



The EUMM Hotline is...

Reducing tensions by phone

One of the fundamental tasks of the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia is to “contribute to the reduction of tensions through liaison, the facilitation of contacts between parties (of the conflict) and other confidence building measures”, as stated in the 15 September 2008 decision by the Council of the European Union to establish the Mission.

The objective of the Mission is to ensure that there is no return to hostilities and to facilitate the resumption of a safe and normal life for the local communities living on both sides of the Administrative Boundary Lines with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.

The Hotline

Frequent communication between parties to the conflict prevents escalation of incidents and builds confidence. To enable a reliable and instant communication between the parties, the Mission has established and operates a mechanism – the Hotline – which allows all sides to communicate around the clock, seven days a week.

The Hotline facilitates communication between security actors representing the Georgian authorities, Abkhaz and South Ossetian Hotline Holders, and the Commands of the Russian Federation Border Guards based in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. These are all referred to as Hotline Holders.

The Hotline is not a point-to-point connection. All communication goes to and from the Mission’s Hotline Holder.

The role of the Mission’s Hotline Holder is – in line with the Mission’s Mandate and to the extent possible – to facilitate a peaceful resolution of tensions, concerns and issues.



Pavels Sarigins (left) and Michal Ostasz (right) are the European Union Monitoring Mission’s current Hotline Holders.

Incident prevention and management

In case of irregularities, incidents or requests – typically, but not only, relating to the Administrative Boundary Line – one of the Hotline Holders will call the Mission’s Hotline Holder and ask for clarification. This is referred to as a *Hotline Activation*.

The Mission’s Hotline Holder will then call the relevant counterpart to convey the information, query or concern. After each activation a case is opened and all activities are logged by the Mission.

In most cases the side receiving the question or concern will need time to investigate the issue through their chain of command and will call back once the issue has been clarified.

If a clarification cannot be obtained within a period, best described as reasonable, the relevant Hotline Holder will call back and inform the Mission’s Hotline Holder that the answer will be delayed and for how long. Once the answer is received, it is passed to the counterpart.

In some cases, the ‘conversation’ between the Hotline Holders continue back and forth for several hours or days until it is closed.

The European Union Monitoring Mission Hotline Holders

The Mission has two Hotline Holders of which one is on 24/7 duty for 7 or 14 consecutive days. Both are fluent in English and Russian and have professional backgrounds as senior Border Guard Officers or from another law enforcement agency in one of the European Union Member States. They have served in International Border Guard Departments and have field experience in cross-border cooperation. Their tour of duty in the Mission is typically minimum two years, often longer. Although the official title of the Missions’ Hotline Holders is Liaison Officer, this label is hardly ever used.

The Hotline Holders are...

The first responders

The multifaceted structure of the Hotline mechanism is vital to its achievements. But even more important are the Hotline Holders, who very often are the people on which a peaceful resolution of situations and incidents depend.

Their ability to handle challenging circumstances and effectively use the Hotline to cool down an emerging crisis cannot be underestimated.

Each Hotline Holder contributes to the long-term stability throughout Georgia.

The Hotline is the tool, but it takes commitment, patience and empathy to ensure the effective use of the tool.

The Hotline Holders are the first responders whenever and wherever an incident occurs. Their job requires 24-hour availability to ensure that every time the Hotline is activated, the line is answered. All communication takes place in English and Russian languages.

