

U.S.-Black Sea Nonproliferation Professional's Exchange: Tbilisi Regional Module

“The Black Sea is a mirror in which the European continent and the world can see what the future looks like. It will be either free and democratic, or ruled by fear, by hatred, and the will of the most powerful... It is up to us to participate in shaping this future”¹

Overview

Continuing the U.S. State Department/Center for Nonproliferation Studies “Nonproliferation Professionals Exchange” program, bringing mid-career diplomats, practitioners, academics and researchers together to strengthen transatlantic and regional ties, the 25-person group was hosted by the Civil Council on Defense and Security, May 11-12, 2023, in Tbilisi, Georgia. Initiated in [Vienna](#) in the early days of the war, followed by the “Exchange” with United States’ counterparts at [Sandia and Los Alamos labs and in Washington](#) in September 2022, this first regional module followed the format of previous meetings with a conference, to include local dignitaries/experts, followed by a visit to a sensitive WMD-related facility, the decommissioned Mtskheta nuclear reactor. Prior to the opening of the Exchange sessions, a meeting was held jointly with the Black Sea Women in Nuclear Network (BSWN) group, given the synergistic work of the two groups.

Continuing the U.S. State Department Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation (ISN) and James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies (CNS) “U.S.-Black Sea Nonproliferation Professionals Exchange” program, a 25-person group of mid-career diplomats, practitioners, academics, and researchers from the Black Sea Region were hosted by the Civil Council on Defense and Security from May 11-12, 2023, in Tbilisi, Georgia to continue exchanging timely on-the-ground insights and perspectives during a critical moment for regional and global security and stability.

Originally intended to meet in Georgia in March, 2022, the war made it impossible to do so and thus the “Exchange” was initiated in Vienna, [April 26 - 29, 2022](#), hosted by CNS’ Vienna Center for Disarmament and Nonproliferation (VCDNP). This was followed by a U.S. module, [September 4 - 15, 2022](#), hosted by Sandia and Los Alamos labs and the U.S. State Department’s International Security and Nonproliferation Bureau. This first regional module in Tbilisi, Georgia, opened with a conference including Georgian and regional dignitaries and experts, and concluded with a visit to the decommissioned Mtskheta nuclear research reactor. Prior to the opening of the Exchange sessions, a joint meeting was held with the [Black Sea Women in Nuclear Network](#) (BSWN) to leverage the two groups’ synergistic work.

Conference and Presentations by Experts

The first part of the exchange consisted of a conference where experts from Georgia and the group were able to present timely insights and perspectives on the nonproliferation-related challenges facing Georgia, the Black Sea Region, and the world. The host of the Conference, Shorena Lortkipanidze (CCDS Director) introduced H.E. Lasha Darsalia, Deputy Foreign Minister of Georgia, who provided

¹ Remarks by Romanian First Minister Christian Daniel during Session 1 Day 1 of the Exchange

remarks on the Georgian threat perspective and Georgian commitments to strengthening the nonproliferation regime. Program sponsors Jennie Gromoll (State/ISN Bureau) and Karen Chaisson (U.S. Embassy/EXBS Program) and Margarita Kahlinina-Pohl (CNS Program Lead) also provided their perspectives on the value of the Exchange program and its contributions to strengthening ties across the region and with the United States.

Expert presentations provided regional perspectives and allowed in-depth debate on:

- Cooperation in the Context of the Evolving Threats in the Black Sea Region
- Global Developments in WMD Nonproliferation and Russia’s War on Ukraine
- Georgia’s Nuclear and Biological Security and Nonproliferation Profile
- Effects of NATO Enlargement and Sanctions Imposed on Russia
- Research and Publications by U.S.-Black Sea Nonproliferation Professionals



Highlighting the value of the conference’s presentations and thoughtfulness of the important dialogue spurred amongst participants, Lana Jervalidze, senior advisor to Georgian President Zourabichvili, noted her regret that the meetings with the President were not possible due to a last-minute trip and pledged her support to future engagements of the Exchange given the critical nature of the group’s work to Georgia’s security.

Visit to the Decommissioned Mtskheta Research Reactor

Having completed two days of presentations on Georgian and regional security and related implications, participants visited Georgia's decommissioned Mtskheta nuclear research reactor where experts from the Andronikashvili Institute of Physics explained the unique nonproliferation history of the facility.



Participants explore Mtskheta nuclear research reactor facility

Originally started in 1957 and intended for research and isotope production, the IRT-2000 type research reactor eventually fell into disuse after the Chernobyl disaster. With the collapse of the Soviet Union only a few years later, the research reactor was permanently shut down leaving highly enriched uranium fuel elements posing a proliferation concern. Georgian experts recounted a 1998 collaboration in which Georgia and international partners successfully secured and removed these fuel elements, preventing their potential use by bad actors. While now decommissioned, Georgian experts noted how the relics of the past can continue to be assets for the future, by showing the exchange participants the research reactor's unique hot cell facility and noting how visiting IAEA inspector-trainees can now enter the hot cells to practice inspection skills that they will use to prevent proliferation in similar facilities throughout the world.

Visiting this site, participants gained a deeper understanding and appreciation for Georgia's continuing commitment to nonproliferation, as well as the power of collaborative efforts in this endeavor.

Black Sea Regional Developments with Global Impact

While this first regional module encompassed a variety of experiences, from in-depth discussions on the nuclear safety and security norms related to operating civilian nuclear power plants in times of war, Georgia's contributions to regional biosafety and security, and how to approach the changing CBRN landscape through the many channels available to this combined group of diplomats, practitioners and academics, the common thread was the conviction that the course of events in the Black Sea region will undoubtedly have a lasting impact on the shape of security and stability not just in Georgia, Türkiye, Moldova, Romania, Bulgaria, or Ukraine, but globally.