

Joint press statement following the 5th Association Council meeting between the EU and Georgia

The European Union and Georgia held the 5th meeting of the Association Council on 5 March 2019. The Association Council took note of the 2018 Association Implementation Report on Georgia and positively assessed the state of the EU-Georgia relations since the last Association Council in February 2018.

The sides welcomed the excellent state of EU-Georgia relations and reaffirmed their continued commitment to advance Georgia's deeper political association and economic integration with the EU, as highlighted by the first high-level meeting between the Georgian government and members of the European Commission in November 2018. The Association Council welcomed the discussions that took place at the meeting and noted the readiness of both sides to follow-up on its results. 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 took note of Georgia's "Roadmap 2EU" which aims at enhancing Georgia's integration with the EU.

Both sides reaffirmed their continued commitments to bring tangible benefits to the lives of Georgian citizens in line with the Association Agenda's four key areas of cooperation: economic development and market opportunities; strengthening institutions and good governance; connectivity, energy efficiency, environment and climate change; enhancing mobility and people-to-people contacts.

The Association Council welcomed the fact that the Presidential elections, on 28 October and 28 November 2018, were held in an overall competitive environment. It also acknowledged some shortcomings and agreed on the importance of addressing all OSCE/ODIHR recommendations in order to further strengthen the environment favourable for the democratic conduct of elections, especially in view of the parliamentary elections in 2020. The Association Council welcomed the entry into force of the revised Constitution in December 2018 which concluded Georgia's transition to a full parliamentary system. The Association Council encouraged all political actors to work together and to maintain an open dialogue, including with civil society, in order to further strengthen democratic institutions, consolidate pluralistic democracy in Georgia and advance reforms. Both sides stressed the need to continue the successful cooperation established between the EU and Georgia on Strategic Communication and countering disinformation.

The Association Council welcomed the progress made over the year by Georgia in the implementation of comprehensive reforms in the rule of law; it also noted some areas where further progress was needed and encouraged Georgia to move ahead with the 4th wave of judiciary reform and to continue strengthening its judicial institutions by upholding, inter alia, transparency and meritocracy in the appointment of judges. The EU underlined its commitment to continue assisting Georgia in its efforts to further reform the judiciary and safeguard the rule of law.

The Association Council welcomed that a great number of Georgian citizens have benefited from short term visa free travel with Schengen countries. It welcomed continuous efforts of the Georgian Government to address violations of the visa-free travel requirement and encouraged Georgia to continue its commitment to counter the increased numbers of unfounded asylum seekers in some Schengen countries. The EU encouraged Georgia to further enhance cooperation with the EU Member States to fight against irregular migration and organised crime.

The Association Council welcomed progress made in the implementation of the Human Rights Strategy and its Action Plan, as well as the establishment of Human Rights Protection Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The EU recognized Georgia's efforts and encouraged to continue preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence, gender based violence, as well as promoting gender equality, including by strengthening national institutional capacities. The Council stressed the commitment to the universality of human rights for all, regardless of religion or belief, race, sex, language, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability or other. The Association Council commended Georgia on the adoption of the law on Occupational Health and Safety applying to all spheres of economic activity and encouraged Georgia to continue its work to create an effective labour inspection system in order to further improve working conditions.

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 EU continued to be the most important partner of Georgia; the total bilateral trade amounted to EUR 2.76 billion in 2018. The EU invited Georgia to identify concrete products having export potential to the EU, on the basis of which assistance will be provided. Both sides welcomed successful implementation of structural reforms and underlined the importance of ongoing reforms related to the improvement of the investment climate in Georgia.

The Association Council welcomed the first disbursement of the Macro-Financial Assistance to Georgia in December 2018 and encouraged Georgia to continue the implementation of outstanding agreed policy measures in order to enable the disbursement of the second installment. The EU encouraged Georgia to ensure sustainability of the already implemented reforms and maintain macro-economic stability.

The Association Council reiterated Georgia's strategic role in the field of energy, transport and connectivity and increasingly as a transportation and logistics hub in the region. The EU committed to continue engaging closely with Georgia on the connectivity agenda and on the further extension of the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T). The Association Council welcomed the first EU-Georgia High Level Transport Dialogue on 29 January 2019. Both sides also highlighted the importance of Black Sea cooperation as a step towards enhancing connectivity and international trade between Europe and Asia.

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 European markets, notably via the Southern Gas Corridor and the Black Sea. The EU stressed its commitment to further support the roll-out of energy efficiency standards in public buildings, based on legislative reforms in key areas. The EU reiterated its continuous support for reinvigorating Georgia's agriculture and rural sector to improve living conditions in rural areas as well as to boost export opportunities through better food safety systems. The Association Council noted the importance of enhanced cooperation in the area of civil protection. The EU welcomed the successful implementation of the first European School in Tbilisi as a crucial milestone in the EU's relations with its Eastern partner countries and Georgia's commitment to education reforms.

The EU acknowledged the importance of EU-Georgia cooperation in the field of foreign and security policy and underlined that Georgia continued consolidating its position of a strategic partner of the EU in the region. The Association Council reflected on the issues discussed during the second EU-Georgia Strategic Security Dialogue that took place October on 23 October 2018. 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 reiterated its firm support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognised borders. The EU reiterated its firm commitment to peaceful conflict resolution in Georgia by using all instruments at its disposal including the policy of non-recognition and engagement. The work of the EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia, and the extension of the mandate of the EU Monitoring Mission demonstrate this strong commitment.

The Association Council stressed the crucial importance of the Geneva International Discussions for addressing and resolving the challenges stemming from the conflict between Russia and Georgia in August 2008. It also reiterated that full and effective Incident Prevention and Response Mechanisms (IPRMs) is essential for addressing the safety and humanitarian needs of conflict-affected population on the ground. In this regard, the Council emphasised the urgency of resuming the Gali IPRM without preconditions.

The Association Council was deeply concerned with the continued implementation of so-called "treaties" signed between the Russian Federation and Georgian regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, as well as with other illegal activities of Russia in these regions, in violation of Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, including intensified military build-up, installation of barbed wire fences and artificial barriers along the administrative boundary lines, closure of "crossing points" and restriction of freedom of movement. The Association Council expressed concern over deteriorating humanitarian and human rights situation in both Georgian regions, with particular emphasis on ethnic discrimination of Georgians, prohibition of education in native language, and deprivation of life of Archil Tatunashvili and Giga Otkhozoria. In this regard, the Association Council reiterated that justice should be applied.

The Association Council reiterated the obligation for the Russian Federation to fulfil its international obligations including under the EU-mediated 12 August 2008 Ceasefire Agreement, notably to withdraw its military forces from the territory of Georgia and remove all impediments for establishment of international security mechanisms therein. The Association Council further urged the Russian Federation to provide EUMM access to the whole territory of Georgia, in line with the mandate of the Mission. The Council stressed the obligation to ensure safe and dignified return of all internally displaced persons and refugees to their homes.

The Association Council stressed the importance of increasing support to people-to-people contacts and confidence building measures across the divides. In this respect, the Association Council expressed support for the Georgian peace initiative "A Step to a Better Future".

The EU commended Georgia's active participation in the multilateral dimension of the Eastern Partnership and underlined that continued reform efforts in the partner countries are key to the success of the Eastern Partnership and to the EaP 10th

anniversary celebrations scheduled for this year.

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

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