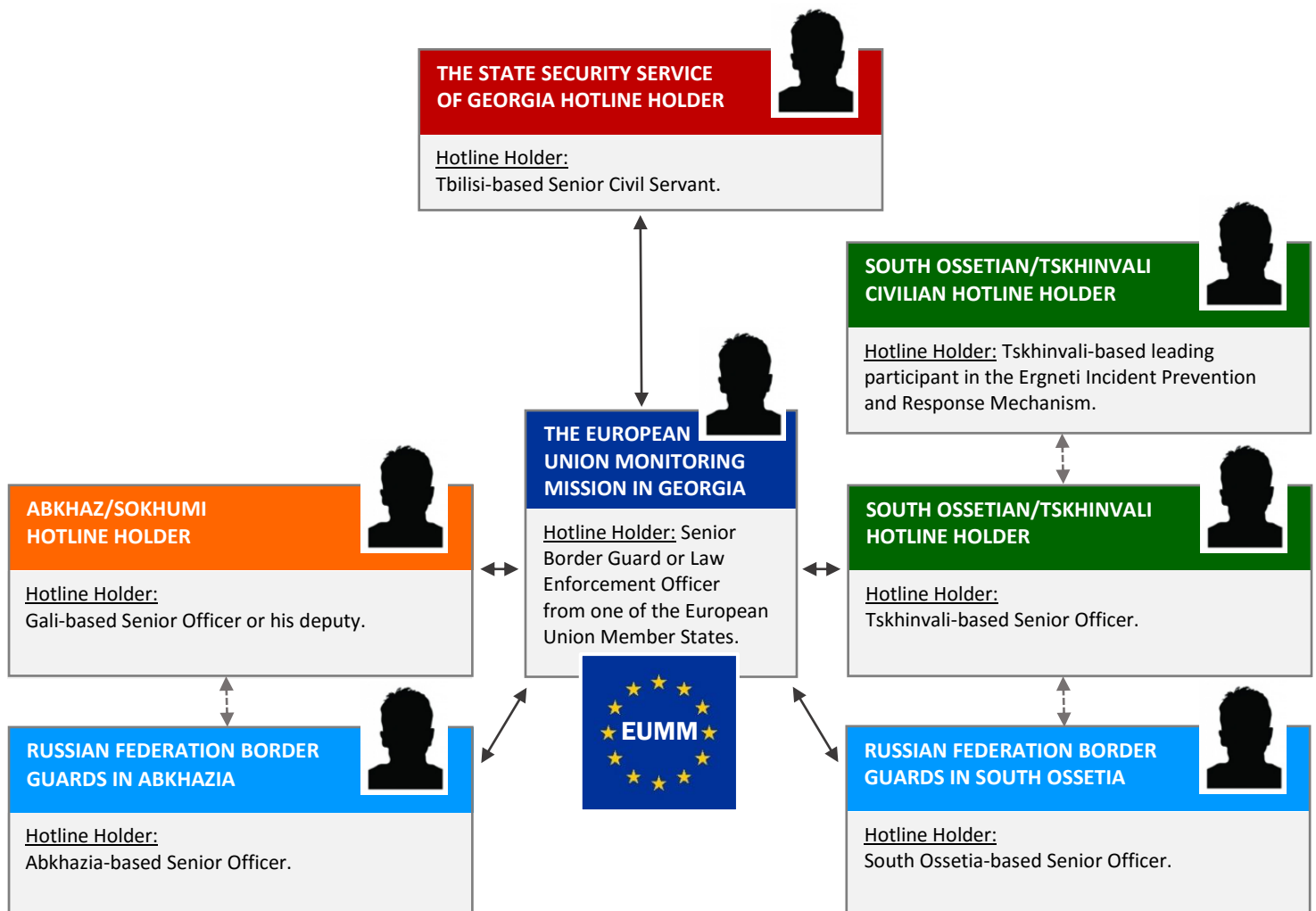
The Hotline is not a red telephone. The connection between Hotline Holders is maintained through the use of commercially available mobile phones.

In a few cases, the Hotline Holders agree to communicate via Skype and on some occasions they meet physically for Technical Meetings or in the margins of Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism Meetings.

The line that always answers

The Mission's Hotline operates 24/7, 365 days a year. Since the first incoming call in May 2009, the Hotline has been activated almost 4,700 times (as of October 2016).

The Hotline structure and its practitioners



Addressing incidents

Over the years the nature of incidents addressed by the Hotline has changed from the coordination of Prisoner of War exchanges to the return of livestock from one side of the Administrative Boundary Line to the other. Here are the most common types of Hotline activations.



Detentions related to crossings

Individuals can cross the Administrative Boundary Line into South Ossetia and Abkhazia and vice versa using the Controlled Crossing Points, provided the commuter possesses a valid travel document. Crossing the Administrative Boundary Line to South Ossetia or Abkhazia elsewhere – deliberately or accidental – leads to detention by security actors based in Tskhinvali and Sokhumi. In most detention cases the Hotline is activated to assist a swift release and facilitate a safe return of the detainee.



