



EU-Georgia relations from Vilnius to Riga – priorities and challenges

Speech by PM Irakli Garibashvili at the Egmont Royal Institute for International Relations

Brussels, February 2014

Excellencies,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Dear friends,

I am pleased and honoured to address this esteemed audience at Egmont Royal Institute today, in the margins of my first visit to Brussels in capacity of the Prime Minister of Georgia. Let me also thank the Institute for giving me this excellent and very timely opportunity to speak here today about Georgia's prospects and challenges from the Summit of Vilnius to the Summit of Riga.

At the background of significant domestic and foreign policy developments in my country, I have come here to share with you Georgian Government's European and Euro-Atlantic integration agenda. I will also speak about the post-Vilnius challenges, not least due to external factors. In conclusion I shall present to your attention Georgia's expectations for 2015 Eastern Partnership Riga Summit.

First of all, let me make it clear: European and Euro-Atlantic Integration is the cornerstone of Georgia's foreign, as well as domestic policy. It is a National idea, supported by the Georgian people and all major political parties. The outcome of October 2013 Presidential elections served as a clear demonstration of European aspirations of the people of Georgia.

At the same time we are fully conscious that the European integration is a continuous internal process involving wide-scale reforms.

Since coming to power in October 2012, being fully committed to the goal of European Integration, my Government has initiated and implemented key political and economic reforms directed towards strengthening democracy, rule of law, judicial independence, human rights and fundamental freedoms, support businesses and social welfare.

2013 was a year full of various memorable events and achievements in Georgia. To put it shortly, allow me to make six points outlining major accomplishments in our domestic policy:

- First of all, Georgian democracy is proceeding to the next stage of democratic consolidation. October Presidential elections have been widely praised by international observers as free and fair. Besides, the Georgian people

made it clear that they will not tolerate any more deviations from the Democratic path of development and I believe, this is one of the most important achievements of my Nation.

- As another benchmark of Georgia's democratic consolidation, recent constitutional amendments created a more democratic system of checks and balances between the legislative and executive branches. The power centered in the hands of the executive authority has been transferred to the Parliament to strengthen the representative democracy.
- Furthermore, efforts are being made to ensure free and independent judicial system. The Courts have been gradually regaining trust and respect of the people.
- Currently, Georgian media is as free from political pressure as in any other democracy.
- Protection of fundamental human rights and freedoms, including the minority rights are among our key priorities. We are at the final stage of elaboration of the National Human Rights Strategy. In this context, we are particularly grateful for the valuable contribution of the EU adviser on Human Rights and National Minorities Thomas Hammarberg.
- **Last but not least, Georgia is a country, where doing business is easy and businesses freely operate in a competitive environment, with strong guarantees of private property rights. Despite the economic challenges** welfare support is doubled; nationwide health insurance is introduced; **a new Labour Code** is fully in line with the ILO standards; the Government finalizes work on the 2020 Strategy for Socio-Economic Development, which aims to ensure a long-term, sustainable and inclusive economic growth in Georgia. According to the World Bank forecast, Georgian economy will increase by 5-6% in 2014.

As a result, strong efforts of the Government and firm European aspirations of my people made the year 2013 exceptionally successful for the EU-Georgia relations:

- First of all, At the Eastern Partnership Vilnius Summit we initialled the Association Agreement, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), which opened a new chapter in our relations with the EU. We consider this Agreement as a Master plan for the Europeanization of our country. It reflects a fundamental shift in the political association and provides prospects for an unprecedented level of economic integration with the European Union. It increases Georgia's attractiveness as a viable investment destination by opening up wide opportunities for businesses. I expect that these new realities will be duly seized by the Georgian and international business communities.
- Another important achievement at the Vilnius Summit was the signature of the Framework Agreement on participation of Georgia in the EU-led crisis management operations, which, above all, carries a strong message. Alongside our intensive engagement in NATO's ISAF operation in Afghanistan - Georgia being the largest non-NATO troop contributor - our enthusiasm for joining the EU partners in the civilian and military missions reflects Georgia's commitment to be not only the beneficiary of the Euro-Atlantic security arrangements but, to remain a reliable partner to the Western efforts to build peace and security worldwide.

- We have scored significant progress towards finalization of the 1st legislative phase of the Visa Liberalisation Action Plan, which was positively assessed by the Commission. Enhanced mobility through introduction of visa-free travel regime must become a major visible outcome of the EU integration process for ordinary citizens of Georgia. Therefore, my Government is determined to spare no effort in order to achieve this goal by the Eastern Partnership Riga Summit.

While we hail new opportunities opened by the Vilnius Summit, we must also consider the challenges that come with this process:

Number one priority for Georgia is to sign the EU-Georgia Association Agreement as soon as possible. We welcome the statement of President of the European Council Herman van Rompuy, stressing the readiness to sign the Agreement by early autumn 2014. On our part, we are doing everything necessary to make this happen. However, I would like to underline that the Association Agreement in itself is not an end game. It is a step towards our eventual integration in the European Union. As Commissioner Stefan Fule noted at the Munich Conference, there should be a light in the end of the tunnel.

