of our alliance in the west our hope is for that we will move toward better relations and a better future and a more peaceful world as a result.

PM Kvirikashvili:

Thank you. First of all, let me mention once again how important is strong America for Georgia. We are genuinely interested in the strength of the United States; we want to see the US united, coping with global challenges. I do not think that Georgia is in a position to judge about Russian interference. With our excellent intelligence capabilities, we were not able to detect any interference and we think that American nation has made its decision to elect the President and of course we look for more partnership with the current administration of the US.

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Remarks by the Vice President to Noble Partner Participants

August 1, 2017

Tbilisi International Airport

Tbilisi, Georgia

THE VICE PRESIDENT: President Margvelashvili, Prime Minister Kvrikashvili, Minister Izoria, General Chachibaya, members of the armed forces of the United States of America and Georgia, to all our distinguished guests, it is an honor to join you here today to address the men and women of Exercise Noble Partner. (Applause.)

And to all of you, I bring greetings from the leader of the free world, the President of the United States of America -- President Donald Trump. (Applause.)

The President sent me here to this place, at this time simply to thank all -- thank you for stepping up to serve your nations, for standing in the gap on this great frontier -- united in the defense of freedom.

You are the best of us -- heroes all.

And you are here, the Americans among you so far away from home, because the United States and Georgia are bound together by the abiding oath of friendship and by our shared commitment to the cause of freedom.

Under President Trump, the policy of the United States is to place the security and the prosperity of America first. But as the President has made clear, and as our presence here today demonstrates, America First does not mean America alone.

We are here today, with the steadfast assurance of the United States of America to tell our friends in Georgia: We are with you. (Applause.)

We stand with the nation and the people of Georgia, and we will stand with you as you pursue membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. And the United States of America stands with Georgia in defense of what President Trump in Warsaw called "the priceless ties that bind us together as nations, as allies, and as a civilization." And those ties are freedom, democracy, and the rule of law.

The roots of the nation and people of Georgia stretch back into the mists of history. Sitting here at the crossroads of empires and civilizations -- where East meets West, where North meets South -- Georgia has fostered a vibrant culture and a rich heritage of faith.

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And through all the millennia, none have been able to deprive you of your identity. The people and culture of Georgia have stood the test of time. (Applause.)

It was only a generation ago that Georgia was still imprisoned inside the Soviet Union. That Communist regime personified everything that free peoples reject, and it sought to crush you in its heartless, inhuman embrace. The Soviet Union sought to eradicate your history -- even the very essence of who you are, the cherished ties of culture and faith.

But when the Soviet Union collapsed, Georgia reclaimed its liberty. You reached out your hand in friendship to the free nations of Europe and the United States, and the United States of America proudly reached back. (Applause.)

This year marks the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the diplomatic relations between the United States and Georgia, and we marvel at your progress -- the progress you've made since you regained your independence. Georgia's future is in the West.

For many years, Georgia has been a key strategic partner of the United States. Since 2004, thousands of brave Georgians have served with their American brothers-and-sisters-in-arms in Kosovo, in Iraq, and in Afghanistan.

In Afghanistan alone, Georgia has provided more troops on a per-capita basis than any other country in the world. (Applause.)

And today we remember 31 Georgian soldiers who've given their lives in the cause of freedom in that land. The American people remember their sacrifice and their families on this day. They are heroes. And let me assure you and their families that they will be enshrined in the hearts of the American people forever.

The strategic partnership between the United States and Georgia is stronger now than ever before, and this joint exercise is a tangible sign of our commitment to each other to make it stronger still.

Exercise Noble Partner brings together the Armed Forces of the United States, of Georgia, and many other nations to train together and execute complex operations.

Noble Partner will strengthen Georgia's ability to defend itself in the years ahead. It will prepare Georgian soldiers to join NATO's Response Force in the future.

This exercise is a testament to your professionalism, to the high value that the United States and our

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NATO allies place on Georgia's security. But our commitment to your security doesn't stop there.

American advisors will continue to work alongside your leaders to improve Georgia's military readiness. And along with all our NATO allies, the United States is contributing to the Substantial Package for Georgia, to strengthen Georgia's resilience, and to bring Georgia ever closer to your goal of membership in NATO. (Applause.)

And to be clear, President Trump and the United States stand firmly behind the 2008 NATO Bucharest statement, which made it clear that Georgia will someday become a member of the most successful military alliance in the history of the world. (Applause.)

Georgia has already taken important steps toward this goal -- especially in terms of security. Georgia has long exceeded NATO's own goal of spending 2 percent of gross domestic product on defense. Your commitment is a model for many current NATO members, many of which have not fulfilled their obligations to our common defense. And so I want to congratulate and thank Georgia for your strong commitment and your strong example of national leadership on national defense. (Applause.)

And to those here in the uniform of the United States, be assured your Commander-in-Chief is busy making the strongest fighting force in the history of the world stronger still.

As President Trump said just a few days ago, in his words, "American might is second to none -- and we're getting bigger, and better, and stronger every day."

The President has already signed the largest increase in military spending in nearly 10 years. And we're calling on Congress to pass one of the largest investments in defense since the days of the Cold War.

Our investments in our defense, like Georgia's, are borne of necessity. The rise of adversaries new and old requires renewed strength and renewed resolve by all who cherish freedom.

We stand here today in the gap, on a frontline of freedom, a frontline compromised by Russian aggression nearly a decade ago. At this very moment, just 40 miles from where we stand, Russian tanks sit on Georgian land in South Ossetia. Today, Russia continues to occupy one-fifth of Georgian territory.

The United States strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgia's soil. (Applause.)

Be assured: The United States will continue to support Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity

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within its internationally recognized borders.

The United States of America, under President Donald Trump, will reject any claim, at any time, by any nation that undermines this enduring principle.

To that end, President Trump has called on Russia recently, here and elsewhere, to "cease its destabilizing activities," and we will continue to work with Georgia to reduce your vulnerabilities and counter potential Russian aggression.

And in a further sign of our commitment, very soon, President Trump will sign legislation to strengthen and codify the United States' sanctions against Russia.

The United States prefers a constructive relationship with Russia based on mutual cooperation and common interests. But the President and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia -- a better relationship, the lifting of sanctions will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused the sanctions to be imposed in the first place. And not before. (Applause.)

We hope for better days, for better relations with Russia, but the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow I can assure you will not deter this President or the commitment of the United States to our security, that of our allies, and freedom-loving nations around the world like the freedom-loving people of Georgia.
The United States has stood with Georgia since your independence, and under President Trump, we will continue to stand shoulder-to-shoulder and work hand-in-hand with you to fortify your defense, to strengthen your democracy, and to deepen your ties of friendship with Europe and the United States.

We stand with you because we know the wisdom of that ancient Georgian saying there is -- "strength is in unity." (Applause.)

So in unity, together, we will be strong in arms. In unity, together, we will be strong in resolve. And in unity, together, we will be strong in faith -- faith in freedom, and faith in Him from whom our freedom springs.

Earlier today, my wife and I visited the Patriarch of the Georgian Orthodox Church at the Sioni Cathedral; that soaring temple, whose foundations stretch back more than 1,500 years, is deeply inspiring. It's a symbol of the ancient faith that fills this land.

As I walked beneath its painted dome, I could not help but think of an ancient truth from the sacred scriptures, one which we'd do well to reflect on in these challenging times. As we train, as we

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prepare, as we promote commerce and mutual prosperity, we do well to remember those words: "Where the spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty."

Today, we recommit ourselves to the cause of security, prosperity, and liberty for the people of Georgia. We renew our pledge to stand together in unity as partners and as friends, and to one day stand together as allies in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. (Applause.)

And we do so with confidence and with faith -- faith in the courage of all of you who wear the uniform, faith and confidence in the strength and resilience of the proud people of this ancient land, confident in the leadership of our Commander-in-Chief, President Donald Trump, and your leadership in Georgia, and with faith in the blessings and protection of God above, I know the United States and Georgia will embrace a future of freedom in unity together.

Thank you. God bless you. God bless Georgia. And God bless the United States of America. (Applause.)

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PRESS RELEASE: Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and U.S. Vice President Mike Pence Agree to Further Enhance Georgia-US Security and Economic Cooperation

Tbilisi, 1st August 2017 – Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili today met with United States Vice President Mike Pence to discuss expanding future security and economic cooperation between Georgia and the U.S. Last night, Kvirikashvili hosted Vice President Pence and the American delegation for dinner in Tbilisi.

"Vice President Pence's visit so shortly after taking office bears witness to his and President Trump's great desire to deepen the strategic partnership and friendship with Georgia, for which I am very grateful," stated Prime Minister Kvirikashvili. "The Georgian nation deeply appreciates the American people's friendship, solidarity, and strong support."

During their meeting, Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and Vice President Pence discussed the U.S.-Georgian security partnership in depth. Following the meeting, the Vice President met with Georgian and U.S. soldiers participating in the Noble Partner exercise, a U.S. Army-led exercise to support the training, evaluation and eventual certification of Georgia's second light infantry company contribution to the NATO Response Force (NRF).

"The Vice President's meeting with Georgian and American service members participating in the Noble Partner exercises is an unmistakable demonstration of the strong U.S. support for spurring our country's sovereignty and integration into NATO," affirmed Prime Minister Kvirikashvili. "The special bonds and extraordinary sacrifices of our two militaries -- currently fighting extremism together -- is something to behold. Georgia and the U.S. are truly brothers in arms."

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and Vice President Pence also held productive discussions about furthering the economic and trade partnership between Georgia and the U.S. Georgia's Anaklia Deep Sea Port on the Black Sea, which will become a focal point in trade between Europe and Asia, is being built by an American-Georgian consortium, led by U.S. company Conti. SSA Marine, another U.S. company, will operate it.

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During the visit, Vice President Pence also reaffirmed U.S. support for continued progress toward Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

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For more information contact:

Levan Karumidze

Media Adviser

Department of Public Relations

Administration of the Government of Georgia

Phone: +995 599 969610

E-mail: lkarumidze@geo.gov.ge ; levankarumi@gmail.com

Address: 7, Ingorokva str. 0114 Tbilisi, Georgia

www.government.gov.ge

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Vice President Pence Trip to Georgia Coverage Report for July 31, 2017



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Pence Arrives In Georgia In Bid To Reassure U.S. Allies
31 July 2017
Radio Free Europe

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence arrived in Georgia on July 31 for the second leg of his three-day trip aimed at reassuring allies in Eastern Europe in the face of what the United States calls Russia's efforts to destabilize the region.

Pence was greeted at the Tbilisi airport by Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili just hours after the U.S. vice president reaffirmed Washington's solidarity with the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders" and "undermine democracies."

"We stand with the people and nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and we always will," Pence said in Tallinn, where he met with the three Baltic presidents -- Kersti Kaljulaid, Raimonds Vejonis, and Dalia Grybauskaite, respectively.

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions, as have Georgia and the third ally on Pence's itinerary: new NATO member Montenegro.

"No threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said. "At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another."

The United States "rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation, or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies," he also said.

Article 5

Pence said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty -- the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

He also pledged that the United States would not be deterred from its goals by Moscow's demand for drastic cuts in staff levels at U.S. diplomatic facilities in Russia.

"Recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter commitment of the United States to our security, the security of our allies, and the security of freedom-loving nations around the world," he said.

After Pence began his visit to Estonia on July 30, Prime Minister Juri Ratas said the U.S. vice president raised the possibility of deploying the Patriot antimissile defense system in the country.

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"We spoke about it today, but we didn't talk about a date or time," Ratas told state broadcaster ERR.

The U.S. Patriot defense system is a mobile, ground-based system designed to intercept missiles and warplanes.

Ratas also said the two leaders talked about the upcoming Russian military maneuvers planned for near the Estonian border, "and how Estonia, the United States, and NATO should monitor them and exchange information."

'Very Clear' Message

Estonian Foreign Minister Sven Mikser told Current Time TV, the Russian-language network run by RFE/RL in cooperation with Voice of America (VOA), that Pence's visit was "an extremely important event."

"The message from the vice president was very clear: The U.S. stands by all its allied obligations and commitments, and the U.S. is truly committed to being there for us, for all of its NATO allies," Mikser said.

Pence planted an English oak before departing Tallinn aboard Air Force Two en route to Georgia's capital, Tbilisi, where he was greeted at the airport by Prime Minister Giorgi Kvrikashvili later on July 31.

Officials said Pence will highlight U.S. support for the Caucasus nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity before continuing on to Montenegro, the newest NATO member.

Georgia, which has expressed hopes of joining the Western alliance, has seen Russian encroachment on its territory.

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili said on July 27 that Pence's visit will demonstrate that the United States continues to support Georgia in building a stronger military force.

During Pence's visit, 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the previously planned Noble Partner 2017 exercises.

Troops from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, and Armenia were taking part.

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"The vice president's presence here is definitely showing that this is not only about military exercises, but it is also showing unification with our values, with our foreign policy targets, and showing a clear message that we are together," Margvelashvili said.

Pence was to participate in an official dinner hosted by Kvrikashvili. State media in Georgia reported that Margvelashvili was expected to join them.

On the last stop, Pence will welcome NATO's newest member with his stop in Montenegro, whose accession to the alliance in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica, U.S. officials said.

Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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Pence to Visit Estonia, Georgia, Montenegro on NATO, Russia
By Laurie Kellman
28 July 2017
Associated Press

Vice President Mike Pence visits three countries in Russia's neighborhood beginning Monday to signal support for them and NATO while drawing a line against aggression.

Pence's trip to Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro is viewed as a follow-up to President Donald Trump's visit to Europe earlier this month. Then, Trump used stops in Poland and Germany to try to pull off a tricky balancing act of improving ties with Moscow while also presenting the U.S. as a check against Russia's moves in the region.

Pence's mission will be encouraging those countries to continue to ally with the West and resist Russia's attempts to splinter the NATO alliance.

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson have previously been dispatched to try to allay the concerns of countries near Russia that the U.S. really will stand behind NATO and support the sovereignty of non-member former Soviet republics.

The concerns stem from Trump's suggestion during the campaign that the U.S. might not defend NATO allies and his apparent desire for closer relations with Russia. Trump received criticism on his

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first European trip for passing up the chance to affirm the NATO mutual defense commitment clause known as Article 5, which frames an attack on one as an attack on all. Trump did affirm U.S. support for Article 5 on his second trip to Europe.

The vice president is expected to deliver a message of support for U.S. trade and investment with the countries while underscoring the U.S. commitment to the security of the three nations, according to senior administration officials who briefed reporters about the trip on the condition that they not be identified by name. Pence also will stress the values of freedom of speech, democracy and religious tolerance.

In Estonia, Pence is expected to highlight bilateral ties with the U.S., particularly on trade, investment and cyber issues. Pence also is expected to thank Estonian officials for their approach to "burden-sharing," diplomatic speak for agreeing to spend a full share of 2 percent of their GDP on defense, the administration officials said.

The vice president also is expected to underscore the U.S. commitment to NATO, which sees Russia as a security threat and offers protection to concerned member states near Russia's borders.

In Georgia, Pence is expected to highlight U.S. support for its sovereignty and territorial integrity, the officials said. Georgia is the only country on the trip that is not a NATO member and, like Ukraine, has seen Russian encroachment on its territory. The administration officials said the U.S. is encouraging Georgia to continue to make reforms to its judiciary and expand anti-corruption efforts.

In Montenegro, Pence will celebrate that nation as the newest NATO ally.

On Wednesday, he'll attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Podgorica, Montenegro, to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and underscore the importance of good governance, political reforms and rule of law. Also expected to attend are the leaders of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia.

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VP Pence, in the Baltics, voices support for mutual defense in NATO
By David Mardiste, Andrius Sytas
31 July 2017
Reuters

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence on Monday assured the Baltic states of U.S. support if they faced aggression from Russia, telling them that Washington firmly backs NATO's doctrine of collective defense.

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 08/03/2017 7:59:37 PM

Pence's comments to the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania, ahead of Russian war games on their doorstep, were clearly intended to reassure following Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea from Ukraine and U.S. President Donald Trump's early lukewarm support for NATO.

During a visit to NATO's Brussels headquarters in May, Trump jarred allies by not restating U.S. support for a critical portion of the alliance's charter and instead berated some members for not spending enough on defense.

Trump has since said he supports the NATO charter's Article 5, the requirement that each member of the alliance defend each other if they come under attack.

"A strong and united NATO is more necessary today than at any point since the collapse of communism a quarter-century ago and no threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said at news conference with the three Baltic presidents.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States stands firmly behind our Article 5 pledge of mutual defense. An attack on one of us is an attack on us all."

Russia is scheduled next month to hold large-scale military maneuvers with its ally Belarus. The U.S. army's top general in Europe said this month that the Zapad war games could be a "Trojan horse" resulting in military equipment being left in Belarus.

He warned that Russia continues to "seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine democracies of sovereign nations and divide the free nations of Europe, one against another".

Lithuania's President Dalia Grybauskaite told Lithuanian radio that NATO's air-policing missions would be doubled during the Russian-led Zapad exercise.

Pence is also due to visit Montenegro, the alliance's newest member, and make a stop in Georgia, an aspiring member, which fought a brief war with Russia in 2008.

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Pence: Baltic States' Greatest Threat Comes from Russian Aggression
31 July 2017
Voice of America

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence said Monday there is no larger threat to Baltic states than the "specter of aggression" by Russia, as he pledged support for NATO allies Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

Received by NSD/FARA Registration Unit 08/03/2017 7:59:37 PM

Pence met in Tallinn with the presidents of all the Baltic states — Estonia's Kersti Kaljulaid, Latvia's Raimonds Vejonis and Lithuania's Dalia Grybauskaite — and afterward summarized the U.S. position on Russia's "destabilizing" activities:

"At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine democracies of sovereign nations and divide the free nations of Europe one against another. Under President Donald Trump, the United States of America rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies."

During his public remarks in Estonia's capital, the U.S. vice president also expressed hope for improved relations with Russia. He said the Kremlin decree this week ordering most American diplomats to leave their posts in Moscow will not deter the U.S. commitment to its allies' security.

Pence praised Estonia for meeting the NATO alliance target for defense spending of at least 2 percent of its gross domestic product, and he noted Latvia and Lithuania would hit that level by the end of next year. Trump has repeatedly called on NATO members to boost defense spending.

Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania all have asked for tangible demonstrations of U.S. military support. Concerns about Russian expansionism have increased sharply in the Baltic region since Russia annexed Crimea from Ukraine three years ago.

From Estonia, Pence traveled later Monday to Georgia, where troops from the United States and other NATO partners are conducting military exercises that began Sunday.

Welcoming him to Tbilisi, Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili said, "Vice President Pence's visit sends a strong message about the enduring strength of the relationship between Georgia and the United States."

Pence praised the Georgian people for their strong "commitment to independence and freedom." He and Kvirikashvili dined together Monday and will hold talks Tuesday.

Following his visit to Georgia, Pence's three-nation tour of Eastern Europe will conclude in Montenegro, NATO's newest member.

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Pence Says U.S. Will 'Always Stand' With Baltic Nations
31 July 2017
Radio Free Europe

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence has reaffirmed Washington's support for the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders " and "undermine democracies."

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"We stand with the people and nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, and we always will," Pence said on July 31 in the Estonian capital, Tallinn, where he met with the three Baltic presidents -- Kersti Kaljulaid, Raimonds Vejonis, and Dalia Grybauskaite.

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries and other allies in Eastern Europe have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions in their respective regions.

"No threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said. "At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another."

The United States "rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation, or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies," he also said.

Pence said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty -- the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

He also pledged that the United States would not be deterred from its goals by Moscow's demand for drastic cuts in staff levels at U.S. diplomatic facilities in Russia.

"Recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter commitment of the United States to our security, the security of our allies, and the security of freedom-loving nations around the world," he said.

After Pence began his visit to Estonia on July 30, Prime Minister Juri Ratas said the U.S. vice president raised the possibility of deploying the Patriot antimissile defense system in the country.

"We spoke about it today, but we didn't talk about a date or time," Ratas told state broadcaster ERR.

The U.S. Patriot defense system is a mobile, ground-based system designed to intercept missiles and warplanes.

Ratas also said the two leaders talked about the upcoming Russian military maneuvers planned for near the Estonian border, "and how Estonia, the United States, and NATO should monitor them and exchange information."

Estonian Foreign Minister Sven Mikser told Current Time TV, the Russian-language network run by RFE/RL in cooperation with Voice of America (VOA), that Pence's visit was "an extremely important event."

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"The message from the vice president was very clear: The U.S. stands by all its allied obligations and commitments, and the U.S. is truly committed to being there for us, for all of its NATO allies," Mikser said.

Pence planted an English oak before departing Tallinn aboard Air Force Two later on July 31, en route to Georgia's capital, Tbilisi, for the second leg of his trip.

Officials said Pence will highlight U.S. support for the Caucasus nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity before continuing on to visit the newest NATO member, Montenegro.

Georgia, which has expressed hopes of joining the Western alliance, has seen Russian encroachment on its territory.

Georgia, which has expressed hopes of joining the Western alliance, has seen Russian encroachment on its territory.

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

Georgian President Giorgi Margvelashvili said on July 27 that Pence's visit will demonstrate that the United States continues to support Georgia in building a stronger military force.

During Pence's visit, 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the previously planned Noble Partner 2017 exercises.

Troops from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, and Armenia were taking part.

"The vice president's presence here is definitely showing that this is not only about military exercises, but it is also showing unification with our values, with our foreign policy targets, and showing a clear message that we are together," Margvelashvili said.

Pence was due to arrive in Tbilisi in the evening of July 31 and participate in an official dinner hosted by Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvrikashvili.

On the last stop, Pence will welcome NATO's newest member with his stop in Montenegro, whose accession to the alliance in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica, U.S. officials said.

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Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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Georgia begins U.S.-led military exercise a day before Vice President Pence visit
By Margarita Antidze
30 July 2017
Reuters

The Georgian army began two weeks of military exercises with the United States and other partner countries on Sunday, a day before U.S. Vice President Mike Pence visits the ex-Soviet nation.

About 2,800 soldiers from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, Armenia and Georgia were taking part in the maneuvers, with Washington dispatching an entire mechanized company including several Bradley infantry fighting vehicles and M1A2 Abrams main battle tanks.

Georgia's Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili said the drills were an important event for the South Caucasus republic.

"These exercises will help Georgia to get closer to NATO standards and to strengthen stability in the whole region," Kvirikashvili said at the opening ceremony on Sunday.

The "Noble Partner" exercises are being held in Georgia for the third time. Russian officials had not commented on the event yet, but in previous years Moscow warned that drills could destabilize the region, a charge denied by Georgian officials and U.S. diplomats.

"This exercise is not directed against any country. It's about to help Georgia to grow its capacity to interoperate in international operations," U.S. Ambassador Ian Kelly told Reuters.

Russia and Georgia fought a war in August 2008 over the breakaway Georgian region of South Ossetia. Moscow continues to garrison troops there and to support another breakaway region, Abkhazia.

The exercises were being run out of the Vaziani military base near Georgia's capital, Tbilisi.

Russian forces used to be based there until they withdrew at the start of the last decade under the terms of a European arms reduction agreement.

Pence plans to attend the drills and address participants on Tuesday.

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The United States has spoken favorably of the idea that Georgia might one day join NATO, something Russia firmly opposes.

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U.S. backing of Georgian military sends strong message to Russia: Margvelashvili
By Margarita Antidze
27 July 2017
Reuters

The United States has continued to support Georgia in building more resilient military forces, training and equipping its army, Georgian president Giorgi Margvelashvili said on Thursday.

He added that these issues would be "one of the main" topics discussed during U.S. Vice President Mike Pence's visit to the ex-Soviet country.

Margvelashvili also said the Georgian army will start two weeks of military exercises with the United States and other partner countries on Sunday, the day before Pence's visit to Tbilisi, to send an important message to Russia about their common values and political targets.

"The vice-president's presence here is definitely showing that this is not only about military exercises, but it is also showing unification with our values, with our foreign policy targets and showing a clear message that we are together," Margvelashvili told a news conference.

Russia defeated Georgia in a short war in 2008 over the breakaway Georgian region of South Ossetia, and Moscow continues to station troops there and to support another breakaway region, Abkhazia.

"This is an important message especially in the environment when (Russia's) training and exercises going on the occupied territories of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region (South Ossetia)," Margvelashvili added.

Pence plans to visit Georgia as a part of his trip to Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro.

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U.S., U.K., Ukraine, Others Begin Massive Military Drills In Georgia
30 July 2017
Radio Free Europe

Some 2,800 troops from host Georgia, the United States, and six other countries have begun a major military exercise in the South Caucasus nation.

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Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili and other leaders on July 30 said they see the event as a substantial step toward their goal of one day joining NATO.

"These exercises will help Georgia to get closer to NATO standards and to strengthen stability in the whole region," Kvirikashvili said at the opening ceremonies at the Vaziani military base near the capital, Tbilisi.

Georgia's defense minister, Levan Izoria, called the scale of exercises "unprecedented" and said they "make clear the support for Georgia by the NATO member states, especially the U.S."

U.S. officials in the past have spoken favorably toward Georgian hopes of eventually joining NATO, a move Russia vehemently opposes.

At a 2008 summit in Bucharest, NATO leaders made a formal pledge that Georgia "will become a NATO member," but alliance leaders have moved warily toward that goal in the face of Moscow's opposition.

About 1,600 U.S. troops and 800 Georgian soldiers are taking part in the two-week exercises, dubbed Noble Partner.

Troops from Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, and Armenia are also participating, with the United States deploying a mechanized company, including several Bradley infantry fighting vehicles and M1A2 Abrams battle tanks.

It is the third time the exercises have been held in Georgia, a country that has seen much-larger rival Russian encroach on its territory since its independence from the Soviet Union.

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway areas of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008, and Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

In previous years, Moscow warned that the drills could destabilize the region, a notion that Georgia and the United States have dismissed.

"This exercise is not directed against any country. It's about to help Georgia to grow its capacity to interoperate in international operations," U.S. Ambassador Ian Kelly told Reuters news agency, citing missions such as the current one in Afghanistan.

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence is scheduled to visit Georgia on July 31 after a stop in Estonia to meet with Baltic leaders also concerned about Russia's intensions in their region. He will meet with U.S. troops on August 1.

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During his stop in Tallinn, Pence said, "Our message to the Baltic states -- my message when we visit Georgia and Montenegro -- will be the same: To our allies here in Eastern Europe, we are with you, we stand with you on behalf of freedoms."

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US and Georgia hold military drills, as Russia shows off naval strength
30 July 2017
BBC

The US and Georgia have launched their biggest ever joint military exercises, as the Caucasus nation seeks to push its bid to join Nato.

US Vice-President Mike Pence will visit this week and is expected to back the plan, which Russia strongly opposes.

Georgia and Russia have had fractious relations over two breakaway republics and fought a brief war in 2008.

Russia staged its own show of force on Sunday with President Putin joining a naval display in St Petersburg.

The US-Georgia military drills, dubbed Noble Partner, involve some 1,600 US and 800 Georgian troops.

The US has also deployed M1A2 Abrams main battle tanks and M2 Bradley infantry vehicles for the exercises, which will go on until 12 August.

A number of other nations, including the UK, are involved.

Georgian Defence Minister Levan Izoria said the "unprecedented" exercises would "make clear the support for Georgia by the Nato member states, especially the US".

Although Georgia is not a member of Nato, it does voluntarily contribute to the Nato Response Force (NRF), the multinational force of land, air, navy and special operations units the alliance can deploy quickly when needed.

The Russo-Georgian War in August 2008 led to Moscow occupying the Russian-backed self-proclaimed republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia.

Meanwhile on Sunday, President Vladimir Putin attended a show of might on Russia's annual Navy Day.

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Some 50 warships and submarines were on displayed in the Gulf of Finland and on the Neva river around St Petersburg.

He said in an address: "The navy is not only dealing with its traditional tasks but also responding with merit to new challenges, making a significant contribution to the fight against terrorism and piracy."

There were other displays around the country, and Russia also showed off its naval hardware at its Syrian base of Tartus.

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Mike Pence arrives in Estonia, kicking off Eastern Europe trip
By David Caplan
30 July 2017
ABC News

Vice President Mike Pence and second lady Karen Pence arrived in Estonia Sunday afternoon, kicking off a three-country visit of Eastern Europe.

The Pences, who left from Joint Base Andrews in Maryland Saturday night, were greeted at the Tallinn airport by U.S. ambassador to Estonia James D. Melville and Estonian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sven Mikser. The group shook hands and spoke briefly before the vice president's motorcade headed to the Pences' hotel.

"On behalf of @POTUS, arrived in Tallinn, Estonia with @SecondLady to meet w/ leaders of Baltic States on security & prosperity #VPinEurope," Pence tweeted upon his arrival.

In explaining the purpose of the trip, a senior Trump administration official told reporters last week, "This builds upon the administration's engagement. The Secretary of Defense had been there recently, and it builds upon the Vice President's trip when we addressed some of these leaders at the Munich Security Conference when he met with the three Baltic Presidents then. And he has since hosted the Prime Minister of Georgia here at the White House, as did the President. And then on Montenegro's accession into NATO, we also hosted leadership here in the White House."

The office of Estonian Prime Minister Juri Ratas said in a press release Saturday that Ratas and Pence will meet at 5:30 p.m. local time, to "discuss cooperation in defence, digital issues and cyber defence, as well as cooperation between the US and the EU in connection with the Estonia Presidency of the Council of the European Union."

Ratas said in a statement, "The contribution of the US to the security of the Baltic States and also the whole of Europe is vital, and I certainly wish to thank the Vice President for that. Besides that, we plan to speak about the Estonian digital solutions that are of interest to the US, and developing

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cooperation in cyber defence at our meeting. Another important topic that will be on the table, is the cooperation between the EU and the US."

A senior White House administration official told reporters last week that while in Estonia, Pence "will highlight our strong bilateral ties, including by trade and investment. And particularly with Estonia, successes in the cyber realm, and their current partnership on cyber issues, and their leading not only in that region, but globally."

On Thursday, Karen Pence expressed her enthusiasm for the trip, tweeting "Looking forward to our visit to Eastern Europe where I highlight my iniative, art therapy. What an honor!"

According to the second lady's office, she will tour a medical center in Tallinn, and participate in a roundtable discussion with art therapists.

The senior administration official said in Georgia, the vice president will "highlight our commitment to the U.S.-Georgia Strategic Partnership, our strong support Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity ... and its internationally recognized borders, and our support for Georgia and their Euro-Atlantic aspirations."

While in Georgia, Karen Pence will visit with patients of an art therapy program in Tbilisi.

On Wednesday, Pence will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Podgorica, Montenegro, to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and underscore the importance of good governance, political reforms and rule of law. Also expected to attend are the leaders of Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia and Slovenia.

In Podgorica, Montenegro, the second lady will tour a honey farm, where she will learn about a local family's beekeeping business.

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Pence travels to Baltic states to reassure allies and send message to Russia
By Ashley Parker
31 July 2017
Washington Post

Vice President Pence touched down in Estonia on Sunday on the eve of President Trump's expected signing of legislation to impose broad sanctions against Russia, and said he came bearing a message from the president: "Russia's destabilizing activities, its support for rogue regimes, its activities in Ukraine, are unacceptable."

Speaking briefly with reporters in Town Hall Square here in Tallinn's old town, Pence reaffirmed the president's decision to sign the sanctions bill but also held out the possibility that the implementation

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of the penalties — for which Russia has already retaliated — might actually improve relations between the two countries, saying he and Trump "expect Russian behavior to change."

"The president and I remain very hopeful that we'll see different behavior by the Russian government, with regard to Ukraine, with regard to supporting rogue regimes in Iran and North Korea," Pence said. "We continue to believe that if Russia will change its behavior, our relationship can change for the good and improve for the interests in both of our countries and the interest of peace and stability in this region and around the world."

Russia has rejected the idea that the sanctions will in any way improve relations, with its U.S. embassy tweeting on Saturday: "Washington still doesn't get the fact that pressure never works against @Russia, bilateral relations can hardly be improved by sanctions."

Russian President Vladi-mir Putin said Sunday that the U.S. diplomatic missions in Russia will have to reduce their staffs by 755 people.

Pence's long-planned, 3½-day trip to Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro was originally intended to reaffirm the United States' commitment to NATO — Estonia is one of five countries meeting its defense spending commitment — and touch on the United States' commitment to the security of the Baltic states. All three countries have been the targets of Russian aggression.

But in the wake of Trump's decision to sign the legislation — which passed the Senate on Thursday on an overwhelming 98 to 2 vote — the vice president's trip has taken on a clear Russia focus, senior administration officials said. Nearly all of Pence's remarks and speeches are likely to address the challenges Russia poses in this part of the world.

But Pence's rhetoric abroad so far seems slightly out of sync with some of his boss's previous comments and actions on the topics of both Russia and NATO.

Despite the firm conclusion of his own intelligence community that Russia interfered in the 2016 U.S. presidential election, Trump has repeatedly refused to fully accept that determination. When he has acknowledged that Russia did meddle, he has played down Moscow's role, saying other state or individual actors could have played a role as well.

When asked how the Baltic states can accept Pence's reassurances that the United States will support them against Russian aggression and interference in their domestic politics when Trump has frequently taken a softer line, the vice president said, "The president has confirmed repeatedly that we believe Russia did meddle in U.S. elections. I think he has also said it could have been other actors as well."

His message throughout Eastern Europe, Pence added, is a simple one. "While our policy is America-first, it's not America-alone, and that our allies in Eastern Europe can be confident that the United States of America stands with them," he said. "We are committed to NATO, we are committed to our common defense."

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Trump's comments and actions have at times raised questions about his commitment to the alliance, despite statements of strong support from Pence and other administration officials.

While attending a ceremony at NATO headquarters in Brussels in May on his first trip abroad, Trump delivered a speech from which he specifically removed a roughly 20-word section intended to reaffirm U.S. support for the treaty's Article 5, which says an attack on one member is an attack on all members. He later committed to NATO's collective defense ideal, which is the cornerstone of the treaty, but the earlier omission worried European leaders.

Pence on Sunday again tried to play down the president's previous uncertainty on Article 5, arguing Trump has never wavered in his commitment.

"From the time the president sent me to speak at the Munich Security Conference, we made it clear that the policy of our administration is to stand firmly with our NATO allies and to stand firmly behind our Article 5 commitment that an attack on one is an attack on all," Pence said. "The president has made it clear from the outset of our administration and will continue to make it clear to all our allies in the region."

Trump was initially reluctant to accept the Russia sanctions legislation, which curbs his ability to lift them on his own without consent from Congress. But he finally agreed to sign it after revisions, which also include sanctions on Iran and North -Korea.

In many ways, the president had no choice. Trump would have encountered a fierce political backlash — as well as faced the threat of a veto override from a Republican-controlled Congress — had he refused to sign the bill. Rejecting the legislation also would have raised further questions about his seeming reluctance to confront Putin.

Pence's trip also comes as Trump is facing growing scrutiny at home over Russia, in the form of special counsel Robert S. Mueller III's widening investigation. In addition to looking into whether Trump's associates colluded with Russians in the 2016 election, Mueller's probe has grown to include questions about the finances of Trump and his family, as well as possible attempts to obstruct the investigation.

Michael McFaul, the ambassador to Russia under former president Barack Obama, said that Pence's tough-on-Russia message will be "welcome" in each of the countries he's visiting — but may disguise a deeper uncertainty about what the Trump administration's true policy is toward Moscow.

"It will be easy for him to have positive bilateral meetings when he goes there," McFaul said. "But of course he has a very convoluted message on what they're doing on Russia."

All three countries have struggled for years with Russian aggression. In 2007, Estonia faced a cyberattack that hobbled dozens of corporate and government websites — an attack for which it blames Russia, though the Kremlin denies the charge. In 2008, Russia invaded Georgia, and

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Montenegro has accused Russian agents of an attempted coup in 2016, aimed at preventing the nation from joining NATO.

"Most certainly all three of these countries have felt the influence — the coercive influence — of Russia on their domestic politics, so from my point of view, that's an interesting and positive set of countries for him to go to, with the caveat that I don't know what their Russia policy is," McFaul said. "I follow it pretty closely, and I could not tell you what the strategy is."

