In January 2010, the Republic of Georgia unveiled its new strategy for rebuilding ties with the breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The State Minister for Reintegration, Temuri Yakobashvili, visited The George Washington University to discuss the new strategy and Tbilisi’s plans for its implementation.

According to Minister Yakobashvili, Georgia’s new strategy was crafted in an effort to deal with the aftermath of the 2008 South Ossetia War, in which Russia invaded Georgia and occupied Abkhazia and South Ossetia. To those who may ask why Georgia has now chosen to respond with the unveiling of a new strategy, Yakobashvili stated that the issue over how to reassert authority over the breakaway regions prior to 2008 was considered by the Georgian government to be an internal affair. Since 2008, the issue has acquired an international context because Russia has chosen to maintain a large military presence in the breakaway regions. Georgia, in turn, has formulated a new state policy toward the occupied territories.

Mr. Yakobashvili explained that the state strategy was designed with the assistance of various actors both inside and outside the Georgian government, including NGOs, think tanks, civil society actors, opposition parties, and policy analysts. He underlined that the Georgian government is not interested in adopting a military strategy to resolve the issues surrounding the occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Instead, Georgia advocates a “human-centric” approach, whereby it will provide for the needs of its people currently living under the shadow of Russian military occupation. On this point, the Georgian government maintains that it is obligated to provide for its people in the spheres of economics, environment, healthcare, and quality of life. Another goal of the new strategy is to promote sustained interaction between those (former) residents of Abkhazia and South Ossetia who have been internally displaced with those people now living within the territories.

Presently, Georgia is promoting its new strategy in Washington, Paris, London, Berlin, and Ankara, as well as in the UN, OSCE, EU, NATO, and the Council of Europe. So far, Mr. Yakobashvili stated, Georgia’s new strategy has been well-received. Russia, however, has not
endorsed the new strategy, going so far as to accuse the U.S. government of itself crafting the policy.

**Q and A**

Following his presentation, Minister Yakobashvili responded to questions posed by audience members. Below is a list of some of the questions that were asked:

1) Do you expect any good to come out of the Geneva talks between Georgia and Russia?

2) What is the timeline for Georgia’s new strategy?

3) How much funding is the Georgian government going to allocate to implement the new strategy?

4) Are the authorities in the occupied territories willing to cooperate with Tbilisi on the new strategy? How has the U.S. responded to Georgia’s promotion of the new strategy? How has the Georgian opposition responded?

5) Do you expect that Russia will cooperate and not try to hinder implementation of the new strategy?

6) Has Turkey expressed any interest in Georgia’s new strategy?

7) Will Georgia conduct public opinion polls in the occupied territories to fine-tune the new strategy?

8) Will there be any EU engagement with the occupied territories?

With respect to the Geneva Talks, Mr. Yakobashvili pointed out that since these discussions were being conducted between Georgia and Russia, they will not affect the manner in which Georgia chooses to implement its new strategy. Mr. Yakobashvili also stated that Georgia has not yet specified a timeline for the implementation of its new strategy because the process is still in an experimental phase and will need to be reevaluated every six months. On a related note, funding appropriations for the new strategy have not yet been determined by the Georgian government. However, the Georgian government anticipates that NGOs will play a considerable role in implementing its new strategy.

With respect to policy, Mr. Yakobashvili made it clear that the new strategy seeks to promote sustained interaction among Georgian residents wherever they reside but especially to rebuild local ties. Some Georgian opposition groups, while critical, have given indirect support for the new strategy by noting that the government appears to have taken many of their ideas. In addition, although they publicly renounce the strategy, authorities at least in Sukhum appear prepared to consider at least some of its elements. The U.S. government has also been very supportive of the new strategy. Turkey has expressed interest as well, mainly because a considerably large Abkhaz Diaspora resides within Turkey’s borders. Lastly, Mr. Yakobashvili
noted that if Russia chooses to not cooperate with Georgia on this issue, then Moscow will have to explain to the international community why it refuses to allow Georgia to provide public services to innocent civilians living under occupation in Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

In conclusion, although EU monitors are not allowed in the territories, Mr. Yakobashvili reiterated that it is Georgia’s aim to open these regions to the rest of the world to ensure the well-being of its people. Until then, it will be difficult to conduct public opinion surveys in the occupied territories because the people who live under occupation also live in fear and are exposed to Russian propaganda.