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Challenges and Perspectives: Georgia after the Election in 2012

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After the recent political changes in Georgia there has been a renewed interest on the part of our partners towards the country, especially plans and goals of its Government.

I would like to underscore that in October 2012 Georgia passed a litmus test of holding successful parliamentary elections that marked the first peaceful transition of power in the history of the country. This happened due to the declared will of the Georgian people, as well as significant support from the international community.

We appreciate the work of an unprecedented number of observers who were monitoring the pre-election period as well as elections themselves.

After the establishment of the new Cabinet, the Prime Minister declared his commitment to the co-habitation process. According to the principle of co-habitation, we have retained almost all public servants in ministries and governmental agencies, as in the case of my Ministry. We are committed to obtaining the imperative objective of the cohabitation process, which is forging consensus on the topic of Georgia's vital national interests and priority issues related to the sovereignty and security of the state. The Government of Georgia is committed to build a strong and effective democratic state where human rights and fundamental freedoms are protected. We will be actively engaged in establishing the truly democratic institutions, uphold and strengthen the rule of law, foment the practice of good governance and accountability, and preserve transparency of our institutions and decision-making

process, as well as conduct sound and effective political and economic reforms.

Constitutional Reform: For the first time in nine years there is no constitutional majority in the Parliament, therefore parliamentary majority needs consent from the opposition to impose the constitutional system of checks and balances. The vivid example of cohabitation is the recent amendment to the constitution, which was unanimously adopted by the Parliament. The amendment is consistent with international constitutional norms and removes the President's unilateral power to appoint a new Government without Parliament's approval. It was truly a bipartisan measure that paves the way for the consolidation of democracy in Georgia. Moreover, the Parliament of Georgia actively cooperates with the Venice Commission on the issues related to constitutional reform and takes into consideration relevant recommendations provided by the Commission. This was also implied in the mentioned amendment.

Judicial Reform: Although the judiciary has been criticized and there has been public demand to carry out dramatic reforms, the Government has opted for an extremely cautious method of reform based on recommendations by non-governmental and international organizations. This reform aims at empowering democratic processes and individual judges in the judiciary system, so the previous level of political influence does not reoccur.

Media Environment: The media have been made independent from governmental pressure. The television company Imedi was returned to private ownership. The existence of more pluralistic media and their accessibility is welcome.

* Paper based on remarks at the conference "Challenges and Perspectives: Georgia after the Election in 2012" (IPRIS/Universidade Lusíada, 23 May 2013).



Public Engagement: The Government pays special attention to public engagement and takes into account criticism and comments provided by civil society. A number of formats have been developed with a view to ensure the engagement of the non-governmental sector in this process, including those who now have been provided with the ability to monitor penitentiaries. Several initiatives of the Government have been halted or modified in compliance with critical public opinion.

Labor Code: Works on a new Labor Code are underway under the guidance of the Ministry of Justice. The new Georgian Labor Code, which has been already adopted by the Parliament on its first hearing, is in harmony with the relevant legislations of European *acquis communautaire*. The Government actively cooperated on this issue with the International Labor Organization, NGOs and other organizations.

Boosting Economic Development and welfare of the citizens are among the priorities of the new Government, which is resolved to implement the social and economic policies and reforms. In this regard, a special team is working on setting several investment funds to reinvigorate the country's economy, assisting both local and foreign investors as well as to generate additional resources for agricultural projects. The Government has already secured resources for these funds and they soon will start functioning.

The Fight against Corruption, especially its elite component, remains one of the main priorities of the new Government. We will pay particular attention to ensuring private property rights that will be conducive to enhancing a favorable investment climate and will contribute to creation of new enterprises and jobs.

Let me briefly touch upon the foreign policy agenda of the Government of Georgia. From the very first day, the newly elected Government made it clear that Georgia's main foreign policy priorities remain unchanged. The Government remains determined to ensure the continuity of Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration process. This approach exceeds political party lines and is based on a firm quest of the Georgian people, its European culture, history and identity. Moreover, there is a consensus over the issue among the major political actors in Georgia, as documented in a common resolution on Basic Directions of Georgia's foreign policy adopted in March of this year. As stated in the resolution, Georgia's foreign policy is defined by Georgia's national interests and stems from the goal to ensure the well-being of its citizens.

Georgia is resolved to implement its European integration priorities by following a gradual and consistent approach, and by making the best use of all available cooperation instruments and mechanisms. In this process, we are guided by and are committed to the implementation of the priorities reflected in the bilateral and multilateral Eastern Partnership Road Map. This concerns both domestic reforms as well as the commitment to further

develop cooperation with the EU in different dimensions, including the strengthening of democracy, justice, rule of law, good governance, economic and social issues, transport, agriculture, and so on.