But Sunday afternoon, in the sun-soaked town square, Pence seemed to only have one overarching message — that he and the president are in policy lockstep, and that he is just a humble emissary spreading Trump's greetings abroad.

The vice president stopped to shake hands with a few of the people who had gathered to watch the spectacle, many of them — like Pence — tourists in Estonia. As each individual introduced themselves, Pence often tied their comments back to Trump, telling a man from Paris, "The president was just in Paris for Bastille Day," and telling a couple from Poland, "The president was just in Warsaw."

Then, he ducked into his motorcade and pulled away.

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Pence Delivers Tough Speech on 'Unpredictable' Russia
By Peter Nicholas
31 July 2017
Wall Street Journal

Vice President Mike Pence issued one of the Trump administration's toughest attacks to date on Russia, coming to a nation on Russia's border to warn against aggression from the "unpredictable neighbor to the east."

Mr. Pence said Monday that President Donald Trump would sign a bill passed by Congress that imposes new sanctions on Russia, despite earlier reservations from the White House and a promise from Moscow to expel hundreds of U.S. diplomats in return.

Mr. Pence said the Russia must be held accountable for its actions, saying the U.S. wouldn't lift sanctions until it sees as a reversal of "the actions that caused the sanctions in the first place."

"At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe one against another," he said.

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Mr. Pence is in the midst of a three-day overseas trip that includes stops in two other countries that Moscow has seen as its traditional sphere of influence: the former Soviet state of Georgia and the Balkan state of Montenegro. His repeated message is that the U.S. won't abandon allies living in Russia's shadow.

The vice president delivered his remarks outside Estonia's defense headquarters, surrounded by symbols of military resolve. Flanking him were armored tanks and standing in front of the stage were hundreds of U.S., British, French and Estonian troops, hands clasped behind their backs.

Moscow has accused the U.S. of threatening Russia by pushing for the expansion of NATO up to its borders through the admittance of the Baltic states and the inclusion of Ukraine and Georgia.

Before the speech, Mr. Pence and the presidents of the three Baltic states, Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, received a private military briefing that opened with an officer referencing the "eastern flank of NATO."

Mr. Pence praised Estonia for being one of just five in the NATO alliance to devote 2% of its gross domestic product to defense. The country of 1.3 million has pushed for more U.S. air cover for the region, but NATO officials say its 183-mile border with Russia would be hard to defend against a determined Russian assault. A Rand Corp. study last year showed that Russia could beat back NATO forces reach the outskirts of Tallinn, the capital, in just a few days.

In his 2016 presidential campaign, Mr. Trump often spoke of more cooperative dealings with Russia, and described NATO as obsolete. But he has since toughened his line on Russia, and Mr. Pence's remarks signaled again that the U.S. supported NATO's common-defense provision, known as Article 5.

"The United States rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation or malign influence in the Baltic States or against any of our treaty allies—and under President Donald Trump, the United States of America will stand firmly behind our (NATO) Article 5 pledge of mutual defense—and the presence of U.S. Armed Forces here today proves it," Mr. Pence said.

Mr. Trump in recent months has described relations with Russia at an all-time low point. After insisting he didn't believe Russia interfered in the 2016 presidential race, he has said Russia was "probably" involved, though he has also said China and other actors could have been. Russia has denied interfering in the election.

Mr. Pence, talking to reporters during a visit to Old Town Square, said that Mr. Trump's feelings on the matter are clear.

"The president has confirmed repeatedly that we believe Russia did meddle in U.S. elections." Mr. Pence said. "I think he has also said it could have been other actors as well. But he's confirmed his belief and our intelligence that Russia was involved in meddling in U.S. elections."

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Having chided Russia for its actions, Mr. Pence held open the possibility of a thaw. "President Trump has made it clear: America is open to a better relationship with Russia," he said.

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The Latest: US VP Wants Better Relations With Russia
31 July 2017
Associated Press

The Latest on U.S-Russian tensions (all times local):

2:50 p.m.

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence says that despite what the State Department described as "a regrettable and uncalled-for act" when the Kremlin ordered the U.S. to cut embassy and consulate staff in Russia, America wants to improve relations with Moscow.

Pence told reporters during a visit to Estonia that "we hope for better days, and better relations with Russia."

Speaking to the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania — all former Soviet republics bordering Russia — he said Monday that "the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, the security of our allies, and the security of freedom-loving nations around the world."

Pence was speaking on the first leg of a European tour that continues to Georgia and Montenegro.

On Sunday, Russian President Vladimir Putin said the U.S. would have to cut 755 of its embassy and consulate staff in Russia — a sweeping reduction that he described as a response to new U.S. sanctions.

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1:10 p.m.

The Kremlin says Washington needs to show "political will" for Russia-U.S. relations to recover.

President Vladimir Putin's spokesman, Dmitry Peskov, said Monday that it will take time for the U.S. to rid itself of what he called "political schizophrenia." He added that Russia remains interested in constructive cooperation with the U.S.

On Sunday, Putin said the U.S. would have to cut 755 of its embassy and consulate staff in Russia — a sweeping reduction which he described as a response to new U.S. sanctions. The Russian Foreign

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Ministry also announced closing down a U.S. recreational retreat on the outskirts of Moscow as well as warehouse facilities.

Moscow's move showed that its earlier hopes for an improvement in Russia-U.S. ties after Donald Trump's victory in the U.S. presidential election have withered.

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12 noon

Russian President Vladimir Putin has demanded that United States cut its embassy and consulate staff in Russia by 755 people, heightening tensions between Washington and Moscow three days after the U.S. Congress approved sanctions against Russia.

The U.S. State Department called Putin's move "a regrettable and uncalled-for act."

The announcement Sunday also came hours after U.S. Vice President Mike Pence landed in Estonia, which borders Russia, for talks with the country that holds the rotating European Union presidency.

Russian's Foreign Ministry on Friday first ordered a reduction by Sept. 1 in U.S. diplomatic personnel in Russia to 455 people in response to a new package of American sanctions.

The sanctions seek to punish Moscow for meddling in the 2016 U.S. election and for its aggression in Ukraine and Syria.

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Pence: We will 'hold Russia accountable for its actions'
By Louis Nelson
31 July 2017
Politico

Amid a fresh wave of sanctions and renewed tension between the United States and Russia, Vice President Mike Pence reassured NATO's Baltic member states that the U.S. stands firmly behind its mutual-defense commitment in the face of stepped-up aggression from Moscow.

"The United States stands with the nations and people of the Baltic States — and we always will. We stand with our NATO allies in our commitment to your security," Pence said Monday in remarks at the headquarters of Estonia's defense forces. "Today we stand where East meets West — on a great frontier of freedom. No threat looms larger in the Baltic States than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east."

Pence's remarks came before members of the U.S., French, British and Estonian militaries and followed a meeting between the vice president and the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

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Pence offered optimism that the U.S.-Russia relationship might improve but said that any warming would come with a shift in Moscow's behavior. The vice president reaffirmed President Donald Trump's commitment to signing sanction legislation targeting Russia passed overwhelmingly last week by Congress.

In response to the forthcoming sanctions measure, Russian President Vladimir Putin ordered the U.S. to reduce the number of diplomats stationed in Russia by more than 700. The dueling diplomatic maneuvers marked a new low in already frosty relations for the former Cold War rivals.

Trump's presidency brought with it the possibility of improved relations with Russia after the president spent much of the 2016 campaign speaking warmly of Putin and expressing optimism that he would be able to build a strong relationship with the Kremlin. Instead, relations have worsened amid investigations into Russia's efforts to interfere in last year's election, continued Russian military activity in Ukraine as well as Moscow's support for Syrian dictator Bashar Assad.

Trump, too, has shifted his rhetoric in regards to Russia, drawing a relatively tougher line even if some critics would prefer him to take an even more aggressive approach. And after characterizing NATO as "obsolete" and questioning the U.S.'s willingness to comply with the treaty's all-for-one, one-for-all defense agreement, Trump has more recently reaffirmed his nation's commitment while also urging member states to increase their defense spending.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States will continue to hold Russia accountable for its actions — and we call on our European allies and friends to do the same," Pence said Monday in Estonia. "President Trump has made it clear: America is open to a better relationship. But the president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia — a better relationship, and the lifting of sanctions, will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place."

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Pence: Administration policy is 'America first,' not 'America alone'
By Julia Manchester
31 July 2017
Hill

Vice President Mike Pence looked to reassure NATO allies on his trip to Eastern Europe on Sunday, saying President Trump's "America first" policies are not meant to isolate U.S. allies.

"President Trump sent me to eastern Europe with a very simple message, that is America first doesn't mean America alone," Pence said in an interview with Fox News during a stop in Tallinn, Estonia.

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"Our message to the Baltic states, my message when we visit Georgia and Montenegro will be the same. To our allies in Eastern Europe, we are with you, we stand with you on behalf of freedom," he continued.

Pence's visit comes as tensions between NATO member states and Russia continue to rise. He arrived in Estonia on Sunday to showcase support for NATO allies in the Baltic region and Eastern Europe.

It also comes as Trump prepares to sign legislation that would slap brand new sanctions on Russia.

"The president has made it very clear that Russia's destabilizing activities and support for rogue regimes and its activities in Ukraine are unacceptable. The president made it clear that very soon he will sign sanctions from the Congress to reinforce that," Pence said Sunday.

"But at the same time as we make our intentions clear that we expect Russian behavior to change, the president and I remain very hopeful that we'll see very different behavior from the Russian government," he added.

Russia caught the attention of NATO and its allies earlier this month, when when it sent 2,500 troops to the Latvian and Estonian borders as a part of a military drill in the Pskov region.

It's also at the heart of the election meddling investigations that have expanded to include questions about possible Trump campaign contact with Moscow.

The vice president will also make stops in Montenegro, which became a NATO member earlier this year, and Georgia, which has attempted to join the alliance in the past.

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Vice President Mike Pence: Russian 'Aggression' Makes NATO Necessary
By Eoghan Macquire
31 July 2017
NBC News

The "specter of aggression" from Russia makes a strong and united NATO more important now than at any time since the Soviet Union's collapse, Vice President Mike Pence said Monday.

"Russia seeks to redraw international borders by force, undermine democracies of sovereign nations and divide the free nations of Europe," Pence said after meeting the leaders of the Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania.

The three European countries are now members of NATO but were part of the Soviet Union and still feel the pressure of Russian influence after gaining independence in the early 1990s.

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"A strong and united NATO is more necessary today than at any point since the collapse of communism a quarter-century ago and no threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States of America rejects any attempts to use force, threats, intimidation or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies," he added.

Pence made the comments in the Estonian capital, Tallinn, the first stop on a three-day trip that will also take in Georgia and Montenegro.

Some in the Baltic nations have fretted they could be in Russia's sights after its annexation of Crimea and backing of pro-Moscow separatists in eastern Ukraine.

Although Pence stated that U.S. still wanted to foster "better relations" with Russia, he reiterated that the U.S. would continue to adhere to Article 5 of the alliance's charter — a tenet of collective defense.

President Trump had previously caused concern among NATO members by saying the organization was "obsolete" and declining to promise that America would defend fellow members if they did not up their military spending.

No other president since NATO was founded in 1949 had questioned that principle — until Trump, although he recently expressed support for NATO's Article 5.

Pence also stated that "recent diplomatic action" by Russia will not impact American commitments to the security of its NATO allies.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said Sunday that he was ordering the U.S. to reduce its diplomatic staff in the country by 755.

The move came in the wake of new sanctions voted through by the U.S. Congress last week which aim to punish Moscow for interfering in the 2016 presidential election and for its military aggression in Ukraine and Syria.

"Recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter the commitment of the United States of America to our security, the security of our allies and the security of freedom loving nations around the world," Pence said.

"[The U.S.] stands firmly behind our Article 5 pledge of mutual defense and an attack on one of us is an attack on us all," he added.

Estonian president, Kersti Kaljulaid, said the presence of Pence in Tallinn "underlined the credibility of Article 5."

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President Dalia Grybauskaitė of Lithuania, meanwhile, praised the decision of the U.S. Congress to pass new sanctions against Russia, describing it as a "very good message."

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The Testing Ground for Trump's Russia Policy
By Uri Friedman
30 July 2017
Atlantic

At the moment, U.S.-Russian relations could be thought of as a live experiment in the "Great Man" theory of history, which attributes historical change to the actions of exceptional individuals rather than impersonal forces that transcend any man or woman. If it were up to Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump, it seems, Russia and the United States would be teaming up to defeat terrorism, leaving the bitter days of sanctions and election meddling and proxy wars behind them.

The evidence to date, however, suggests it's mostly not up to the two men. Despite all the speculation about the American president cozying up to the Kremlin, the United States under Trump has repeatedly done the opposite. Yes, Trump has echoed Putin talking points, wavered on clearly committing to defend NATO allies, and ended some U.S. funding for rebels fighting Russia's ally in Syria, President Bashar al-Assad. Yet since Trump took office, the U.S. government has also attacked Assad's forces, admitted another country to the NATO military alliance over Russian objections, and advanced new sanctions to punish Russia for interfering in the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign.

Many members of Congress and Trump's own administration, including the president's defense secretary and national-security adviser, consider Russia a U.S. adversary. Many Americans, amid investigations into whether the Trump campaign colluded with the Russian government to undermine Hillary Clinton's candidacy, are suspicious of any White House concession to the Kremlin. And so far, these views, as well as the clashing geopolitical goals of the two world powers, have proven stronger than Trump's desire to pursue friendlier relations with Moscow.

In the latest sign of the Russia hawks prevailing over the Russia doves, Vice President Mike Pence departs Sunday for a four-day trip to Eastern Europe, where he'll seek to reassure U.S. allies who see nearby Russia as a threat—and to shore up NATO in particular as a bulwark against that threat.

In Estonia, he'll meet with the leaders of the three Baltic countries, Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania, who are among NATO's easternmost members. In Georgia, an aspiring NATO member, he'll visit troops involved in a NATO-affiliated military exercise. And in Montenegro, a new NATO member that has never before received such a high-ranking U.S. official, he'll attend a summit of current and potentially future NATO members.

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According to the White House, Pence is making the trip "at the direction of President Trump." And surely there's some truth to that. But the direction of President Trump—especially when it comes to Russia—is far from clear. The countries on Pence's itinerary offer examples for how the administration's perplexing, bifurcated approach to Russia could be poked and prodded in the coming months and years. Small nations such as Estonia, Georgia, and Montenegro, which straddle East and West, literally test the limits of the America-First president's commitment to U.S. allies and to fundamentally changing America's relationship with Russia. And unlike another testing ground for Trump's Russia policy—his response to Russia's alleged intervention in the U.S. election—the one in Eastern Europe will yield results that don't primarily affect Americans. It isn't all about "us."

It's also very much about Estonians and Georgians and Montenegrins: The vice president is visiting a region that is "somewhere in between the EU and NATO and Russia," Vesko Garcevic, a former Montenegrin ambassador to NATO, told me. "Therefore, for Russia, this is really a battleground—a place where Russia can influence countries."

Or consider the view from Moscow: "The Baltic states right now are seen as a U.S./NATO foothold close to Russia's main [power] centers; Georgia is a U.S. ally in the Caucasus and the Black Sea region, a sensitive area in security terms," Dmitri Trenin, the director of the Carnegie Moscow Center, wrote in an email. As the Kremlin sees it, Pence "will be visiting the new U.S. sphere of influence. Russian conventional thinking maintains that the U.S. is supporting the Balts, Georgians, and Ukrainians not because they are democratic or strive for democracy but because they are vehemently anti-Russian and are only too happy to lease their territory to the Pentagon, CIA, et al."

In each country that Pence is visiting, the perceived threat from Russia looks different. In Georgia, which fought a war with neighboring Russia in 2008 that left two Georgian breakaway regions in de facto Russian control, there are fears that the Kremlin could do what it did in Ukraine in 2014: support separatists and seize control of just enough territory to keep the country in Russia's sphere of influence and out of the West's. Moscow currently seems content to nibble around the edges of Georgian territory, in what Georgian officials have condemned as "creeping occupation."

In Montenegro, the threat is more political than military. The former Yugoslav republic joined NATO in June despite Russian vows to retaliate against its onetime ally for taking a "hostile course"—one that would cut the Russian navy off from the Adriatic Sea and reduce Russia's sway in the Balkans. And several Serbian and Russian nationals will soon go on trial in Montenegro for allegedly planning a coup last fall that would have overthrown the nation's pro-West government, brought the pro-Russia opposition to power, and thwarted Montenegro's bid to become part of NATO and eventually the European Union. Montenegrin authorities claim the Russian government was involved in the plot, which the Kremlin denies. Montenegro is a young, fragile democracy, Garcevic observed, and Russia has exploited its "democratic deficiencies" to "gain greater geopolitical influence in the region."

In Estonia, a former Soviet republic that is now a thriving democracy ensconced in NATO and the EU, the main concern is Russia manipulating Estonian politics and policy by, for instance, launching cyberattacks, tampering with energy supplies, engaging in information warfare, or carrying out

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limited military provocations. The present preoccupation involves Russia's plans to stage large-scale military drills, known as Zapad ("West"), in Belarus this fall, ahead of which NATO has rotated troops through the Baltics and Poland. Baltic leaders are now increasing their defense budgets—already among NATO's most robust—and asking the alliance to permanently deploy anti-aircraft weapons in their countries as further deterrents against Russian aggression.

The wide open question, however, is the extent to which Pence's reassurance tour can really reassure these countries.

"People here, politicians, are puzzled with the new administration's position toward Russia," said Garcevic. There are moments when that position "seems to be very friendly and forthcoming to Putin," which suggests the United States is "turning its back to the Balkans," he explained, and other moments when it appears to be a "more traditional American approach" of fully supporting NATO and America's European alliances.

"Sometimes it seems like an unguided missile," Garcevic mused. "You don't know what's going to happen next."

Since Montenegrin officials "are interested in having good relations with the U.S.," they try to "minimize and downplay, water down, what President Trump says, particularly in his tweets," Garcevic added. But when I presented him with a scenario—Pence tells the Montenegrin government everything it wants to hear, only for Trump to complain about NATO on Twitter a couple days later—Garcevic acknowledged the limits of this approach. "If Trump says this, this would be like a cold shower," he responded. "This will cast a shadow over what I'm assuming the vice president will do in the Balkans."

