

STUDY VISIT TO GEORGIA

GEORGIA ON MY MIND

There is one over-riding impression that strikes anyone meeting with politicians in Georgia; they all seem to be young, highly educated, competent, articulate and multi-lingual. From all sides of the political spectrum there is a prevailing sense of optimism; a feeling that Georgia has a great future and that they are determined to make it happen. That sense of confidence is reflected even in the names of the mainstream and largely pro-western political parties. Currently in power is the 'Georgian Dream – Democratic Georgia' Party (affiliated to the S&D). The main opposition movement is the 'European Georgia Party' (affiliated to the EPP), an offshoot of the 'United National Movement', the former governing party originally founded by Mikheil Saakashvili, the enfant terrible of Georgian politics. Saakashvili, a former President of Georgia, was stripped of his Georgian citizenship by his arch-Nemesis Bdzina Ivanishvili, a multi-billionaire oligarch and former Prime

Minister of Georgia, who founded the Georgian Dream Party. There is huge support for further EU integration. Opinion polls repeatedly show public backing of over 80% and Georgia is now considered to be the 'front-runner' in the long list of Balkan and Trans-Caucasian countries vying to join the EU and NATO. The EU has reciprocated by spending a generous EUR 120 million annually in Georgia, where the small 3.7 million population are understandably grateful recipients. Nevertheless, 50% of the Georgian economy still relies on agriculture and there is a huge disparity between the per capita GDP of \$20,000 p.a. in the capital Tbilisi, and the paltry \$2,000 in most rural areas. Serious and successful efforts have been made to tackle poverty, corruption and electoral fraud and the Georgian economy is now growing at an annual rate of 5%. But there is a clear understanding among all of the political parties that rural, agricultural poverty will have to be confronted

and it is emerging as a key issue in the campaign for the autumn 2020 elections.

Against this predominantly positive background is, sadly, the looming dark cloud of Russian aggression. More than 20% of Georgian territory is now occupied by Russia. The regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia, both scenes of violent separatist conflicts which left thousands dead and tens of thousands homeless in August 2008, are now virtual no-go areas. Putin allows limited visits to Abkhazia by the UNDP, but South Ossetia has become a Russian military camp and the ill-defined demarcation lines established by the Russians are now blockaded with tangled razor wire, guarded by military watchtowers. This illegal 'border' slices through villages, fields and gardens. Georgians attempting to cross the wire to visit friends and family or even to attend weddings and funerals, are regularly arrested, taken to court and fined.

Hundreds of thousands were forced to flee during the 2008 war. Abkhazia formerly had a population of 560,000. It is now 160,000. South Ossetia's pre-war population of 120,000 has been ruthlessly slashed to only 20,000. Georgian government ministers claim that those who remain inside the two occupied territories routinely suffer human rights abuse, a lack of freedom of expression and widespread discrimination; their children are even denied education in their own native Georgian language. Scores of Georgian villages were completely destroyed by the Russian-backed separatists, particularly in



Group picture with Tamar Khulordava, Chairperson of the European Integration Committee and Archil Talakvadze, Chairman of the Parliament of Georgia.

GEORGIA: THE EU OR NATO?

The FMA's visit to Georgia from 29 September to 4 October 2019 yielded interesting insights, including for me, although I had been following the country's development since 1993 and written a good deal about the country¹.

The Georgian Dream (GD) party, which has been in power since 2012/13, has adopted a pragmatic approach towards Russia, which has led, among other things, to a resumption of Georgian exports of wine and mineral water to the north, following their suspension as a result of the anti-Russian stance of the Saakashvili regime. At the same time, it is clear that Georgia still has a long way to go to achieve stable economic and social development. The FMA group's meeting with Georgian NGOs² also showed that, when representatives of popular movements criticise the GD regime, it is not without justification. What has irritated some EU representatives is the action taken by the Georgian justice system against the Saakashvili regime. Many people, including the Minister of the Interior, Vano Merabishvili, have been sentenced to imprisonment, and former President Saakashvili is a wanted man. Sweden's then

Minister for Foreign Affairs Carl Bildt was at the forefront of the criticism of the GD regime, inter alia in a tweet of 6 August 2014 in which he accused Georgia of 'deviating from the European path in using the justice system for revenge'. Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili rejected Bildt's attack, saying that Bildt was a member of 'the club of Saakashvili's friends'. Justice Minister Thea Tsulukiani responded with a statement of the charge sheet against Saakashvili. Bildt's rejoinder could have been perceived as a threat: 'If the Prime Minister does not want to listen to the best friends of his country, that is his choice. We take note.' At the FMA's meeting with Thea Tsulukiani (still Minister of Justice), she confirmed that she had interpreted Bildt's tweet as a threat. From whom? The EU? The fact is that Bildt did not even have the backing of the Swedish Government. He has now left politics, but his private vendetta could have damaged relations between Georgia and the EU. The Georgian representatives³ spoke about the EU and NATO as if they were different wings of the same organisation. As a representative of one of the six EU Member States that are not NATO members, I had to respond. My impression of the EU is that there is a majority that would like to see a more independent European identity

and does not favour the tendency to regard the EU as an appendage to NATO. In addition, there are perhaps lessons that Georgia could learn from non-aligned EU states, such as Finland and Sweden. In 1991, President Mauno Koivisto of Finland declined an offer from the President of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, to allow Finland to buy back Karelia (which Russia had annexed in 1940) for USD 15 billion; its reconstruction would have been too expensive, costing an estimated USD 65 billion. Following the loss of Finland to Russia in 1809, Sweden decided not to attempt to recapture it militarily but (according to the poet Esaias Tegnér) 'within the borders of Sweden to win Finland back'. Finland gained its independence from Russia rather than from Sweden, which is one reason why today Finland and Sweden are each other's closest allies. A visit to the EUMM in Gori reminded the FMA delegation that the EU is an autonomous force in the region. When other international organisations fail to speak out, the EU can contribute practically to the peaceful development of everyday life in a disputed area. This makes a former MEP proud to represent the EU, as a peaceful and non-military organisation.

1. *Georgia pawn in the new great game, 2010; Är Ryssland ett hot, exemplet Georgien, 2018*

2. *International Society for fair Elections and Democracy, Georgian Young Lawyers Association (GYLA): Transparency International, Open Society Georgia Foundation, Charter of Journalistic Ethics, Media Development Foundation, Georgian Trade Unions Confederation, Human Rights Education and Monitoring Centre.*

3. *Tamar Khulordava, Chairperson of the European Integration Committee, Archil Talakvadze, Chairman of the Parliament of Georgia, Sophie Katsarava, Chairperson of the Foreign Relations Committee, David Zalkaliani, Foreign Affairs Minister of Georgia*

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