The second point, which I want to make here, is that we are more than ever determined to translate declared commitments into concrete actions and policies for the benefit of our citizens. We are resolved to intensify our reform efforts to prepare solid ground for the implementation of the Association Agreement, which is more complex and demanding process.

Thirdly, the new realities to be opened by the signature and provisional application of the Agreement also imply comprehensive and costly reforms that my country has pledged to undertake. To this end, the Government started to plan the reform agenda in line with respective obligations under the Association Agreement. We are also ready to timely finalize the Association Agenda. We believe that our endeavours will be duly supported by the European Union, in accordance to the principles of differentiation and more-for-more.

Dear Friends,

A number of Eastern European Partners, including Georgia, have come under increasing pressure from the Russian Federation, especially in recent months, to reconsider their European aspirations. We have no illusion as to the possibility of further provocative actions from Moscow, especially before the signature of the Association Agreement.

However, we will remain vigilant to prevent any escalation that could hinder the signature or the implementation of the Agreement. We are ready to withstand any pressure because what is at stake is not just another international agreement, but rather the European future of Georgia.

At the same time, lessons should be learned from the recent developments in the Eastern Partnership region. The European Union should use all its power to avert any undue interference from a third party in its relations with the Eastern European partners. We must join our efforts and design a common position to forestall possible coercive measures directed against the Eastern Partnership.

We should together defend the fundamental principle of non-interference and the right of each nation to define and conduct its own foreign policy in accordance with the OSCE Helsinki Final Act.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Over the years, Georgia has been trying to lower tensions in its relations with Russia and we have been consistent in our efforts.

The previous government undertook the pledge not to use force in pursuing de-occupation, which we reiterated in 2013. Georgia introduced the visa-free regime for the citizens of Russia, and agreed to Russia's accession to WTO.

In order to decrease the tensions we have started exploring the various areas of cooperation without detriment to Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Since our government came to power, we appointed the Prime Minister's special representative for the relations with Russia. We achieved some results, such as gradual opening of the Russian market for Georgian products, transport links have improved, people-to-people contacts intensified.

At the same time, we decided not to boycott the Sochi Olympic Games. We have even offered to cooperate on the issues related to the security of the Games and on our part do everything to prevent any provocations against the Olympic Games.

Despite these efforts of my Government, Moscow still continues provocative and destructive activities by illegally installing barbwires and fences along the occupation line, that engender deplorable humanitarian implications for the local population. We expect further attempts from the Russian Federation to increase pressure on Georgia.

My Government will continue to work closely with the EU and other international partners and friendly nations in order to avert any further deterioration of the situation.

In this respect I would like to particularly underline the critical role of the EU in the peaceful resolution of the Russia-Georgia conflict: Its unwavering support for Georgia's territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders is crucial; The EU's non-recognition policy towards Georgia's occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali is of paramount importance; The EU Monitoring Mission and the EU's contribution to the confidence building between the war-divided communities as well as its active participation in the Geneva International Discussions is invaluable.

Dear Friends,

2014 is the year of important anniversaries in the EU-Georgian relations. Ten years ago Georgia joined the European Neighbourhood Policy. Five years ago Georgia became part of the EU Eastern Partnership initiative.

This year we will sign the Association Agreement which should become the logical consequence of what we have accomplished during our fruitful cooperation with the EU. Today, any threat to the future of the Eastern Partnership is our common threat. Our cooperation to avert these threats is a necessity.

With this necessity in mind, we pledge to work closely with our partners in Brussels, as well as in each and every European Capital in order to make the Eastern Partnership a successful European project. We also expect to see the EU policy in tune with what is at stake for Europe with the Eastern Partnership policy.

We also expect that 2014 will be marked with another important development in NATO-Georgia relations. Considering our progress on the track of democratic reforms and Euro-Atlantic integration, we do expect that NATO duly acknowledges Georgia's performance, reflects it in concrete decisions, and takes the next step in our integration, at the NATO summit in UK.

In my concluding remarks, I would like to shortly outline what we pledge to do and what we expect to achieve by the Eastern Partnership Riga Summit:

- We pledge to continue a far reaching reforms agenda in line with our commitments under the EU-Georgia Association Agenda;
- We pledge to further consolidate our democratic achievements and remain a model of successful democratic development in the region;
- We expect to sign the Association Agreement by the early autumn this year;
- We are ready to participate in the EU programs, such as Creative Europe, Erasmus +, Horizon 2020 and to explore new avenues of cooperation under the CSDP;
- We expect to start implementation of the provisions of the Association Agreement pertaining to trade and take first steps towards gradual integration into the European Union's common economic area. I hope that at the Riga Summit we will be able to positively evaluate the early results of implementation of the Association Agreement;
- We will work hard to achieve Commission's positive recommendation on the visa waiver for short-term travel by the citizens of Georgia;
- We expect to carry out new projects in the fields of transport, energy, education and culture;
- We expect to enhance the EU's role in the peaceful conflict resolution in Georgia.
- and to see stronger political and financial support from the EU, including effective implementation of new Instruments of assistance;

I am confident that we can make it happen!

I expect a constructive exchange of opinion on how to achieve that.

Thank you for your attention.