I found Toomas Hendrik Ilves, who left office as Estonia's president shortly before Trump was elected, similarly mystified. "There will be cyber cooperation [between the U.S. and Russia], there won't be cyber cooperation, now there is cyber cooperation," he said. You have Trump and his supporters "trying to dream up some kind of conspiracy on the part of Ukraine against Trump and then you have [Trump's Ukraine envoy] Kurt Volker saying ... there are more Russian tanks in Ukraine than there are tanks in Western Europe."

"Were I to be in office right now, the concern would be trying to [determine] what is exactly the [U.S.] policy that we're going to have to count on," Ilves told me. So, I asked, how would he describe that policy?

He laughed. "I don't know. I don't know. I don't think anyone really does."

It's wrong to picture Estonian leaders panicking, Ilves said, but they're probably confused. "How do we proceed?" he asked. "Do we spend more money on [defense]? Do we start pushing for something in the European Union? Do we want NATO to have a shift in focus?"

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It used to be that "when the [American] president says something, it becomes policy," noted Ilves, who served as Estonia's president for 10 years, spanning the administrations of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Now he's unsure, especially when it comes to Trump's tweets. "I think that they don't reflect policy," he said.

Trenin, for his part, dismissed the idea behind much of the unease in Eastern European capitals: that Russia is poised to act aggressively against another country in its neighborhood, as it did in Ukraine. The worry is based on the assumption that Russia has some inherent desire to "expand, invade, [and] subjugate others," Trenin argued, and that assumption is mistaken. "From the Kremlin's standpoint, Russia's intervention in Ukraine [after a revolution overthrew Ukraine's pro-Russia President Viktor Yanukovych] was a defensive move. The importance of Ukraine to Russia's security and the Russian psyche can hardly be overestimated."

There "is only one Ukraine," Trenin added.

Nearby countries such as the Baltic nations will remain fearful of Russia, Trenin conceded, but those fears have less to do with Russia itself than with the West, whose leaders failed to protect them during the World War II era. (The Molotov–Ribbentrop Pact, a 1939 agreement in which Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union secretly staked out spheres of influence in the Baltics and elsewhere in the region, is "the big national scar" for Estonia and the other plundered countries, Ilves told me. From the Estonian perspective, great powers made a deal "about you," he explained. This left a legacy of "paranoia" that "is always a subcurrent" of the public's thinking on Russia-related matters.)

"In 1939-40, Britain and France did not much help [these countries] against the Nazis," Trenin wrote to me. "Now they are not sure whether the United States would defend them against a nuclear superpower. During the Cold War, the unanswered question was whether Washington would REALLY risk losing Chicago for Hamburg. Would it do so now for Tallinn? Since there can be no clear answer, there will always be fears"—whether Donald Trump is in office or not.

As for the Trump administration's contradictory Russia policy, and the latest move in Congress to impose additional sanctions on Russia in legislation that also slaps sanctions on Iran and North Korea, Trenin had this to say: "I think the Kremlin views the U.S. as a dysfunctional polity, with its political class at war with itself and its society deeply divided along cultural fault lines. Under these circumstances one hardly expects a consistent policy."

"The president has to bow to the prevailing anti-Russian consensus in the policy establishment," he continued. "The new sanctions bill, which puts Russia into the same category of U.S. worst enemies as Iran and North Korea, is a very candid statement that virtually nothing positive can be achieved between the U.S. and Russia for a long time to come," despite the hopes of a U.S.-Russian rapprochement that initially followed Trump's election.

"Bad as they are now, U.S.-Russian relations continue to get worse, edging ever closer to a kinetic collision between their armed forces somewhere: in Syria, over the Baltic and Black Seas, or Ukraine," Trenin warned. Putin's decision this week to retaliate against America's retaliation for

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Russian interference in the 2016 election, which included the seizure of U.S. diplomatic properties and a demand that the United States cut its diplomatic staff in the country, "will usher in a new and harsher round of rivalry" between the two countries, he predicted. On Sunday, Mike Pence wades into the territory where that rivalry is fiercest.

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VP Pence: Attack on 1 NATO ally is attack on all
By Jari Tanner
31 July 2017
Associated Press

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence on Monday strongly pledged America's commitment to protecting NATO allies against attacks, including the Baltic states, which have anxiously watched a growing Russian military presence in the region.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States stands firmly behind our Article 5 pledge of mutual defense — an attack on one of us is an attack on us all," Pence told reporters after meeting with the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania in the Estonian capital of Tallinn.

Mutual defense is a vital issue for the three small former Soviet states that border Russia, which were all occupied for nearly five decades by Soviet troops before regaining their independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The United States never recognized the claim by Soviet leader Josef Stalin on the three countries — which have a combined population of 6 million — allowing Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to maintain independent diplomatic missions and have their national flags stored at the State Department throughout the occupation.

Saying that Trump "knows security is the foundation of our prosperity," Pence said America and the Baltic countries would seek new ways to increase prosperity by increasing two-way trade that currently amounts to $3.5 billion and by increasing their mutual investments.

Earlier, he met Estonian President Kersti Kaljulaid, Latvian President Raimonds Vejonis and Lithuanian President Dalia Grybauskaite at the baroque 18th-century Kadriorg Palace, which was built by the Russian Emperor Peter the Great.

Energy is one way that Washington is seeking to tighten its commercial ties with the Baltic countries. It closed a deal in June to sell liquefied natural gas (LNG) directly from the United States to the region.

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A Lithuanian state-owned gas trading company will receive the first delivery of U.S. imported LNG in August — something that Pence said will "benefit not only our prosperity, but regional security. And I am confident that this deal will only be the first of many."

Pence said he and Trump were pleased with the deal that will help the Baltic states to reduce their reliance on Russian gas.

Later Monday, Pence met with NATO troops from Britain, France and the United States that are stationed in Estonia. The alliance has deployed some 4,000 troops and military hardware in the three Baltic states and Poland to counter Russia's presence in the Baltic Sea region.

Before departing for Georgia, Pence took shovel and planted an English oak outside the headquarters of the Estonian defense forces together with the leaders of Latvia and Lithuania.

Russian President Vladimir Putin on Sunday ordered the U.S. to cut its embassy and consulate staff in Russia by 755 people. On Monday, Pence said America wants to improve bilateral relations with Russia "despite the recent diplomatic action by Moscow."

"We hope for better days and better relations with Russia," Pence told reporters.

Yet Russia's upcoming Zapad 2017 military exercises with 13,000 troops near the Baltic states' borders in September may further strain relations.

Grybauskaite told Lithuanian national radio on Monday that the U.S. would double the number of military jets and increase American troops on her country's soil during the Russian drills to signal that Washington is monitoring the Baltics situation closely.

Estonia — which currently holds the rotating presidency of the 28-nation European Union — is the first leg of Pence's European tour. The U.S. vice president flew later Monday to Georgia, another former Soviet republic, and will also visit new NATO member Montenegro, two countries facing strong pressure from Russia.

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Mike Pence Wants Sanctions to Change Russia's 'Behavior' as Putin Orders Expulsion of Hundreds of U.S. Diplomatic Staff
By Harriet Sinclair
31 July 2017
Newsweek

Vice President Mike Pence said he hopes the decision to place sanctions on Russia will prompt "different behavior" from Moscow, as President Vladimir Putin announced the U.S. would have to cut 755 diplomatic staff from Russia.

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After the White House on Friday confirmed the sanctions on Russia, Putin responded by announcing the cuts, but Pence appears optimistic about the future relationship between the two countries.

Speaking from his European tour on Sunday, Pence said he hoped the sanctions would prompt Moscow to reconsider its position on a number of issues, including North Korea.

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"The President and I remain very hopeful that we'll see different behavior by the Russian government, with regard to Ukraine, with regard to supporting rogue regimes in Iran and North Korea," Pence said in comments reported by Fox News.

"We continue to believe that if Russia will change its behavior, our relationship can change for the good and improve for the interests in both of our countries and the interest of peace and stability in this region and around the world," he said.

Pence also took the opportunity to stress that President Trump does accept the intelligence community's conclusion that Russia attempted to "meddle" in the U.S. election, despite the president previously making contradictory statements on the topic.

"The President has confirmed repeatedly that we believe Russia did meddle in U.S. elections," Pence told Fox News.

"I think he has also said it could have been other actors as well. But he's confirmed his belief and our intelligence that Russia was involved in meddling in US elections and it's part of what inspired the bipartisan action in the Congress to codify the sanctions that our administration has been implementing against Russia and will continue to advance that," he added.

But any U.S. hopes that sanctions would prompt any cooperation from Moscow appear to have been dashed after Putin announced the U.S. would lose diplomatic staff in Russia, and warned about further retaliation over the sanctions.

"We were waiting for quite a long time that maybe something would change for the better, were holding out hope that the situation would change somehow. But it appears that even if it changes someday it will not change soon," Putin said in comments carried by Russian state media.

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Pence pressures China on North Korea, talks Russia sanctions, election meddling
By Deena Zaru
30 July 2017
CNN (Excerpt)

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Pence's visit to Estonia is the first leg of an Eastern European trip that will also take him to Georgia and Montenegro to show US support for them and NATO in the face of what the administration has called Russia's destabilizing activities in Ukraine and elsewhere and its efforts to undermine the alliance. The trip comes amid rising tensions between the US and Russia over a new sanctions bill that easily cleared Congress last week and that the White House says Trump is expected to sign.

Passage of the bill prompted Russia to retaliate by cutting US diplomatic missions by 755 people, which Moscow announced Friday -- an in-kind response to penalties that would be codified by the legislation, including the ejection of Russian diplomatic staff and closure of two Russian compounds in the US, for its alleged meddling in last year's election and aggression in Ukraine.

"We waited a long time for things to perhaps change for the better," Russian state media quoted Russian President Vladimir Putin as saying Sunday. "We had such hope that the situation would change, but judging by the situation that will not be soon."

On taking retaliatory measures, Putin said, "I thought it was time for us to show that we will not leave this without an answer. As for other possible measures, or whether it is a lot or not, this is quite sensible from the point of view of the work of the diplomatic department. ..."

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov threatened further retaliation against the US on Sunday morning, saying that if that US goes through with the sanctions, "we will respond in kind," but he would not specify how Russia plans to respond.

Pence said Sunday that he hopes that slapping new sanctions on Russia would lead Russia to change its behavior with regard to Ukraine and end its support for Iran and North Korea.

"The President and I remain very hopeful that we'll see different behavior by the Russian government, with regard to Ukraine, with regard to supporting rogue regimes in Iran and North Korea," Pence said. "We continue to believe that if Russia will change its behavior, our relationship can change for the good and improve for the interests in both of our countries and the interest of peace and stability in this region and around the world."

Pressed on how to square the purpose of his trip with Trump's position on Russia's alleged efforts to influence last year's election, Pence defended the President. He insisted Trump is in agreement with US intelligence services on Russian meddling despite newly appointed White House communications director Anthony Scaramucci telling CNN last week that Trump is still unsure.

"The President has confirmed repeatedly that we believe Russia did meddle in US elections," Pence said. "I think he has also said it could have been other actors as well. But he's confirmed his belief and our intelligence that Russia was involved in meddling in US elections and it's part of what inspired

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the bipartisan action in the Congress to codify the sanctions that our administration has been implementing against Russia and will continue to advance that."

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Pence vows U.S. resistance to Russia during Estonia visit
By S.A. Miller
31 July 2017
Washington Times

Vice President Mike Pence on a visit to Estonia pledged Monday unwavering support of NATO allies and steadfast resistance to Russia aggression, especially in Baltic states that have been feeling intense pressure from Moscow.

Mr. Pence said he was in Eastern Europe to deliver a message from President Trump that the "the United States of America is with you."

"At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another," Mr. Pence said in a speech after meeting with the presidents of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuiana.

"Under President Donald Trump, the United States of America rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation, or malign influence in the Baltic states or against any of our treaty allies," he said.

The tough talk came amid mounting tension between Washington and Moscow. Russian President Vladimir Putin expelling 755 U.S. diplomats in retaliation for new sanctions legislation Mr. Trump is expected to sign.

"To be clear: We hope for better days, and better relations with Russia, recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, the security of our allies, and the security of freedom-loving nations around the world," Mr. Pence said.

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Pence's tricky trip has Russia hanging over it
By Andrew Hammond
30 July 2017
Gulf News (Opinion)

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US Vice-President Mike Pence started an important Eastern European tour yesterday that will last until tomorrow. The visit, whose subtext is that of the future of United States-Russia relations under US President Donald Trump, will see stops in Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro, and comes in the wake of the US Senate and House of Representatives' landmark votes to impose new sanctions on Moscow, which has already drawn Russian retaliation.

Key agenda items in Pence's tricky trip include a visit to see US and Georgian troops participating in the Noble Partner Nato-related exercise, which also features troops from the United Kingdom, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Armenia, and Slovenia. And the US vice-president will also participate, in Montenegro, with leaders across the Western Balkans in the Adriatic Charter Summit.

The immediate backdrop for Pence's visit is the continuing controversy over Russia and the Trump team. The US Senate and House voted overwhelmingly in recent days to impose sanctions on Moscow, and Trump now has to sign it into law or, in what would be a remarkable move, veto it. The legislation, whose restrictions would include on oil-and-gas projects in Russia, has been condemned by the country's Deputy Foreign Minister, Sergei Ryabkov, who asserts it would plant a "dangerous mine" under bilateral relations that could explode in coming months. Already, Moscow has retaliated to the congressional votes by ordering US diplomatic staff out of Russia and seizing two US diplomatic properties in the country.

The bill, which would also impose sanctions on North Korea and Iran, puts Trump in an awkward position, given his apparent pro-Moscow leanings. The president, who already has congressional and FBI investigations underway into his team's alleged ties with Russia, has only vowed at this stage to "study" the legislation, but is under strong pressure to sign it into law.

Trump's decision on this issue will be watched closely, not just in Moscow, but across Eastern Europe where Pence is visiting. Part of the nervousness that key US allies in Europe have about the Trump's positioning on Russia is what it potentially may mean for US commitments in the region and Nato. Trump has flip-flopped on this issue, describing the military alliance last year as "obsolete", and then this year as "not obsolete", sowing the seeds of confusion over what his true beliefs are.

Already, uncertainty over Trump's Nato policy is spurring the European Union to seek to reverse around a decade of defence spending cuts, totalling around 10 per cent in real terms. Moreover, a new European Defence Action Plan was agreed earlier this year by the EU, which will see greater continental military cooperation too.

For Trump, the key strategic question now on Russia is whether recent developments have destroyed the window of opportunity that may have existed for a warming of relations between Washington and Moscow. The US president has previously given multiple indications that he believes Russia is not a serious threat to America, hinting in January that he could even drop existing economic sanctions if the country "is helpful". Specifically, he appears to believe there were multiple common interests over issues such as preventing Iran from securing nuclear weapons, and combating terrorism.

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Trump's proposed repositioning of relations with Russia now looks, at the least, to have been put on ice. Here it is not only the fact that any new US sanctions will make relations frostier, but also that the Trump team is under significant pressure over the congressional and FBI investigations, and this issue has already claimed the scalp of national security adviser Michael Flynn.

'Complicit' or 'incompetent'

Should Trump be forced to sign the sanctions legislation, it will reassure the allies in Eastern Europe that Pence is visiting. However, it will complicate US foreign policy in other theatres, including potentially the Middle East, where Russian relations are relevant.

Already this year, there were tensions between Moscow and Washington here, which saw US missile strikes targeted at Syria, following an earlier poison gas attack on citizens in a rebel-held town allegedly by the Damascus regime, which killed at least 80 people, including around two dozen children. Russia — highly implausibly, given the nature of the chemicals involved — asserted that they were released inadvertently when Syrian planes struck a terrorist laboratory.

The ratcheting up of tensions has widened differences between Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin over the future of Syrian President Bashar Al Assad after they had seemed to be getting closer to an agreement to potentially bring an end to Syria's six-year civil war that has left half a million people dead and triggered floods of refugees, while letting Al Assad stay in power. Rhetorically, at least, Trump appeared to move away from the latter and called for the Syrian president to be ousted, and US Ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, said that the Trump administration was ready to take further military steps in the country if needed.

US Defence Secretary James Mattis and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson were also forceful in their criticism of Moscow. For instance, Tillerson said that "either Russia has been complicit or simply incompetent" in Syria, referring to Moscow's apparent inability to prevent the Al Assad regime from using chemical weapons, despite a 2013 agreement under which Russia was a guarantor, to remove these stockpiles from the country.

The spike in Washington-Moscow tensions over Syria even saw Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev saying the two countries were "one step away from war" and had "totally ruined" relations. Signs of rising tensions include Moscow's suspension of an agreement with Washington to share communications about US and Russian aircraft conducting missions over Syria. The Admiral Grigorovich, the frigate warship was dispatched from Crimea to the Syrian port of Tartus.

Taken overall, as Pence undertakes his trip to reassure Eastern European allies, Trump now finds himself in a big bind over Russia. Despite his desire for warming of relations between Washington and Moscow, the window of opportunity for that may be narrowing significantly and this could have implications across the world, including in Syria.

(Andrew Hammond is an Associate at LSE IDEAS at the London School of Economics.)

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Vice President Pence's Trip: An Opportunity to Advance U.S. Leadership in Europe
By Luke Coffey, Daniel Kochis
20 July 2017
Heritage Foundation (Opinion)

From July 30 to August 2, Vice President Mike Pence will travel to Estonia, Georgia, and Montenegro. This trip is the perfect follow-up to President Donald Trump's visit to Poland for the "Three Seas" conference—a meeting focused on the Baltic, Black, and Adriatic Seas—in early July. Vice President Pence should use his trip to affirm U.S. commitment to these three important countries, and to strengthen U.S. focus on the key regions in which they reside. While in Europe, it is important for the Vice President to underscore U.S. commitment to NATO, Baltic security, and U.S. engagement in the Balkans and the Black Sea region, while taking a hard line on Russian aggression.

The Baltic Sea

In Estonia, Vice President Pence will meet with Estonian Prime Minister Jüri Ratas as well as the three Baltic leaders, President Kersti Kaljulaid of Estonia, President Raimonds Vējonis of Latvia, and President Dalia Grybauskaitė of Lithuania.

The U.S. has a long history of championing the sovereignty and territorial integrity of the Baltic states dating back to the interwar period of the 1920s. After regaining their independence from Russia in the early 1990s, the Baltic states have been staunch supporters of the transatlantic relationship.