Medical crossings

Georgia provides all citizens within its internationally recognised borders with health care and medical services. Consequently, residents in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, are eligible for fully or partially free medical treatment on Tbilisi Administrated Territory. For this reason and to obtain certain medical services, numerous patients cross the Boundary Line. In most cases the Hotline is activated to facilitate a medical crossing and coordinate transport across the Administrative Boundary Line.



Agricultural related incidents

Agricultural related incidents on or near the Boundary Line are common. These can be linked to livestock crossings, cross-boundary irrigation channels, picking of jonjoli (a Georgian delicacy) and hazelnuts, collection of firewood or to cultivation of farmland on the actual Administrative Boundary Line. These cases are seasonal and reoccur annually. The Hotline is activated frequently during the season to facilitate practical solutions to concrete problems. In some cases, the Hotline activation also triggers deployment of a Mission patrol to establish a clear picture of the situation on the ground.



Security actor related activities

Sometimes, the Hotline is activated due to unannounced incidents or activities near the Administrative Boundary Line e.g. shootings and explosions or aerial activity. However, over the years, a practice has developed amongst security actors on both sides to preannounce their activities, manoeuvres and convoys in the vicinity of the Administrative Boundary Line. These announcements are fed by the respective Hotline Holders to the Mission's Hotline Holder and passed onto the other side.



Other types of incidents

This group includes Hotline activations concerning e.g. borderisation (physical signs of demarcation on the ground), school children's crossing of the Administrative Boundary Line, crossing by uniformed security actors, mines and unexploded ordnance, missing persons, Administrative Boundary Line related criminality and gatherings at the Administrative Boundary Line (e.g. demonstrations).

Managing issues face-to-face

Whereas most of the dialogue takes place by phone, there are few instances where the parties' Hotline Holders meet face-to-face.

In relation to issues concerning the Administrative Boundary Line with South Ossetia, the Hotline Holders attend ad hoc Technical Meetings.

These meetings are arranged, often with very short notice, as a quick response to specific issues at or near the Administrative Boundary Line. They facilitate pragmatic problem solving relating to e.g. irrigation, patrol patterns, theft of boundary fences or other important issues.

The meetings are held on the ground at the actual hot spot or at the Ergneti Controlled Crossing Point between South Ossetia and Tbilisi Administered Territory.

There can be more than 10 participants in these meetings including the Hotline Holders from the State Security Service of Georgia, South Ossetia/Tskhinvali, the Russian Federation Border Guards, and the Mission. The latter is normally represented by the Head of Mission, the Head of Operations and the Hotline Holder as well as a representative from the concerned Field Office (Gori or Mtskheta).

The overall purpose of the face-to-face meetings is to keep the situation calm and quiet along the Administrative Boundary Line and to build confidence between the participants, which is one of the Mission's priorities.

