

Joint press release following the 4th Association Council meeting between the European Union and Georgia

The European Union and Georgia held the 4th meeting of the Association Council on 5 February 2018. The Council is the highest body established under the EU-Georgia Association Agreement to supervise the implementation of the Agreement and to discuss issues of mutual interest.

The Association Council welcomed the fact that the local elections in Georgia in October/November respected fundamental freedoms and candidates were able to campaign freely and that although partisan, increasingly free and active media fostered greater political debate, as stated in the OSCE/ODIHR preliminary report. Both sides highlighted the importance of addressing all recommendations related to the administration of the elections in order to further strengthen the environment favourable for the democratic conduct of elections.

The Association Council welcomed the adoption of the constitutional reform and of the overall positive opinion of the Venice Commission that assessed it as a completion of the evolution of Georgia towards a parliamentary system. The Association Council encouraged all political actors to work together and to maintain a dialogue open in order to further strengthen democratic institutions, consolidate pluralistic democracy in Georgia and advance reforms.

The EU reiterated its readiness for close cooperation with the Georgian government to advance the common EU-Georgia bilateral agenda.

The Association Council took note of the 2017 Association Implementation Report on Georgia and positively assessed the significant progress in EU-Georgia relations since the last Association Council in December 2016. The sides reaffirmed their continued commitment to Georgia's deeper political association and economic integration with the EU.

The Association Council welcomed the endorsement of the "20 Deliverables for 2020" at the Eastern Partnership Summit. Together with the key reform priorities in the revised Association Agenda for 2017-2020 they provide a practical framework and guidance for the implementation of the Association Agreement requirements. Both sides acknowledged Georgia's European aspirations, its European choice and the common objective to continue building a democratic, stable and prosperous country. The Association Council welcomed sustained reform efforts of Georgia and its ambition to deepen relations with the EU.

The Association Council took note of Georgia's request for appropriate further engagement in support of coming closer to EU norms, policies and practices with the aim of enhancing sectoral integration with the EU.

The Association Council emphasised that in the second year of implementation of the EU Global Strategy for Foreign and Security Policy, the EU will focus on supporting economic and governance reforms, education and youth, energy efficiency and transport with the aim to enhance the resilience of the region, and increase stability of the whole neighbourhood. The EU acknowledged Georgian reforms, which have consolidated its position of a strategic partner of the EU in the region. The sides discussed ways to enhance EU-Georgia cooperation in the field of foreign and security policy and reflected on the issues discussed during the first EU-Georgia Strategic Security Dialogue that took place October 2017. Both sides agreed that such a dialogue provides a good forum to address issues of common interest in the security area.

The Association Council welcomed the progress made by Georgia in the implementation of comprehensive reforms in the justice sector. Both sides agreed on the need to address remaining challenges and consolidate the progress achieved. The EU underlined its commitment to continue assisting Georgia in its efforts to reform the judiciary and safeguard the rule of law.

The Association Council welcomed the effective implementation of the short stay visa-free regime for Georgia and underlined the need to ensure the sustainability of the reforms and progress achieved under the Visa liberalisation Action Plan. The EU welcomed that a great number of Georgian citizens have benefited from visa liberalisation and welcomed the Government's commitment and active communication campaign to inform about the rights and obligations related to visa liberalisation.

The Association Council encouraged Georgia to increase participation of women in politics and continue effective implementation of the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence as well as the anti-discrimination law. The EU welcomed the civil society's involvement in the process leading to the appointment of a new Public Defender in Georgia.

Both sides welcomed the progress made by Georgia in the implementation of the Association Agreement, including its Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA). The continuation of the DCFTA implementation, notably through regulatory approximation and institutional capacity building, will require continuous efforts by the Georgian authorities as well as on the EU side in terms of assisting Georgia in this process. The EU underlined the importance of sound macroeconomic policies in this respect and welcomed the agreement reached with the IMF that allowed the EU to disburse the last tranche under the previous EU macro-financial assistance. The Association Council also welcomed the proposal of the European Commission on a new macro-financial assistance programme to Georgia of up to EUR 45 million to assist Georgia to preserve its macroeconomic stability and to continue the reform process.

The Association Council welcomed the progressive implementation of the DCFTA and the positive reorientation of Georgian trade towards the EU. The sides highlighted the importance of fully benefiting of the export and growth potential provided for by the DCFTA and of communicating to businesses in Georgia the functioning and benefits of the DCFTA. The Association Council underlined the importance both parties give to a high level of protection for geographical indications and highlights EU-Georgia cooperation in this area as one of the most advanced the EU has worldwide. Both sides underlined the importance of ongoing structural reforms related to the improvement of the investment climate in Georgia.