Estonia is the regional leader in defense matters and is currently one of only five NATO countries that spend the required 2 percent of gross domestic product on defense. In terms of economic freedom, the Baltic region is a beacon of hope for Europe and the rest of the world. The region is proof that pursuing policies of economic liberalization and growth works. Estonia ranks first in the eurozone, and sixth in the world, in the 2017 Index of Economic Freedom, published by The Heritage Foundation.

The Baltic states face an existential threat from Russia, and are concerned about the upcoming Russian Zapad 17 exercises. In addition to Zapad, the Vice President's arrival will come just as Russia and China will have wrapped up joint exercises in the Baltic Sea.

The keystone of NATO's new deterrence measures are multinational battalions stationed in each of the Baltic countries and Poland to deter Russian aggression. The Alliance has also increased the number of aircraft taking part in Baltic Air Policing. While in Estonia, Vice President Pence should reiterate U.S. commitment to the transatlantic alliance, NATO, and the Article V security guarantee.

The Black Sea

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In Georgia, the Vice President will meet with President Giorgi Margvelashvili and Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili. In addition, he will visit U.S. and Georgian troops participating in the Noble Partner exercise. Vice President Pence's visit provides a perfect opportunity to strengthen the bilateral relationship with Tbilisi.

Georgia is a staunch ally of the United States. Since regaining its independence in 1991, successive Georgian governments have pursued an agenda of liberalizing the economy, cutting bureaucracy, fighting corruption, and embracing democracy—and in doing so, Georgia and its people have shown a firm and unwavering commitment to the transatlantic community.

Georgia is located in a dangerous and important geopolitical neighborhood for NATO. After the Russian invasion in 2008 and the subsequent Russian occupation of 20 percent of Georgia's territory, Georgia has transformed its military and has been steadfast in its support of overseas security operations. Georgia has contributed thousands of troops to Afghanistan (with 870 currently serving there) and Iraq, and hundreds of peacekeepers to the Balkans and in the Central African Republic.

The Adriatic Sea

In Podgorica, Montenegro, the Vice President will meet with Montenegrin President Filip Vujanović and Prime Minister Duško Marković. Vice President Pence will also participate with leaders from across the western Balkans in an Adriatic Charter Summit. Montenegro is the newest member of NATO, and an important U.S. ally in a region that is becoming increasingly unstable due to malign Russian influence, poor economic opportunities, and the rise of Islamist extremism.

The Balkans is home to unfinished business in Europe. In addition to historic, ethnic, religious, and cultural tensions, the Balkans are caught between Russia's destabilizing influence and pockets of Islamist extremism in the region. Montenegro is a poignant example.

Over the past seven years, Montenegro—a U.S. ally—has reformed itself in preparation for NATO membership. Last year, Russia, not happy with Montenegro's decision to join NATO, was suspected of having been behind a failed plot to break into parliament on election day, assassinate the former prime minister, and install a pro-Russian government in Podgorica, the nation's capital.

The U.S. has invested heavily in the Balkans since the end of the Cold War. Tens of thousands of U.S. service members have served in the Balkans, and billions of dollars in aid has been spent there, all in the hope of creating a secure and prosperous region that will someday be part of the transatlantic community. The Administration should articulate why the Balkan region remains important to the United States, and set out a clear policy to counter threats to the region.

The Way Forward

This trip offers a great opportunity to deepen three very important bilateral relations. To make this visit a success, Vice President Pence should:

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Reiterate America's commitment to NATO's Article V. The Vice President should echo President Trump's commitment made in Warsaw to NATO's Article V. The ultimate guarantor of security and stability in the Baltic region is the knowledge that the U.S. stands firmly by its mutual defense commitments as a member of NATO.

Make the case for a permanent military presence in the Baltic region. The U.S. and NATO need to show an enduring commitment to the region by permanently stationing armed forces in the Baltics and maintaining a robust maritime presence in the region.

Forcefully condemn Russian disinformation. Russia's disinformation measures are especially active in the region. In part, Russia has sought to undermine support for NATO's enhanced forward deployments by propagating false stories of abuse by troops serving in the multinational battalions, such as Canadian, British, or German soldiers. U.S. troops stationed in Poland for NATO's enhanced forward presence there have been targeted by similar Russian disinformation. Russia has also sought to delegitimize the Baltic nations as independent countries. The U.S. should forcefully condemn Russian disinformation and consider becoming a sponsoring nation at the NATO Strategic Communications Center of Excellence in Riga, the Latvian capital.

Empower global free-market energy policy. The U.S. should work immediately and comprehensively to eliminate remaining barriers to U.S. energy exports.

Push back against Nord Stream II. The Nord Stream II pipeline project that would connect Germany with Russia is neither economically necessary, nor is it geopolitically prudent. Vice President Pence should declare U.S. opposition to the pipeline, which in particular threatens allies in Eastern and Central Europe.

Ensure that the U.S. is clear on Georgia's future NATO membership. Vice President Pence should make it clear that Georgia's successful completion of subsequent Annual National Programs, the close relationship through the NATO–Georgia Commission, and the Substantial NATO–Georgia Package are the true markers of progress that will bring Georgia closer to ultimate membership.

Help the Georgians defend themselves. Georgia has the inherent right to self-defense. The U.S. should sell defensive anti-tank and anti-aircraft weaponry to Georgia.

Refer to the Russian military presence in Georgia as an occupation. During his visit, the Vice President should call the presence of several thousand Russian troops in South Ossetia and Abkhazia what it is: an illegal occupation.

Keep a focus on the Balkans. The Balkan nations are facing increased Russian interference and pressure with the aim of regional destabilization. In addition, the threat from Islamist ideology has not abated. The U.S. should look to take on a larger role within the region, and should seek to collaborate with NATO allies in the region to address growing instability.

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Offer political support for the Southern Gas Corridor project. As Europe seeks alternatives to Russian gas, the Southern Gas Corridor, which in part will run through Georgia and the Balkans, will play an important role.

Keep the door open to further NATO enlargement in the Balkans. NATO has helped promote democracy, stability, and security in the Balkans. It has also been a catalyst for reforms within candidate countries. Montenegro is just the latest example of this. The U.S. should ensure the door remains open to deserving Balkan nations, including Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina.
Conclusion

Vice President Pence's trip, during which he will visit allies in the Adriatic, Baltic, and Black Sea regions, dovetails with President Trump's recent trip to Warsaw where he took part in the Three Seas conference. While each region faces threats from Russia, each also presents unique challenges, which demand robust attention. Estonia, Georgia, and Montenegro are important U.S. allies with basic common values. The success of the Trump Administration's policy in Europe will rest in large part on its ability to secure these important regions.

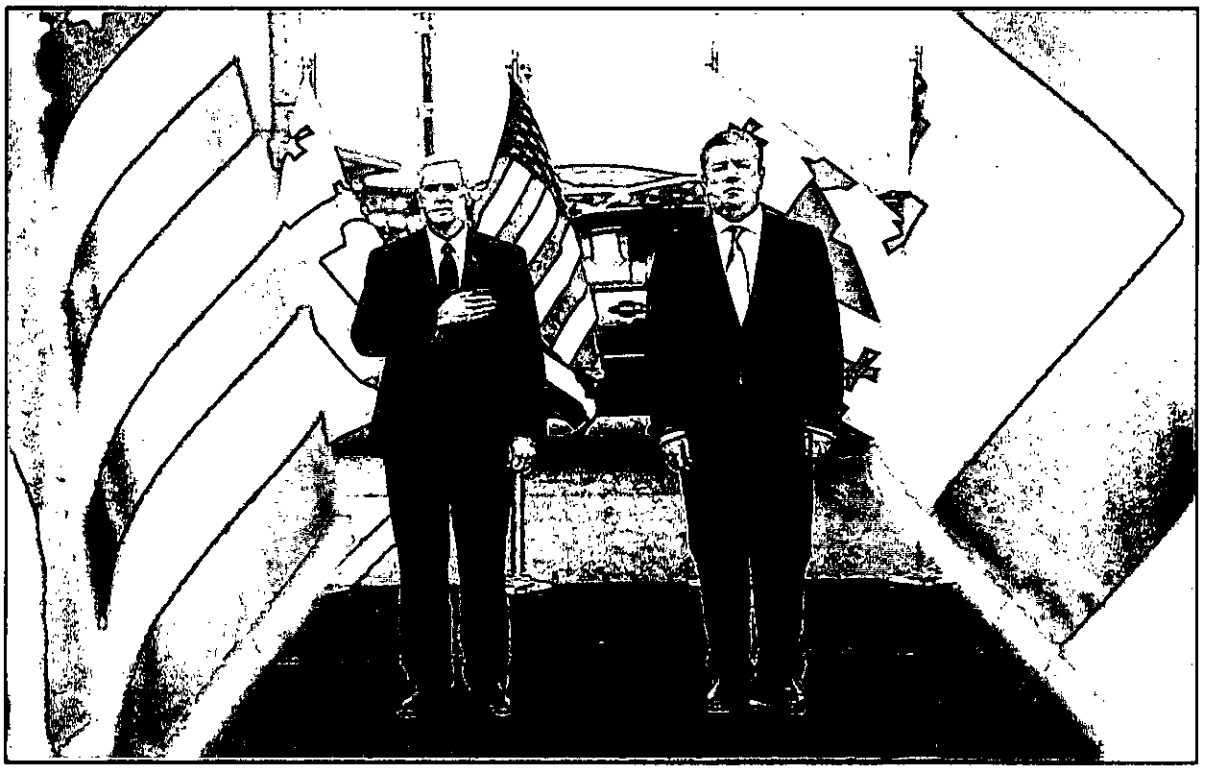
(Luke Coffey is Director of the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy, of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for National Security and Foreign Policy, at The Heritage Foundation. Daniel Kochis is a Policy Analyst in European Affairs in the Margaret Thatcher Center for Freedom, of the Davis Institute)

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Vice President Pence Trip to Georgia Coverage Report for August 1, 2017



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Pence Reaffirms U.S. Solidarity With Georgia, Denounces Russian 'Aggression'
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Mike Pence promises US and NATO support for Georgia in Tbilisi
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Embassy Reductions Won't Deter U.S., Pence Says
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Vice President Pence in Europe: Georgia
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Pence Says U.S. Backs Georgia in NATO Over Russian Objection
By Helena Bedwell
1 August 2017
Bloomberg

Vice President Mike Pence said the U.S. "strongly" supports Georgia's ambition of joining NATO, even as Russia remains hostile to the military alliance expanding its influence in Moscow's former Soviet backyard.

"We see Georgia as a key strategic partner and stand by your territorial integrity and your aspirations to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," Pence said at talks with Prime

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Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi, on Tuesday. U.S. President Donald Trump "asked me to extend greetings to you this morning and to say we are with you," Pence said.

The vice president is also attending joint military exercises involving as many as 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops during his visit. The Noble Partner 2017 drills, which also include German, U.K., Turkish, Slovenian, Ukrainian and Armenian forces, are the largest in the Caucasus republic since Georgia fought a brief war with Russia in 2008 over the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

Pence arrived in Georgia Monday after delivering a similar message in Estonia to leaders of Baltic nations facing the "specter of aggression" from Russia, which he called the greatest threat to their security as NATO members. Georgia wants to join NATO against opposition from Russia, whose annexation of Crimea and involvement in the conflict in eastern Ukraine has strained ties with the U.S. and Europe the most since the Cold War. Russia accuses NATO of seeking to undermine its security by expanding the alliance's presence near its borders.

Spiraling Tensions

The U.S. is monitoring preparations for major Russian exercises planned on NATO's eastern border amid concerns about the scale of the military buildup, the New York Times reported on Tuesday. Some 13,000 troops are to take part in joint military drills from Sept. 14-20 in Russia and neighboring Belarus, according to the Belarusian Defense Ministry, which said Russia will also send about 280 military vehicles to the Zapad 2017 exercises.

Pence's visits to Estonia, Georgia and Montenegro are taking place amid spiraling tensions with Russia after President Vladimir Putin said the U.S. must slash staff at its diplomatic mission by 755, or nearly two-thirds, in retaliation for new sanctions approved by Congress.

Trump "will sign the Russian sanctions bill soon," Pence said at a news conference later with Kvirikashvili. While the U.S. wants better relations, "Russia has to change its behavior" before this can be achieved, he said.

Kvirikashvili said Georgia's facing "daily provocations" from Russia, which has encroached deeper into its territory in recent weeks by shifting the dividing lines with the breakaway regions established after the war. Russia has stationed thousands of troops in Abkhazia and South Ossetia after recognizing them as independent republics. The international community considers the regions as part of Georgia.

'Important Milestone'

NATO declared at a summit shortly before the 2008 war that Georgia will become a member at some point. While it hasn't agreed to accept Georgia since then, partly out of concern about antagonizing Russia, Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg said in Tbilisi in September that the alliance is committed to the goal and that "the bonds between NATO and Georgia are stronger than ever."

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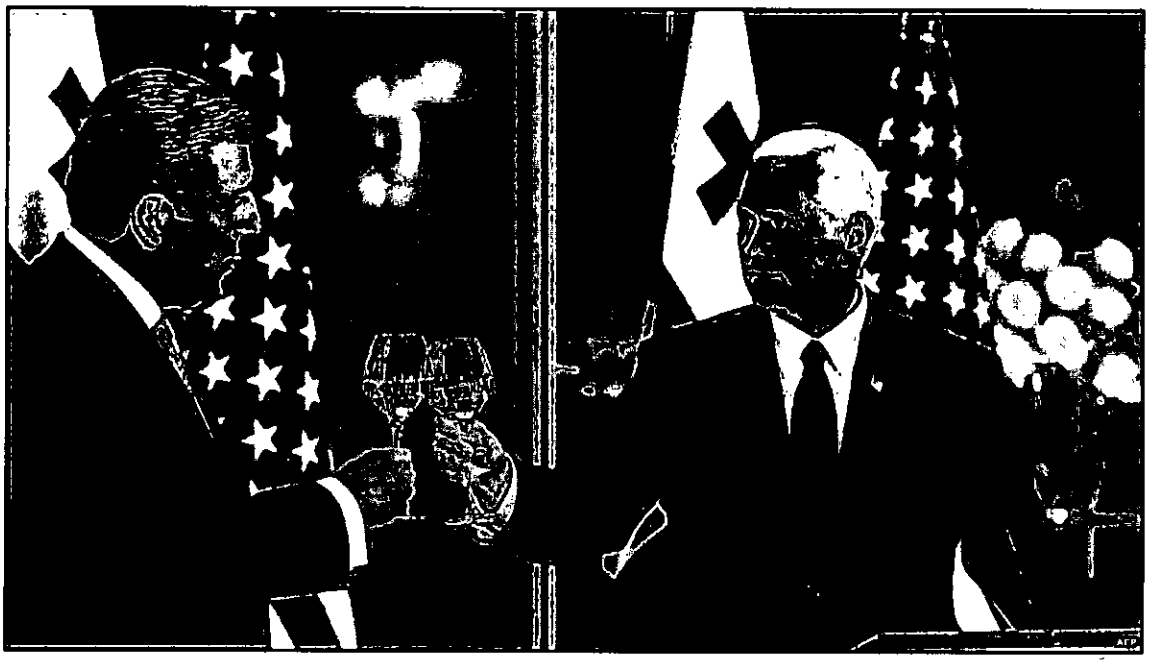
Pence's visit "is an important milestone in the bilateral relationship as we work to further strengthen security, economic, and trade cooperation," Kvirikashvili said Monday after the vice president's arrival.

Two-thirds of Georgians support joining NATO while 23 percent are opposed, according to a survey conducted by the Caucasus Resource Research Centers for the National Democratic Institute. The poll of 2,261 respondents was conducted between June 18 and July 9 with a margin of error of no more than 2.2 percentage points.

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Pence Conveys U.S. Support For Georgia In Visit To Tbilisi

1 August 2017
Radio Free Europe



U.S. Vice President Mike Pence conveyed a message of support from U.S. President Donald Trump to Georgian leaders at an official dinner in Tbilisi late on July 31.

The United States stands with Georgia, Pence said, as he toasted the Caucasus nation for fighting for freedom over the centuries, just as America has.

Pence said America hopes that Georgia prospers and becomes a strong country.

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Pence was greeted by thousands of people when he arrived in Tbilisi, where he will meet on August 1 with Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili, President Giorgi Margvelashvili, Patriarch Ilia II, and representatives of the Georgian opposition.

Pence is also planning to attend joint NATO military exercises being conducted in Georgia. About 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the Noble Partner 2017 drills there.

Pence was greeted at the Tbilisi airport by Kvirikashvili, who said that the visit is "an important milestone in the bilateral relationship as we work to further strengthen security, economic, and trade cooperation between our two countries."

"Vice President Pence's visit sends a strong message about the enduring strength of the relationship between Georgia and the United States," Kvirikashvili said in comments released by the Georgian government.

Pence arrived in the Georgian capital from Estonia, where earlier in the day he reaffirmed Washington's solidarity with the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders" and "undermine democracies."

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions, as have Georgia and the third ally on Pence's itinerary: new NATO member Montenegro.

"No threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said. "At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another."

Article 5 Support

Pence said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty -- the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

In Georgia, officials said Pence will highlight U.S. support for the Caucasus nation's sovereignty and territorial integrity before continuing on to Montenegro.

Georgia has seen Russian encroachment on its territory and has expressed hopes of joining the Western military alliance.

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The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

Margvelashvili said on July 27 that Pence's visit will demonstrate that the United States continues to support Georgia in building a stronger military force.

He highlighted the joint military exercises that will include troops from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, and Armenia.

"The vice president's presence here is definitely showing that this is not only about military exercises, but it is also showing unification with our values, with our foreign policy targets, and showing a clear message that we are together," Margvelashvili said.

On the last stop, Pence will welcome NATO's newest member with his stop in Montenegro, whose accession to the alliance in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica, U.S. officials said.

Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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Pence pledges support for Georgia, condemns Russian moves
By Nataliya Vasilyeva
1 August 2017
Associated Press

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence pledged support Tuesday for the former Soviet republic of Georgia, his second stop on a European trip backing nations that feel threatened by Russian aggression.

Russia and Georgia fought a brief war in 2008, which lead to two breakaway Georgian regions, South Ossetia and Abkhazia, declaring independence. Russia has since been supporting the regions both financially and militarily.