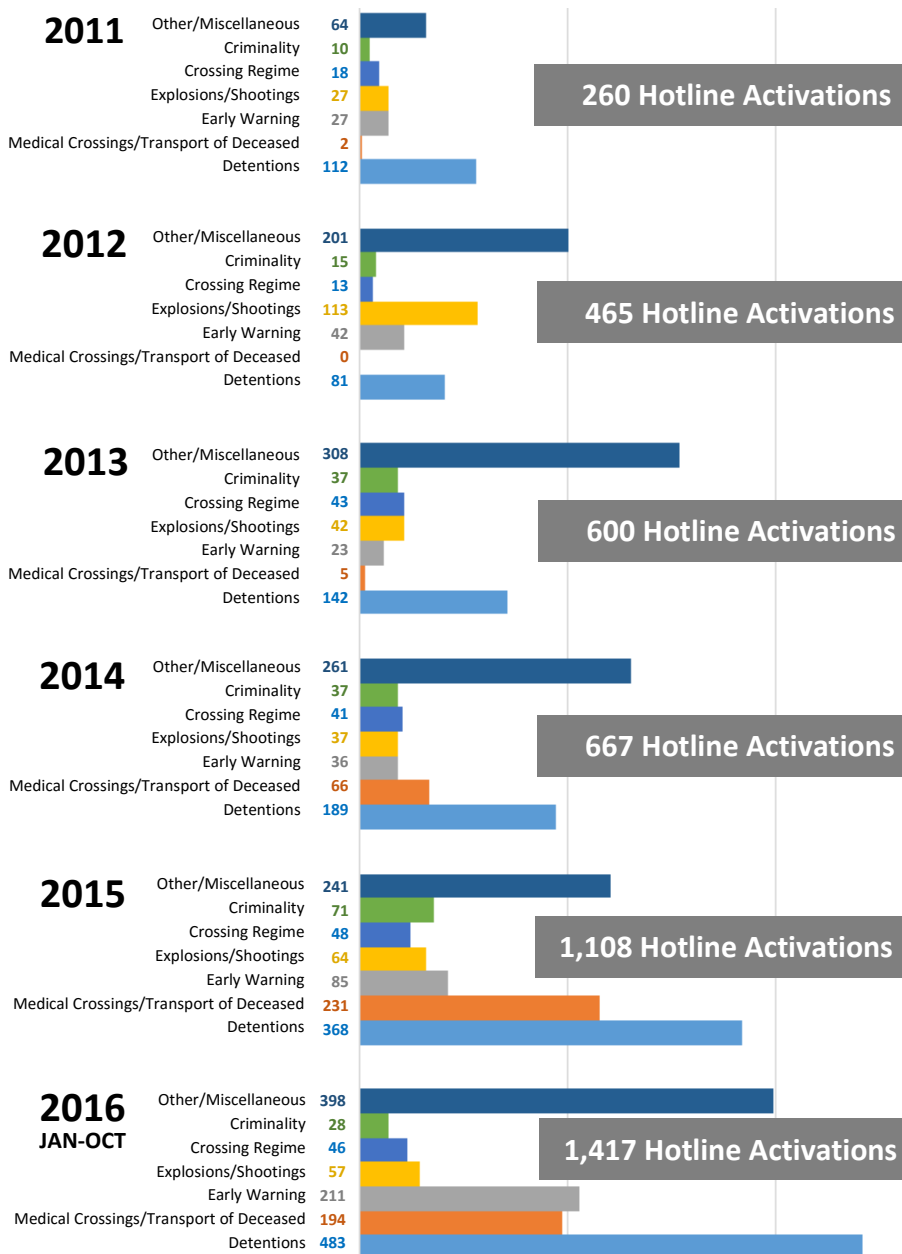
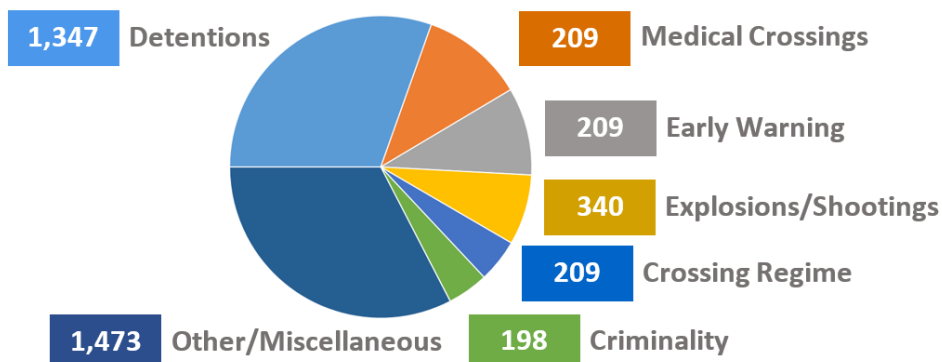
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A mechanism that works

From a modest beginning in 2009 with 33 Hotline Activations, the use of the Hotline has steadily increased to an average of close to five activations per day in 2016. It is difficult to conclude if the increased user frequency is caused by an increasing number of incidents or by an increased will by the conflict parties to prevent and solve incidents. The important deduction is that the Hotline is used by the parties to respond and deescalate potential conflicts. It's a mechanism that works.

4,517 Hotline Activations from 2011 to October 2016



The early months of the Hotline



On **21 September 2008** the Mission invited what was soon to become one of the two first Hotline Holders to prepare a job description for the function as Liaison Officer (Hotline Holder).



The first of many

Contributions to the early history of the Hotline have kindly been provided by Mr. Rinas Bendzius, who served as the Mission's first Hotline Holder (Liaison Officer) from 21 September 2008 to 11 September 2011.



The first two Liaison Officers commence their duty in the Mission Headquarters. One of their first tasks is to **facilitate release and exchanges of Prisoners of War**. There is no agreed format for communication and the phone contacts are sporadic, but it works. Also seen as the most neutral actor on the ground, the Mission soon thereafter becomes the de facto hub for POW exchanges.