The Association Council underlined Georgia's strategic role in the field of energy, transport and connectivity and congratulated Georgia for the official accession to the Energy Community Treaty in July 2017, a fundamental step towards sustainable development of Georgia's energy sector and greater integration with the EU energy market through implementation of the relevant commitments. The Association Council reiterated Georgia's key role as a partner for European energy security and stressed the country's transit role for Caspian hydrocarbon resources to reach the European markets, notably via the Southern Gas Corridor, including its extension to Central Asia, and the Black Sea. In this context, the Association Council welcomed the fact that the Georgian Oil and Gas Company (GOGC) has become shareholder in the Trans Caspian Pipeline project company.

The Association Council welcomed the adoption of a new assistance envelope for 2017-2020, envisaging assistance worth of EUR 370 to 450 million to Georgia, which is centred on economic development and market opportunities, on strengthening institutions and good governance, on supporting connectivity, energy efficiency, environment and climate change and mobility and people to people contacts and is fully in line with the 4-point reform plan of the Government of Georgia.

The EU reiterated its continuous support for reinvigorating Georgia's agriculture and rural sector as an important step towards rural development and investments. In this context, both sides welcomed the agreement signed for the 3rd phase of the ENPARD for 2018-2022, under which the EU pledged to allocate EUR 77.5 million.

The EU welcomed progress made towards the establishment of the European School for the Eastern Partnership in Tbilisi and looked forward to further working with Georgia and EU Member States' already operating international schools in Georgia, in order to welcome the first cohort of students in September 2018.

Both sides stressed the need to continue the successful cooperation established between the EU and Georgia on Strategic Communication and countering disinformation.

The EU reiterated its firm support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognised borders. The Association Council confirmed the EU's firm commitment and its crucial role in conflict resolution in Georgia, by using all instruments at its disposal through a comprehensive approach, including the policy of non-recognition and engagement. The appointment of a new EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia, as well as of the new head of the EU Monitoring Mission are visible and substantial signs of the EU's strong commitment.

The EU welcomed the efforts of the Georgian Government for peaceful conflict resolution, including through compliance with the 12 August 2008 Ceasefire Agreement.

The Association Council stressed the crucial importance of progress in the Geneva International Discussions for addressing and resolving the challenges stemming from the conflict in Georgia. It also agreed that fully functional Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms (IPRMs) are essential for confidence, predictability and transparency on the ground.

The Association Council welcomed the valuable contribution of the EU Monitoring Mission in preventing the escalation of tensions on the ground.

The Association Council was deeply concerned with the continued implementation of the so-called "treaties" on integration signed between Russia and the entities, the opening of "customs points" in Sukhumi and Akhgori, the holding of the so-called

“referendum” in Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia to change its name, the closure of “crossing points” on the Administrative Boundary Line with Abkhazia region, the decision by Sukhumi to release the perpetrator of the killing of an unarmed Georgian civilian in the village of Khurcha, and called on his immediate detention. The Association Council expressed its concern over the intensified human rights violations and continued discrimination on the ground of ethnic origin in both regions of Georgia.

The Association Council emphasised that the intensified military build-up and constant military exercises in both Georgian regions represent gross violation of Georgia's territorial integrity and called on the Russian Federation to fulfil its international obligations notably to withdraw its military forces from the territory of Georgia. The Association Council further urged the Russian Federation to provide EUMM access to the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, in line with its mandate.

The Association Council agreed on the importance of continuing and intensifying a broad policy that includes the whole society and expressed its support to the reconciliation and engagement efforts of the Georgian Government to reach out to its communities throughout its entire territory. The Association Council noted the importance of further supporting people-to-people contacts across the divide and confidence building measures between conflict-affected communities and encouraging reconciliation efforts.

The EU expressed appreciation for Georgia's continued contribution to EU-led crisis management operations and missions in the Central African Republic and the Republic of Mali, as well as readiness to support strengthening of Georgia's respective capacities.

The EU commended Georgia's active participation in the multilateral dimension of the Eastern Partnership. It welcomed Georgia's position to the Eastern Partnership Summit in November and took note of Georgia's engagement in developing concrete proposals for the period up to 2020. The Association Council underlined the importance of translating the strategies into clear and concrete policy priorities and deliverables.

The Council was chaired by the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Ms. Federica Mogherini. Prime Minister of Georgia, Mr. Giorgi Kvirikashvili led the Georgian delegation.

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