The U.S. "strongly condemns Russia's occupation on Georgian soil," Pence said Tuesday at a joint news conference with the Georgian prime minister in Tbilisi, the Georgian capital. "We will reject any claim at any time by any nation that undermines this enduring principle."

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The visit comes a day after Pence met with the presidents of three NATO countries — Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania — in the Estonian capital of Tallinn and pledged that "an attack on one of us is an attack on us all."

Georgia and the three Baltic nations were all occupied for nearly five decades by Soviet troops before regaining their independence in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Later on Tuesday Pence will inspect troops taking part in joint U.S.-Georgian military exercises.

Pence's European trip comes several days after the U.S. Senate voted last week to approve the new financial sanctions against Moscow. The legislation bars U.S. President Donald Trump from easing or waiving the penalties on Russia unless Congress agrees.

Pence told reporters on Tuesday that Trump would sign a bill on a new package of U.S. sanctions against Russia, adding the package was "improved significantly."

The bill underwent revisions to address concerns voiced by American oil and natural gas companies that sanctions specific to Russia's energy sector could backfire on them to Moscow's benefit. U.S. lawmakers said they also made adjustments so the sanctions on Russia's energy sector didn't undercut the ability of U.S. allies in Europe to get access to oil and gas resources outside of Russia.

Russia on Friday ordered the U.S. Embassy and three U.S. consulates in Russia to drastically cut its personnel there. President Vladimir Putin said on Sunday that means 755 staffers have to go. Russia also ordered to shut down the U.S. Embassy's recreational compound on the outskirts of Moscow. The Russian leader warned that he has more tricks up his sleeve to hurt the U.S., but he voiced hope that he wouldn't need to use them.

Pence indicated the U.S. was willing to improve ties with Russia but for that to happen "Russia has to change its behavior," he said, referring to Russia's support for separatists in eastern Ukraine and for Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Russia is planning Zapad 2017 military exercises with 13,000 troops near the Baltic states' borders in September, a move that may further strain relations.

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During Whirlwind Week in Washington, VP Pence Comforts East European Allies

By Emily Tamkin
1 August 2017
Foreign Policy

Amid chaos in Washington, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence is in Eastern Europe assuring American allies that the United States is committed to protecting them.

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"We are with you. We stand with the people and nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania — and we always will," Pence said at a joint press availability with the Baltic leaders in Tallinn, even as, back home, President Donald Trump has yet to comment on Russian expulsion of U.S. diplomatic staff.

The vice president participated in a listening session on cyber and innovation with the president of Estonia in Tallinn, and travelled on Tuesday to Tbilisi, where he met with the Georgian prime minister for their third substantive meeting since Pence took office.

"We see Georgia as a key strategic partner and stand by your territorial integrity and your aspirations to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," Pence said at a dinner with Prime Minister Kvirikashvili in Tbilisi. At a joint press conference with Georgia's prime minister, Pence noted that Russia occupies one-fifth of Georgian Territory.

Back in Washington, in the meantime, President Trump has yet to comment personally on a bill that Congress passed imposing tougher sanctions on Russia. The White House press secretary said Friday in a statement that Trump would sign the bill.

Speaking in Tbilisi, Pence said the bill would be signed soon.

From Tbilisi, Pence traveled to the newest NATO member, Montenegro. In May at a NATO summit, President Trump appeared to push Montenegro's prime minister aside during a photo session.

Pence's staid tour abroad is in stark contrast to the roller coaster in Washington this week. On Monday, U.S. President Donald Trump lost a communications director who was brought on roughly a week prior; Jared Kushner, his son in law and advisor, told White House interns the Trump team was too disorganized to have colluded with Russia; and the Washington Post reported the president had dictated a misleading message to his son about a meeting with a Russian lawyer.

Trump's is not the first administration to send a vice president abroad in the president's stead, or to develop relations with diplomats and dignitaries from particular countries — former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden was known as Ukraine's man in Washington.

"Vice President Pence's visit sent a clear message about the enduring strength of the relationship between Georgia and the United States," Georgian Ambassador to the United States David Bakradze told Foreign Policy by email. "This is an important milestone in the bilateral relationship."

The embassies of Estonia and Montenegro did not immediately respond to request for comment.

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VP Pence says Russia's stance must change before ties improve
By Margarita Antidze
1 August 2017
Reuters

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence said on Tuesday that relations with Russia would not improve until Moscow changed its stance on Ukraine and withdrew support for "regimes like Iran and Syria and North Korea".

The U.S. Congress voted last week for new sanctions on Russia and, at a news conference in Georgia's capital Tbilisi, Pence said the "lifting of sanctions will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place".

"Russia's destabilizing activities in Ukraine, their support for rogue regimes like Iran and Syria and North Korea ... their posture has to change," he said at a joint news conference with Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili.

Pence said U.S. President Donald Trump would sign the new sanctions on Russia into law this week and said that Trump and Congress were "speaking with a unified voice".

Keeping to previous U.S. administrations' line, Pence also condemned Russia's presence in Georgia.

Moscow, whose annexation of Crimea in 2014 prompted U.S. and EU sanctions, still has troops stationed in Georgia after a 2008 war over the breakaway region of South Ossetia, backing Georgia's Abkhazia, a region also controlled by pro-Russian separatists.

Pence also said the U.S. was still behind Georgia's application to become a member of NATO.

"We'll continue to work closely with this prime minister and the government of Georgia broadly to advance the policies that will facilitate becoming a NATO member," he said.

NATO promised Georgia membership in 2008, and three ex-Soviet Baltic nations - Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania - are already members. Pence has reassured them during this tour that Washington firmly backs NATO's doctrine of collective defense.

In the Estonian capital of Tallinn on Monday, he assured them of U.S. support if they faced aggression from Russia.

Asked about Pence's visit, Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov said nations had the right to choose their partners.

"The only problem for us, is when this involves the expanding of various alliances and their infrastructure toward our borders. This is a cause of concern for us," Peskov told reporters on a conference call.

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During his visit, Pence attended Georgian-American military exercises, which began in Georgia on Sunday. About 2,800 soldiers from the United States, Britain, Germany, Turkey, Ukraine, Slovenia, Armenia and Georgia are taking part in the maneuvers, which will last for two weeks.

On Wednesday, Pence visits Montenegro, which joined NATO in June. The tiny Balkan nation won praise from Washington for joining despite pressure against the move from Russia.

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In Georgia, Pence says Trump will back toughened sanctions on Russia
By Allen Cone
1 August 2017
UPI

Vice President Mike Pence on Tuesday pledged U.S. support for Georgia, a former Soviet republic, and said President Donald Trump "very soon" will approve stronger sanctions against Russia.

Georgia, which fought a brief war with Russia in 2008, is among Eastern European nations that feel threatened by the Russian regime, which annexed Crimea from Ukraine in 2014. That aggression led to existing U.S. sanctions against the Kremlin, which Congress moved to strengthen last week.

"At this very moment, just 40 miles from where we stand, Russian tanks stand on occupied territory in South Ossetia," Pence said at a joint news conference in Tbilisi Tuesday, the Georgian capital, with Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili. "Today, Russia continues to occupy one-fifth of Georgian territory.

"So to be clear: The United States of America strongly condemns Russia's occupation on Georgia's soil."

On Monday, Pence met with the presidents of three NATO countries -- Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania -- and said "an attack on one of us is an attack on us all."

The three Baltic nations, along with Georgia, were all occupied for nearly five decades by Soviet troops before regaining independence after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

Pence also met U.S. and Georgian troops taking part in a joint military exercise called "Noble Partner".

"America first does not mean America only," Pence said. "We are here to tell our friends in Georgia, we are with you. We stand with you and will stand with you as you pursue membership in NATO."

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Pence said Trump will sign legislation to "strengthen and codify" U.S. sanctions against Russia. The proposal, overwhelmingly approved by the House and Senate, bars Trump from easing or waiving penalties on Russia unless Congress agrees.

Pence said that legislation "improved significantly" when it moved through Congress, and added the sanctions are stronger but are "giving the president of the United States and our State Department the ability and the flexibility to be able to administer American foreign policy as appropriate."

On Sunday, Russian President Vladimir Putin told the United States it must reduce its diplomatic staff by 755 to match the reduction of Russians in the United States.

"As always, our country prefers a constructive relationship with Russia based on cooperation and common interests," Pence said Tuesday. "But the president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia: A better relationship, the lifting of sanctions will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place.

"We hope for better days, and we hope for better relations with Russia, but the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow I can assure will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, to that of our allies, and to freedom-loving nations around the world like Georgia."

Besides working with Georgia "to reduce your vulnerabilities and counter Russian aggression," the vice president said the United States wants to work with the nation "to deepen our ties of commerce."

Pence next visits Montenegro, also a NATO member.

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Trump Will Sign Russia Sanctions Law 'Very Soon,' Pence Says
By Sewell Chan
1 August 2017
New York Times

President Trump will "very soon" sign a law limiting his ability to lift sanctions against Russia, even though he has "concerns" about the measure, Vice President Mike Pence said on Tuesday.

The announcement during a visit to Tbilisi, Georgia, comes as no surprise, because the Trump administration had signaled it would not stand in the law's way. But it nonetheless carries significance: It is the first time that Congress, with both houses controlled by Mr. Trump's fellow Republicans, has imposed its will on the administration on a major policy matter, and the legislation has helped bring relations between Russia and the United States to one of its lowest points since the Cold War.

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At least in terms of diplomatic policy, the bet Russia might have made when, according to American intelligence agencies, it interfered in last year's presidential election in the United States has backfired in spectacular fashion. The legislation was revised, however, to address concerns by American oil and natural gas companies that do business with Russia's energy sector.

Though he was asked by a reporter about the election interference, Mr. Pence did not explicitly address it, reiterating instead the administration's concerns about Russia's "destabilizing activities," including "efforts to support rogue regimes."

In a brief visit to the Georgian capital, Mr. Pence delivered a message of reassurance to Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili. Russia and Georgia, both former republics of the Soviet Union, fought a brief war in August 2008; since then, Russia has continued to occupy the breakaway regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia in violation of international law.

"In a sign of our commitment, very soon, President Trump will sign legislation to strengthen and codify the United States' sanctions against Russia," Mr. Pence said. "As always, our country prefers a constructive relationship with Russia based on cooperation and common interests."

But, Mr. Pence said, the current state of the relationship between the United States and Russia demanded a different approach. "The president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia," he said. "A better relationship, the lifting of sanctions will require Russia to reverse the actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place."

On Sunday, in retaliation for the sanctions legislation, President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia ordered the dismissal of 755 employees from the United States diplomatic missions in the country. Most of the employees will be local Russians working in the embassy in Moscow and consulates in three other cities, but diplomats are bracing for what a former ambassador has called "a shock to the system."

Mr. Pence said on Tuesday that Mr. Putin's actions would not sway the United States, echoing a message he delivered on Monday in Estonia, where he reassured leaders of the three Baltic nations — the others are Lithuania and Latvia — of the American commitment to NATO's collective defense clause, known as Article 5.

"We hope for better days, and we hope for better relations with Russia, but the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow, I can assure, will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, to that of our allies and to freedom-loving nations around the world like Georgia," Mr. Pence said.

While in Georgia, Mr. Pence inspected troops taking part in a joint United States-Georgian military exercise, which Mr. Pence called "a visible sign of our commitment to Georgia's sovereignty and to her internationally recognized borders."

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Mr. Pence also responded to reports that the Russian military was preparing to send as many as 100,000 troops to neighboring Belarus, on the eastern edge of NATO territory, at the end of the summer, as part of a show of force.

"The current Russian exercises, which news reports today suggest will move up to 100,000 Russian troops into Belarus, is simply a confirmation of the importance of clarity within the NATO partnership," Mr. Pence said.

He portrayed the legislation on sanctions as "a very clear message that we mean what we say and say what we mean: that Russia's destabilizing activities in Ukraine, their support for rogue regimes like Iran and Syria and North Korea, that their posture has to change."

Mr. Pence also reiterated criticisms that Mr. Trump had frequently made of his predecessor, President Barack Obama. "It's been a lack of clarity and commitment by the United States that's created much of the instability in the world today," he said.

He then referred to the "red line" warning that Mr. Obama made to Syria's president, Bashar al-Assad, in 2012 over the use of chemical weapons. Mr. Assad's forces carried out such an attack the next year in a Damascus suburb, largely without repercussions.

"When in the past America had spoken of red lines and not followed through on red lines, many argue that that emboldened others to act in ways that they would not have," Mr. Pence said.

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Pence Reaffirms U.S. Solidarity With Georgia, Denounces Russian 'Aggression'
1 August 2017
Radio Free Europe

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence has reaffirmed Washington's support for Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity during a visit to Tbilisi and denounced Russia's "aggression" and "occupation" of Georgian territory.

"America stands with Georgia," Pence said on August 1 at a joint press conference with Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili.

"Today, Russia continues to occupy one-fifth of Georgian territory," Pence said. "So, to be clear -- the United States of America strongly condemns Russia's occupation on Georgia's soil."

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

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"The United States supports Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders," Pence added. "And under President Donald Trump, the United States of America will object to any claim at any time by any nation that undermines this enduring principle."

Pence said Trump will "very soon" sign legislation that would impose additional economic sanctions on Russia.

The sanctions bill was overwhelmingly passed by Congress last week, and in response Moscow demanded that Washington drastically reduce its diplomatic staff in Russia.

"We hope for better relations with Russia," Pence said. "But the recent diplomatic action taken by Moscow, I can assure you, will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, that of our allies, and the freedom-loving nations around the world, like Georgia."

The relationship between Washington and Moscow has been badly damaged by Russia's aggression in Ukraine, its role in the war in Syria, and its alleged interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Pence also reiterated that the United States "strongly" supports the Caucasus country's aspirations to become a NATO member.

"I commended the prime minister for Georgia's democratic development, which has brought Georgia closer to unity with Europe and membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," he said. "Further progress on the goals that the prime minister has set will bring Georgia even closer and NATO even closer to your grasp and it will strengthen the bond between our nations."

Pence also met on August 1 with the leaders of the Georgian opposition and addressed troops participating in NATO joint military exercises being conducted in Georgia, saying, "We stand here today in the gap -- on a front line of freedom, a front line compromised by Russian aggression nearly a decade ago."

Pence met earlier on August 1 with the leaders of the Georgian opposition and was also planning to attend NATO joint military exercises being conducted in Georgia. About 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the Noble Partner 2017 drills there.

At an official dinner in the Georgian capital late on July 31, Pence said, "We stand with you, for your freedom and for our shared values."

Kvirikashvili said the United States "has a dedicated friend in Georgia, a stable geopolitical ally, and a strategic partner."

In comments released earlier by the Georgian government, Kvirikashvili described Pence's visit as "an important milestone in the bilateral relationship as we work to further strengthen security, economic, and trade cooperation between our two countries."

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Pence arrived in Tbilisi from Estonia, where he reaffirmed Washington's solidarity with the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders" and "undermine democracies."

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions, as have Georgia and the third ally on Pence's itinerary: new NATO member Montenegro.

"No threat looms larger in the Baltic states than the specter of aggression from your unpredictable neighbor to the east," Pence said. "At this very moment, Russia continues to seek to redraw international borders by force, undermine the democracies of sovereign nations, and divide the free nations of Europe against one another."

Pence also said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty -- the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica, U.S. officials said.

Montenegro accession to NATO in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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In Georgia, Pence Assures Eastern Europe of US Backing
By Nana Sajaia
1 August 2017
Voice of America

On the latest leg of his first official tour of Eastern Europe, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence assured regional allies the United States will stand by their side.

Facing a crowd of Georgian and international journalists at government offices in Tbilisi, Pence, standing alongside his host, Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili, said America first does not mean America alone.

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"President Trump has sent me with the simple message to you and to the people of Georgia, we are with you, we stand with you ... America stands with Georgia," said Pence.

The vice president came to Georgia, the only non-NATO member country on his itinerary, from Estonia, a model of a successful EU-leaning transformation, before heading to Montenegro, NATO's newest member.

Pence is the highest-ranking American official of the current administration to visit Georgia and the larger Caucasus region.

"Thanks to your help, Georgia is no longer a Soviet or a post-Soviet country," said Kvirikashvili at Tuesday's joint press conference. "Today we are a democracy closely associated with the European Union."

Kvirikashvili's comments, in which he touted Georgia's role as "a key strategic partner of America," come amid an ongoing partial Russian occupation.

About 60 kilometers from the news conference, Russian tank units maintain control over 20 percent of Georgian terrain, a holdover from the August 2008 five-day war.

Pence reiterated the U.S. non-recognition policy regarding the Russian-occupied zone, condemning Moscow's presence on Georgian soil, what many observers describe as an evolving, "creeping" occupation.

"President Trump has called on Russia to cease its destabilizing activities," Pence said, adding that President Donald Trump will soon sign sanctions against Russia.

"Our country prefers a constructive relations with Russia, based on cooperation and common interest. But the president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia: a better relationship, lifting of sanctions, will require Russia to reverse actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place."

'Reset' jitters

Former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden visited Georgia about a year after the 2008 war. Biden's visit came shortly after the Obama administration's "reset" policy with Russia, which caused concern among many Europeans that the United States would give Moscow a pass for its invasion of Georgia.

Years later, Russia annexed Crimea and destabilized Eastern Ukraine, which led the West to unilaterally impose sanctions on Russia.

Both Georgia and Ukraine are aspiring NATO members. Some observers argue Georgia's 2008 war and Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea could have been avoided if those countries hadn't been denied Membership Action Plan status at NATO's Bucharest summit in April, 2008.

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"President Trump and I stand by the 2008 NATO Bucharest statement, which made it clear that Georgia, one day, will become a member of NATO," said Pence.

According to recent nationwide polls carried by National Democratic Institute, 66 percent of Georgia's population approves of the government's stated goal to join NATO. Sixty-two percent of Georgians say the country should join the European Union. Both organizations are largely seen as security instruments that would protect Georgia independence and development.

2017 represents the 25th anniversary of U.S.-Georgian diplomatic relations.

George W. Bush is the only U.S. president who has visited Georgia, which he called "a beacon of democracy."