Although there is an increased use of the Mission's Liaison Officers to facilitate contacts between the conflict parties, the Hotline is not established and Hotline Holders have not been formally appointed. Consequently, also the phone is not always answered. The situation is tense and **on several occasions fabricated incidents are reported** to trigger deployment of Mission patrols away from areas of interest to the conflict parties. Subsequently, the trust in the Hotline as a mechanism to reduce tensions is not huge.



The Head of Mission continues to have vast confidence in the emerging Hotline mechanism although **it requires strong nerves** to facilitate contacts between the parties. The communication systems are broken or unreliable and the Mission's Hotline Holders must weigh each word carefully, knowing that the fragile ceasefire can be jeopardized by a simple misunderstanding.



For the past months the Head of Mission and the Mission Liaison Officers have met with the actors involved in the South Ossetian conflict. **The meetings take place in open air in "no man's land"** in-between the positions around Ergneti.



The meeting participants increasingly seem to recognize the value of a more formalized format to manage incidents and defuse confrontations.



In Geneva **the first proposals for a 'Incident Prevention and Response Mechanism' are discussed** by participants. The plan is to hold weekly meetings. However, it is decided that "meetings could be preceded by contact over a 'Hotline' between the parties" and that "Such a 'Hotline' should be operational on a 24-hour basis".



The Hotline – then referred to as Incident Prevention Mechanism Hotline or the IPM Hotline – is established. Initially there are only three Hotline Holders: The Georgian Ministry of Interior, the Russian Federation Military and the Mission. Also, the security actors in Western Georgia are not yet connected to the Hotline.



The use of the Hotline gradually gains momentum. A process to register and record Hotline Activations is not yet in place.



The first recording of Hotline Activations begins on **15 May 2009 at 17:45 hrs.**, where a Hotline Holder calls to report the appearance of three camouflaged and armed men behaving confrontationally towards a checkpoint on the opposite side of the Administrative Boundary Line. The caller requests the Mission's Hotline Holder to assist in preventing an escalation of the situation.

Example of...

How the Hotline is used



The Hotline is used to address a variety of incidents of which some relates to detention cases. The below example serves to illustrate how the Hotline can be used to facilitate the release of detainees following such a case; and it provides an example of the related timeline. The case itself as well as individuals portrayed are fictitious. No identification with actual persons and places is intended or should be inferred.

18:48

The Hotline is activated by one of the Hotline Holders (Hotline Holder #1) asking the Mission's Hotline Holder to contact the opposite Hotline Holder (Hotline Holder #2) to request the release of two teenagers who allegedly have been detained earlier the same day after swimming in the river close to the Administrative Boundary Line.

19:06

Hotline Holder #2 is contacted by the Mission's Hotline Holder and promises to clarify if the teenagers have been detained.

20:24

Hotline Holder #2 confirms that two individuals have been detained, of which one is underage. The release of the detainees will depend on the time it will take Hotline Holder #1 to be ready to present the detainees' identity documents.

20:38

Hotline Holder #1 confirms that the detainees' identity documents are ready to be presented.

20:42

Hotline Holder #2 confirms that the release of the underage detainee can be facilitated soon at one of the crossing points. He also informs that the release of the other individual can be arranged, if identity documents for both individuals are presented at the same time. This information is transferred to Hotline Holder #1.

20:48

Hotline Holder #2 calls to inform that the underage detainee will be ready for handover at the agreed crossing point at 21:30 hrs. Hotline Holder #1 confirms that the detainee will be collected accordingly.

21:59

Hotline Holder #1 calls to inform that the teenager has been received and expresses his thanks for the cooperation.

17:01

Hotline Holder #2 calls to arrange the handover of the remaining detainee at the crossing point at 18:00 hrs. This information is passed to Hotline Holder #1.

DAY 2

The European Union Monitoring Mission (EUMM) in Georgia is the EU's only current mission that is specifically dedicated to monitoring. The EUMM Mandate is currently valid until 14 December 2016, and is expected to be extended for 2 years. Since January 2015, EUMM's Head of Mission is Kęstutis Jankauskas (Lithuania). He succeeded Toivo Klaar (Estonia), Andrzej Tyszkiewicz (Poland), and Hansjörg Haber (Germany).

This bulletin is published by the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia

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