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Mike Pence promises US and NATO support for Georgia in Tbilisi
By Dan Alexe
1 August 2017
New Europe

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence pledged Washington's support to Georgian leaders as he met with Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili in Tbilisi.

"We see Georgia as a key strategic partner and stand by your territorial integrity and your aspirations to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," Pence said.

Georgia has been going through Russian occupation of parts of its territory and has expressed hopes of joining NATO.

The Kremlin recognized Georgia's breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as independent countries after fighting a five-day war against Tbilisi in 2008. Russia maintains thousands of troops in the two regions.

Kvirikashvili said the United States "has a dedicated friend in Georgia, a stable geopolitical ally, and a strategic partner."

Vice president Pence is also planning to attend the NATO joint military exercises being conducted in Georgia. About 800 Georgian and 1,600 U.S. troops are taking part in the Noble Partner 2017 drills there.

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Pence arrived in Tbilisi from Estonia, where he reaffirmed Washington's solidarity with the Baltic nations and accused neighboring Russia of seeking to "redraw international borders" and "undermine democracies."

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are members of NATO and were under Moscow's rule during the Soviet era.

The three countries have expressed concerns about Russia's intentions, as have Georgia and the third ally on Pence's itinerary: new NATO member Montenegro.

Pence said the U.S. administration "stands firmly" behind Article 5 of the NATO treaty — the provision stating that an attack on one NATO country is an attack on all members of the alliance.

On the last stop, Pence will visit Montenegro, whose accession to NATO in June was adamantly opposed by Russia.

On August 2, he will attend the Adriatic Charter Summit in Montenegro's capital, Podgorica.

Pence was expected to highlight the U.S. commitment to the Western Balkans and stress the need for good governance, political reforms, and rule of law in the region.

The leaders of Albania, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Kosovo, Macedonia, Serbia, and Slovenia are also scheduled to attend the summit.

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Pence: Reversing Sanctions Requires Russia to Change
1 August 2017
Voice of America

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence says diplomatic actions taken by Russian in response to fresh sanctions will not deter U.S. commitment to its security and that of its allies.

Speaking Tuesday during a visit to Georgia, Pence said the sanctions bill President Donald Trump will soon sign sends a "very clear message" that with Russia's activities in Ukraine and its support for Iran and Syria, its "posture has to change."

Congress overwhelmingly passed the sanctions bill punishing Russia for interference in the 2016 U.S. election, while also imposing new measures on Iran and North Korea. Russia responded by ordering the U.S. to cut its overall staff of more than 1,200 in Russia by 755 people.

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"The president and our Congress are unified in our message to Russia: a better relationship, the lifting of sanctions, will require Russia to reverse the actions that required sanctions to be imposed in the first place," Pence said.

Pence is on a multi-nation tour meant to show U.S. support for its allies in the region.

He said after a meeting with Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili in Tbilisi that the United States will work with Georgia to counter Russian aggression and "seek a peaceful resolution" that restores the country's internationally recognized borders.

In 2008, Russia intervened militarily in Georgia, and later recognized the breakaway republics of South Ossetia and Abkhazia as independent states. A few other countries also recognize that independence, though the vast majority of nations consider the areas still as part of Georgia.

"The United States supports Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders, and under President Donald Trump the United States of America will reject any claim at any time by any nation that undermines this enduring principle," Pence said.

The vice president is also traveling Tuesday to Montenegro, NATO's newest member.

No response yet to Putin

Russia's retaliation for the U.S. sanctions is believed to be the single largest cut ever imposed on the U.S. embassy in Moscow and consulates elsewhere in Russia, although many of those to be dismissed are likely Russians working in support positions.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said the cuts would leave both Russia and the U.S. with the same number of staff and diplomats in Washington and Moscow, respectively - 455.

President Donald Trump has been silent on the issue since Putin announced his action. Asked about this Monday, White House Press Secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said, "Right now we are reviewing our options, and when we have something to say on it we will let you know."

The U.S. State Department said the order to reduce the number of American diplomats in Russia was "a regrettable and uncalled for act." A spokesman said U.S. officials are assessing how to respond to Putin.

A Russian analyst, Nikolai Petrov of the Higher School of Economics in Moscow, said the move reflects the Kremlin's disillusionment with President Trump: "These measures are tough, and it is linked to a deep disappointment that came after the euphoria linked to the arrival of Donald Trump [to power], and to the idea that today we will start our relations anew."

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Another Russian analyst, Gleb Pavlovsky, said a return to Cold War-era hostilities with the U.S. will only boost Putin's popularity at home ahead of another likely bid for the Russian presidency next year.

Pavlovsky, a former political consultant for the Kremlin who is now president of the Foundation for Effective Politics in Moscow, explained how U.S. efforts to "punish" Putin may have the opposite effect: "American sanctions naturally are causing a definite mass reaction [in Russia] - an anti-American, pro-Putin reaction." If Putin wished, Pavlovsky added, he could make the American sanctions the centerpiece of his re-election campaign next year.

Russians will feel cutback

Other experts say the vital work of the U.S. embassy in Moscow will continue despite the massive cuts. Steven Pifer, a former U.S. diplomat now with the Brookings Institution, told VOA that Russians also may discover some unintended consequences of their president's crackdown on U.S. diplomacy.

"My assumption is hundreds of Russians are going to lose their jobs now," Pifer said. "And when you're looking at priority functions of the embassy, you know, visa functions are important but they're not as important as other functions. So my guess is that those Russians [who] want to travel to the United States are going to find that visa processing is going to take longer than usual because of reduced staff in the consular section."

Pifer was assigned to the U.S. embassy in Moscow in 1986, at a time when there were several back-and-forth expulsions between the U.S. and the Soviet Union. He later served on the National Security Council under former President Bill Clinton, and was ambassador to Ukraine from 1998-2000.

During his time in the Russian capital, Pifer said, American staff were called upon for "all-purpose duty" at times when Russian support staff were unavailable for political reasons.

"So, five or six days out of every seven, I would work on my normal portfolio, which is arms control," Pifer recalled. "And then one day, I'd drive a truck. And the embassy got by. There was actually this incredible spirit in the embassy that we were going to show the Soviets that this kind of action was not going to cramp the embassy."

Pifer said he expects the same determined spirit from U.S. embassy personnel now.

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VP Pence says Trump will sign Russia sanctions soon
1 August 2017
Associated Press

U.S. Vice President Mike Pence says President Donald Trump will sign a bill on a new package of sanctions against Russia.

The Senate voted last week to approve the new financial sanctions against Moscow. The legislation bars Trump from easing or waiving the penalties on Russia unless Congress agrees.

Pence, who is visiting the former Soviet republic of Georgia Tuesday, said the Trump administration "had concerns" about the bill when it was drafted in the Senate, but that Trump will sign it soon.

Russia on Friday ordered the U.S. Embassy and three U.S. consulates in Russia to drastically cut its personnel there. President Vladimir Putin said on Sunday it would mean 755 staffers will have to be dismissed.

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Embassy Reductions Won't Deter U.S., Pence Says
By Michael Shear
31 July 2017
New York Times

Vice President Mike Pence responded aggressively on Monday to the decision by President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia to order the shedding of 755 positions at the United States Embassy in Moscow, even as President Trump remained silent on the escalating diplomatic row.

Traveling in Eastern Europe, Mr. Pence delivered a blunt message for Mr. Putin, noting that "recent diplomatic actions taken by Moscow will not deter the commitment of the United States to our security, that of our allies and to freedom-loving nations around the world."

Mr. Pence said that while Mr. Trump remains "open to a better relationship" with Russia, he warned that "the United States rejects any attempt to use force, threats, intimidation or malign influence in the Baltic States or against any of our treaty allies."

Mr. Putin over the weekend ordered that the embassy work force be trimmed by Sept. 1, responding to legislation approved last week by Congress to impose new sanctions on Russia for its meddling in the 2016 presidential election. The legislation also imposes additional sanctions on Iran and North Korea.

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Mr. Trump passed up several public opportunities on Monday to condemn the action, which includes American diplomats and Russian employees. As president, his posture toward Mr. Putin has been closely watched during a congressional inquiry into Russian election meddling and a special counsel investigation on the issue.

"Right now we're reviewing our options, and when we have something to say on it, we'll let you know," said Sarah Huckabee Sanders, the White House press secretary.

Ms. Sanders also declined to say when Mr. Trump planned to sign the sanctions legislation, which passed with overwhelming, veto-proof majorities in both the House and the Senate. On Friday, the White House said the president would sign the bill but had initially suggested it was an improper attempt by Congress to exercise the president's foreign policy powers.

Mr. Trump's silence on the new dispute with Russia struck some veteran foreign policy experts as a sign of weakness as he faces a dramatic diplomatic offense by a major adversary.

"Why is he not denouncing? It's a very weak signal that he's sending," said Michael McFaul, a Stanford University professor who served as ambassador to Russia under former President Barack Obama.

Mr. McFaul said that removing 755 people from the United States Embassy in Moscow — about two-thirds of the personnel in the compound — would severely affect the work that American diplomats do there. That includes processing visa applications for Russians seeking to visit the United States.

He also noted that a statement by the State Department called the Russian action "regrettable and uncalled-for." But Mr. McFaul said that previous administrations would have condemned the expulsion more strenuously and would have made sure the American president responded directly to his counterpart in Russia.

"That he chose not to was striking to me," Mr. McFaul said. "He's on Twitter all the time. If he has something to say, it would take him 10 seconds to say it."

Russian officials said over the weekend that Mr. Putin's diplomatic move was retaliation for the sanctions legislation, promising to go even further if the United States imposed additional economic restrictions in the future.

"This retaliation is long, long overdue," Sergei Ryabkov, Russia's deputy foreign minister, said on ABC's "This Week" on Sunday. Mr. Ryabkov called the sanctions legislation "completely weird and unacceptable" and said that in response to any more moves by the United States, "we will respond in kind."

"We will mirror this," he added. "We will retaliate."

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While Mr. Trump remained silent on Monday, Mr. Pence used his trip to Estonia to underscore a tougher stance for the Baltic nations toward Russia and its aggression in the region. He will visit Georgia and Montenegro later on his trip.

In a speech at Kadriorg Palace in Tallinn, the presidential residence of Estonia, Mr. Pence said he brought a message from Mr. Trump that "we are with you." In the speech, Mr. Pence reiterated the president's call for Russia to end "destabilizing activities in Ukraine and elsewhere."

"The United States will continue to hold Russia accountable for its actions — and we call on our European allies and friends to do the same," Mr. Pence said.

The vice president also explicitly promised that the United States would meet its obligations under NATO's Article 5 mutual defense pledge to come to the aid of a member nation who is attacked. Mr. Trump made a similar statement this summer after earlier refusing to say so directly.

Mr. Pence said that Mr. Trump would sign the sanctions legislation "very soon."

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Vice President Pence in Europe: Georgia
By Office of the Vice President
1 August 2017
The White House

Vice President Mike Pence's next stop on his visit to Eastern Europe was Georgia. Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili and the Vice President met to discuss how the United States, under President Donald Trump, strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgia's soil. Following his meetings, the Vice President and Second Lady Karen Pence toured the Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition, a symbol of the ancient faith that fills Georgia's ancient land, with Patriarch Ilias II and Father Giorgi Zviadadze. Vice President Pence also addressed American and Georgian troops at Exercise Noble Partner where he discussed our shared commitment to promote security and stability across the wider world. Following his speech, the Vice President departed for Montenegro, the last stop of his visit to Eastern Europe.

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During Whirlwind Week in Washington, VP Pence Comforts East European Allies
By Emily Tamkin
1 August 2017
The Cable: Foreign Policy

Amid chaos in Washington, U.S. Vice President Mike Pence is in Eastern Europe assuring American allies that the United States is committed to protecting them.

"We are with you. We stand with the people and nations of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania — and we always will," Pence said at a joint press availability with the Baltic leaders in Tallinn, even as, back home, President Donald Trump has yet to comment on Russian expulsion of U.S. diplomatic staff.

The vice president participated in a listening session on cyber and innovation with the president of Estonia in Tallinn, and travelled on Tuesday to Tbilisi, where he met with the Georgian prime minister for their third substantive meeting since Pence took office.

"We see Georgia as a key strategic partner and stand by your territorial integrity and your aspirations to become a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization," Pence said at a dinner with Prime Minister Kvirikashvili in Tbilisi. At a joint press conference with Georgia's prime minister, Pence noted that Russia occupies one-fifth of Georgian Territory.

Back in Washington, in the meantime, President Trump has yet to comment personally on a bill that Congress passed imposing tougher sanctions on Russia. The White House press secretary said Friday in a statement that Trump would sign the bill.

Speaking in Tbilisi, Pence said the bill would be signed soon.

From Tbilisi, Pence traveled to the newest NATO member, Montenegro. In May at a NATO summit, President Trump appeared to push Montenegro's prime minister aside during a photo session.

Pence's staid tour abroad is in stark contrast to the roller coaster in Washington this week. On Monday, U.S. President Donald Trump lost a communications director who was brought on roughly a week prior; Jared Kushner, his son in law and advisor, told White House interns the Trump team was too disorganized to have colluded with Russia; and the *Washington Post* reported the president had dictated a misleading message to his son about a meeting with a Russian lawyer.

Trump's is not the first administration to send a vice president abroad in the president's stead, or to develop relations with diplomats and dignitaries from particular countries — former U.S. Vice President Joe Biden was known as Ukraine's man in Washington.

"Vice President Pence's visit sent a clear message about the enduring strength of the relationship between Georgia and the United States," Georgian Ambassador to the United States David Bakradze told Foreign Policy by email. "This is an important milestone in the bilateral relationship."

"In short," a representative from the Estonian Embassy in Washington, D.C. relayed to FP, "we consider the trip a great success."

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The embassy of Montenegro did not immediately respond to request for comment.

Update, Aug. 1 2017, 4:16 pm ET: This piece was updated to include comment from the Estonian Embassy.

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Social Media Coverage

Prominent Facebook Posts on the VP Trip

Vice President Mike Pence

Vice President Mike Pence added 4 new photos.
2 hrs

#VPinEurope Photos of the Day: Karen and I landed in Georgia last night and were welcomed by Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili and his wife, Maia. Today, the Prime Minister and I met and I told him that the United States of America, under President Donald J. Trump, strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgia's soil. Following our productive discussions, we toured the Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition, a symbol of the ancient faith that fills Georgia's ancient land, with Patriarch Ilias II and Father Giorgi Zviadadze. To conclude our visit to Georgia, I spoke with American and Georgian troops at Exercise Noble Partner and discussed our shared commitment to promote security and stability across the wider world. Today we recommit ourselves to the cause of security, prosperity, and freedom for the people of Georgia.



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White House Official Facebook Page

Albums > Vice President Pen. .

Vice President Pence's Trip to Europe

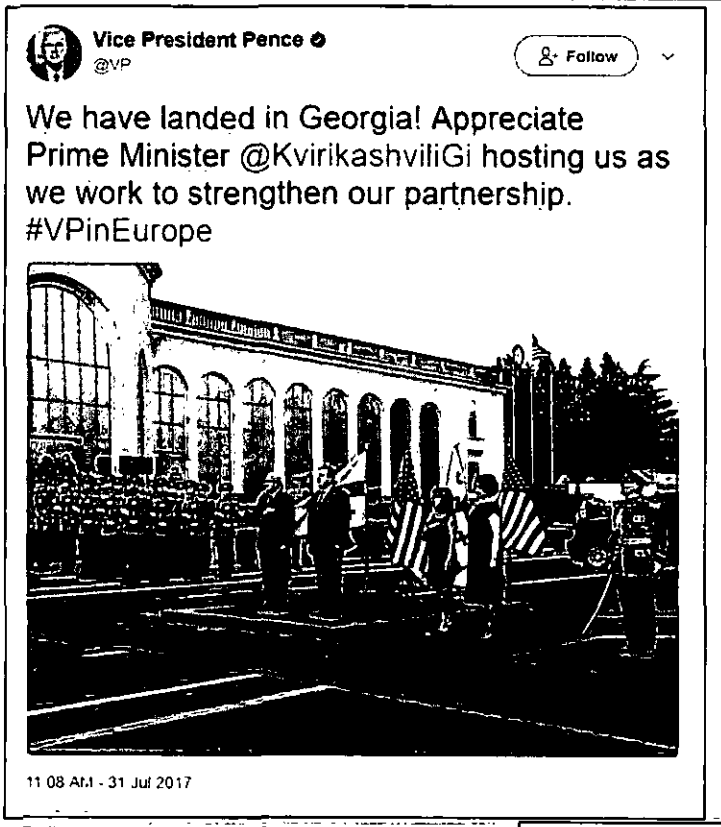
24 Photos Updated 2 hours ago

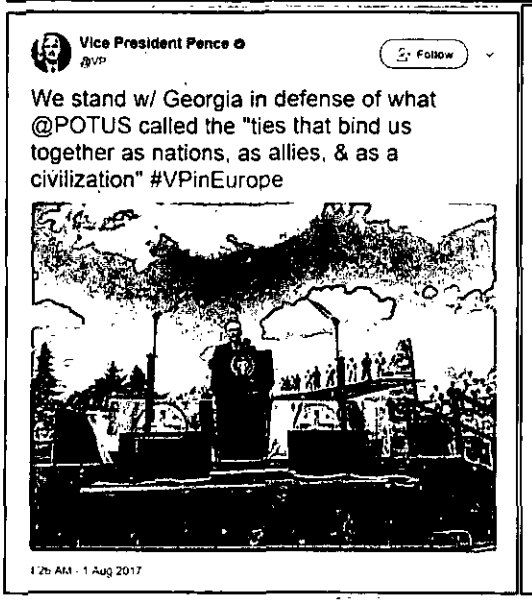


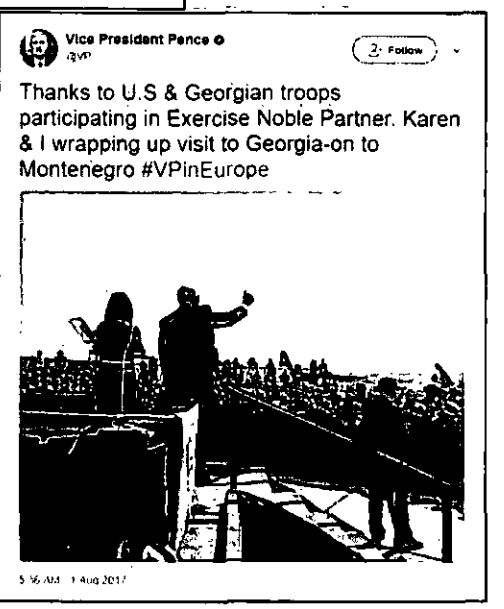
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Prominent Tweets on VP Visit

Mike Pence, Vice President of the United States – 4.08M Followers







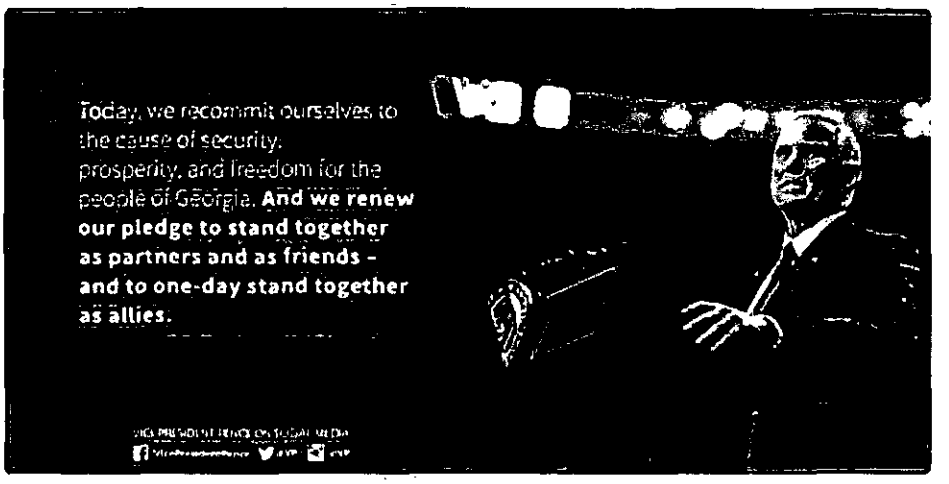
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Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

Follow

Today, we recommit ourselves to the cause of security, prosperity, and freedom for the people of Georgia. #VPinEurope

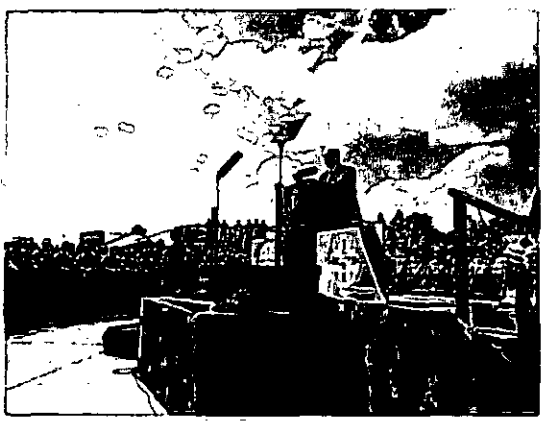


4:34 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

Follow

A better relationship will require Russia to reverse actions that caused sanctions to be imposed in the first place. #VPinEurope



4:32 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

Follow

We stand here today in the gap - on a front line of freedom, compromised by Russian aggression nearly a decade ago. #VPinEurope



4:32 AM - 1 Aug 2017

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Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

Follow

The rise of adversaries new and old requires renewed strength and resolve by all who cherish freedom. #VPinEurope



4:31 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

Follow

Karen & I visited Sioni Cathedral a symbol of the faith that fills Georgia's ancient land. Thanks Patriarch Ilia II & Fr Zviadze #VPinEurope

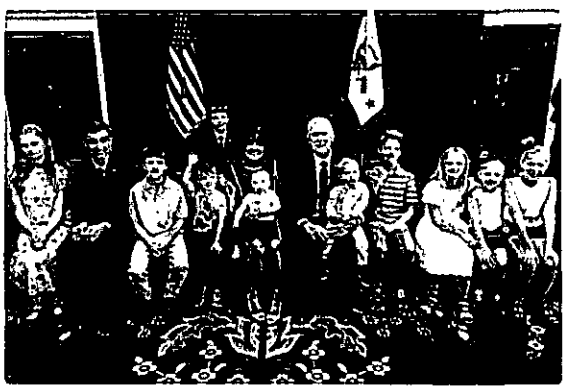


4:01 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

Follow

Karen & I spoke w/ dedicated @EmbassyTbilisi staff members & their families & thanked them for the great work they do for the US #VPinEurope



2:19 AM - 1 Aug 2017

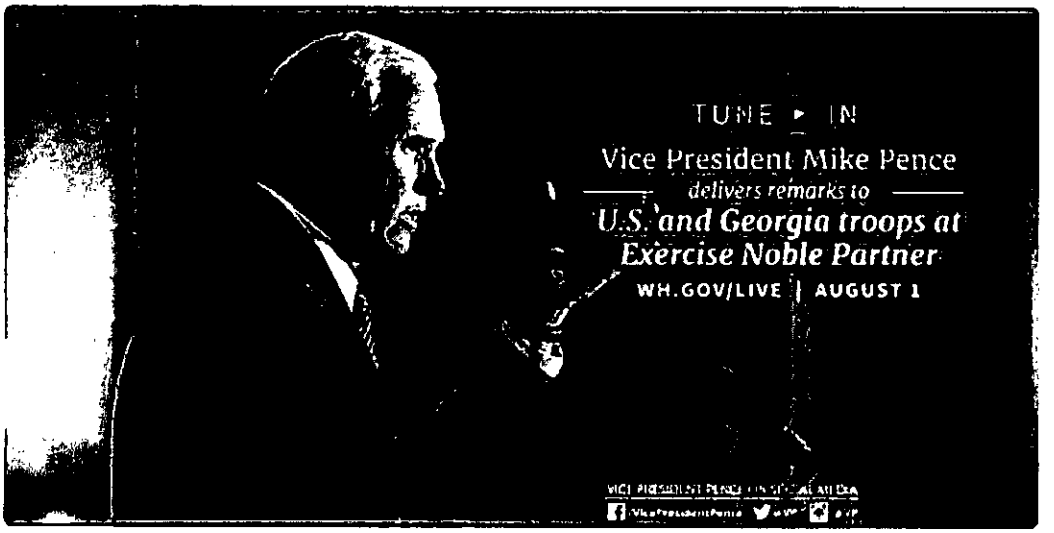
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Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

Follow

TUNE IN! I'm speaking to U.S. and Georgia troops at Exercise Noble Partner: 45.wh.gov/v3dhHa #VPinEurope

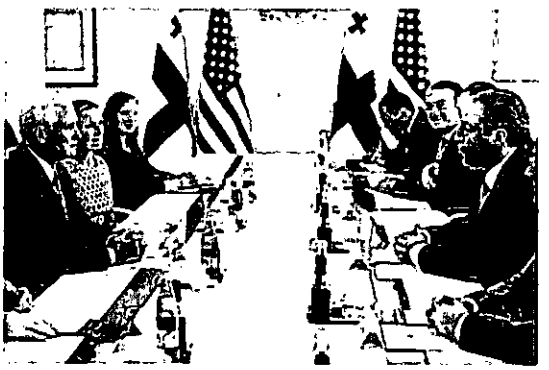


4:14 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

Follow

The United States will continue to work with Georgia to reduce vulnerabilities and counter Russian aggression. #VPinEurope



2:16 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence ✓
@VP

Follow

To be clear: the United States of America strongly condemns Russia's occupation of Georgia's soil. #VPinEurope



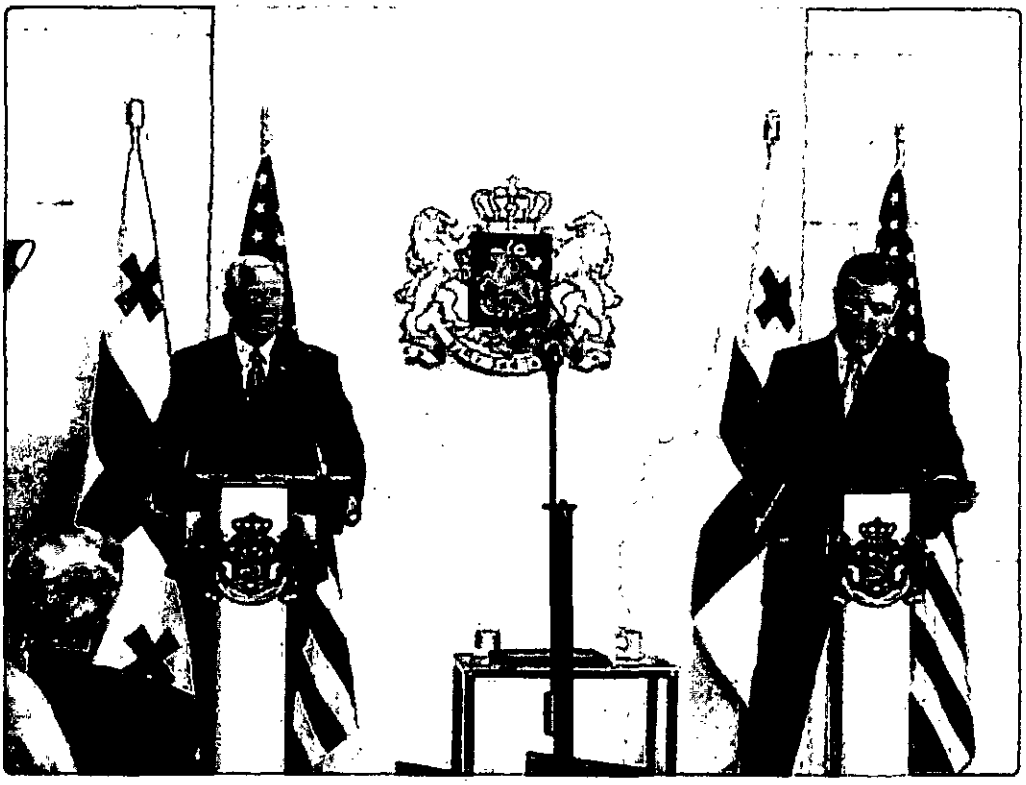
12:47 AM - 1 Aug 2017

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Vice President Pence @VP · 7h

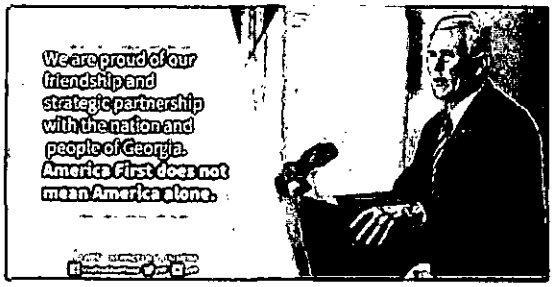
It is heartening to see that Georgia already exceeds NATO's goal of spending two percent of gross domestic product on defense. #VPinEurope



102 433 1.7K

Vice President Pence
@VP
Follow

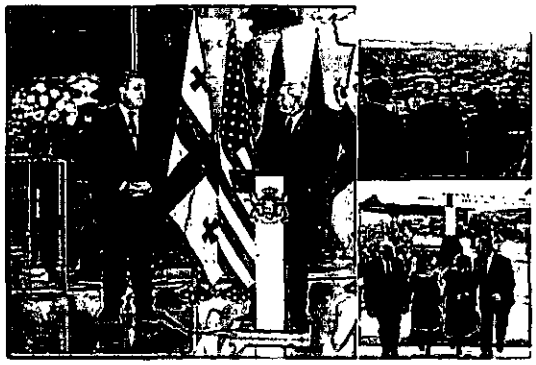
We are proud of our friendship and partnership with the nation and people of Georgia. America First does not mean America alone. #VPinEurope



12:45 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Vice President Pence
@VP
Follow

Thanks @KvirikashviliGi & Maia for welcoming Karen & I to Georgia yesterday. We enjoyed Tbilisi, looking forward to our meetings #VPinEurope

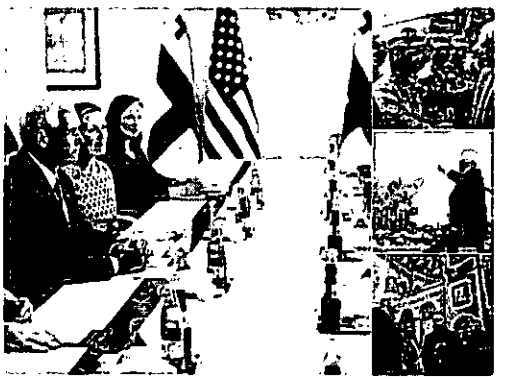


10:09 PM - 31 Jul 2017

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Vice President Pence
@VP
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#VPinEurope Day 3: Visited @EmbassyTbilisi families, met w/ PM @KvirikashviliGi & spoke to US & Georgia troops at Exercise Noble Partner



9:38 AM - 1 Aug 2017

White House Official Twitter – 15.1M Followers

The White House
@WhiteHouse
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Catch up with #VPinEurope:



Vice President Pence in Eastern Europe

Vice President Pence @VP

On behalf of President Donald Trump Vice President Mike Pence is in Eastern Europe to meet with leaders from Estonia, Georgia, and Montenegro. Stay connected on his social media channels to follow...

Moments

11:21 AM - 1 Aug 2017

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Karen Pence, Second Lady of the United States – 235K Followers



John McCain, U.S. Senator – 2.39M Followers



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Mark Knoller, CBS News White House Correspondent – 301K Followers

Mark Knoller
@markknoller

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In Tblisi, addressing US and Georgian troops. @VP declares the US "strongly condemns Russian occupation of Georgian soil."



4:35 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Mark Knoller
@markknoller

Follow

Declaring Georgia's "future is in the west," the @VP reaffirmed US support for Georgia's eventual membership in @NATO.



4:38 AM - 1 Aug 2017

Mark Knoller
@markknoller

Follow

Earlier, VP and Mrs Pence visited Tblisi's Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition. They toured, lit candles and spent a moment in prayer.



4:58 AM - 1 Aug 2017

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Government Statements and Releases

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and U.S. Vice President Mike Pence Agree to Further Enhance Georgia-US Security and Economic Cooperation
1 August 2017
Government of Georgia (Press Release)

Readout of Second Lady Karen Pence's Visit to Tbilisi, Georgia
Office of the Second Lady
1 August 2017
White House

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and U.S. Vice President Mike Pence Agree to Further Enhance Georgia-US Security and Economic Cooperation
1 August 2017
Government of Georgia (Press Release)

Tbilisi, 1st August 2017 – Georgian Prime Minister Giorgi Kvirikashvili today met with United States Vice President Mike Pence to discuss expanding future security and economic cooperation between Georgia and the U.S. Last night, Kvirikashvili hosted Vice President Pence and the American delegation for dinner in Tbilisi.

"Vice President Pence's visit so shortly after taking office bears witness to his and President Trump's great desire to deepen the strategic partnership and friendship with Georgia, for which I am very grateful," stated Prime Minister Kvirikashvili. "The Georgian nation deeply appreciates the American people's friendship, solidarity, and strong support."

During their meeting, Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and Vice President Pence discussed the U.S.-Georgian security partnership in depth. Following the meeting, the Vice President met with Georgian and U.S. soldiers participating in the Noble Partner exercise, a U.S. Army-led exercise to support the training, evaluation and eventual certification of Georgia's second light infantry company contribution to the NATO Response Force (NRF).

"The Vice President's meeting with Georgian and American service members participating in the Noble Partner exercises is an unmistakable demonstration of the strong U.S. support for spurring our country's sovereignty and integration into NATO," affirmed Prime Minister Kvirikashvili. "The special bonds and extraordinary sacrifices of our two militaries -- currently fighting extremism together -- is something to behold. Georgia and the U.S. are truly brothers in arms."

Prime Minister Kvirikashvili and Vice President Pence also held productive discussions about furthering the economic partnership between Georgia and the U.S. Georgia's Anaklia Port on the Black Sea, which will become a focal point in trade between Europe and Asia, is being built by an American-Georgian consortium, led by U.S. company Conti. SSA Marine, another U.S. company, will

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operate it. The two leaders also discussed potential steps for moving forward with a bilateral free trade agreement between the two countries.

During the visit, Vice President Pence also reaffirmed U.S. support for continued progress toward Georgia's Euro-Atlantic integration.

-/-

Readout of Second Lady Karen Pence's Visit to Tbilisi, Georgia
Office of the Second Lady
1 August 2017
White House

Second Lady Karen Pence started her day with the Vice President where they participated in a meet-and-greet with U.S. embassy employees and their families. Mrs. Pence continued her day to the National Parliamentary Library where she joined art therapists and patients from Kamara, a pscho-social rehabilitation center and leading provider of art therapy in Georgia. The Second Lady observed the patient's art therapy work before participating in a roundtable discussion with Kamara co-founders and art therapists, Natia Panjikidze and Nino Komakhidze, and art therapist Salome Panjikidze. After the art therapy program visit, the Second Lady enjoyed lunch at the Vinotel Restaurant with United States Marines who represented both the Marine Security Guard Detachment and Marines from the Georgia Deployment Program. After lunch, Mrs. Pence met with Georgian artist, Olesya Tavadze, who works in easel paintings and graphics. Mrs. Tavadze is passionate about American literature, in particular Robert Frost. Mrs. Pence viewed Mrs. Tavadze's exhibit of paintings inspired by Robert Frost's poems at the Tbilisi History Museum Karvasla. Following the museum visit, Mrs. Pence joined the Vice President to tour the Sioni Cathedral of the Dormition. After the tour, Mrs. Pence listened to the Vice President deliver remarks to U.S. and Georgian Noble Partner Participants at the Tbilisi Airport before departing to Podgorica, Montenegro.

"Art therapy is an emerging profession in Georgia with only a few professionally trained art therapists in the country," said Second Lady Karen Pence. "I will cherish my opportunity to meet with the leading art therapists in Georgia who are breaking new ground in the country by offering art therapy as an option for therapeutic treatment. They are doing great work and making a positive difference in Georgia."

Tomorrow, Wednesday, August 2nd, Mrs. Pence will wrap up her Eastern Europe visit with activities in Podgorica, Montenegro. To stay updated on Mrs. Pence's events, follow her on Twitter at, @SecondLady.

This material is distributed by Rasky Partners on behalf of the Government of Georgia. Additional information is available at the Department of Justice, Washington, DC.

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