The Government is committed to further develop cooperation under the Eastern Partnership framework to ensure the highest possible degree of the countries' integration into the EU through political association and economic integration.

Georgia has demonstrated good progress and its commitment to timely fulfill all key tasks on the EU-Georgia cooperation agenda. We strongly believe that the achievements of partners in their implementation of the Eastern Partnership goals should be taken into account, and that the Vilnius Summit should be the turning point by giving European integration prospects for the willing and able partner countries.

Meanwhile, in the run-up to the Summit of Vilnius the Government of Georgia is committed to exert efforts to significantly advance in several important directions. First, this means finalization of negotiations and initialing of the Association Agreement, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA). The Association Agreement will bring the level of political and economic relations between the EU and Georgia to a qualitatively new level and make the EU integration process irreversible. We have made excellent progress on negotiations on the Agreement, and most of the text has been agreed. As for the DCFTA we are committed to build on existing significant progress and to implement further relevant reforms that will open the EU's internal market. Georgia has shown great progress in justice, liberty and security-related reforms, as well as in the implementation of the EU-Georgia Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreements. As a result, we have a Visa Liberalization Dialogue with the EU and respective Action Plan. Our aim is to finalize the legislative phase of the Action Plan by the EaP Vilnius Summit and move to the second, operational phase. Alongside European integration, Georgia's aspiration for NATO membership remains a key priority. Hence, we spare no effort to further advance our path to NATO membership. We intend to keep up and strengthen the positive dynamics of our integration process.

We are effectively using the mechanisms devised to implement the Bucharest decision. We have recently elaborated on the fifth ANP, which had a particularly positive feedback in Brussels; the NATO-Georgia Commission is being implemented with a vibrant and dynamic agenda on different levels that contributes to keeping active political dialogue and practical cooperation with NATO. We attach particular importance to the next visit, planned later this summer, of the North Atlantic Council to Georgia. It will be their third visit in Georgia. I would like to underscore that the frequency of high-level visits in non-member states is unprecedented and underlines the remarkable intensity of cooperation between NATO and Georgia.



I am also proud to say that Georgia has become a reliable partner for NATO. Georgia is an active security contributor and a provider, rather than just a consumer, of Euro-Atlantic security. We have participated in ISAF from its earliest days, fighting shoulder to shoulder with the allied forces. Moreover, we have increased our contribution by deploying one additional battalion under the US command; this makes Georgia the largest non-NATO troop contributor and the first per-capita contributor to ISAF after the United States. We are ready for the post ISAF engagement by contributing to sustaining Afghan National Security Forces after 2014.

In consequence, Georgia's successes have moved it a lot closer to NATO since the Bucharest summit. We believe the integration is merit-based and it is essential to see the continuous support of the NATO and acknowledgement of the progress achieved.

However, against the background of steady progress we are still facing significant security challenges. To address these challenges Georgia is making its best efforts, but even this would not be sufficient without strong support by the international community, which played decisive role in terminating the 2008 Russia-Georgia war.

Currently the EU Monitoring Mission is the only international mechanism on the ground that monitors the situation along the occupation line. As such the Mission fulfills an invaluable task of guarding security in the vicinity of the occupied territories. We hope that in the future the EUMM will be transformed into a full-scale Common Security and Defense Policy mission tasked with police and peacekeeping functions, and help to the safe and dignified return IDP's and refugees.

I would also like to use this opportunity and once again express my deepest appreciation for Portugal's strong support of Georgia's territorial integrity and sovereignty. We

greatly appreciate Portugal's steadfast support of non-recognition policy of the occupied territories of Georgia and its efforts aimed at preventing so-called checkbook diplomacy attempted in several of its former colonies. Such a stance by Portugal is vital for contributing to the end of my country's occupation and to the security, peace, and stability of the whole region.

For our part, while preserving the continuity of Georgia's foreign policy goals, we have introduced a novel component to our foreign policy and have announced our readiness to start dialogue with Russia. The appointment of Special Representative of the Prime Minister on the issues of Relationship with the Russian Federation is a clear demonstration that Georgia attaches significant importance to the improvement of relations with our neighbor through incremental steps on concrete issues, such as trade, economic and cultural ties. In the framework of this initiative, the appointed Special Representative, Zurab Abashidze, met with Russia's Deputy Foreign Minister on 14 December 2012. The meeting, assessed positively by both parties, was a first effort aimed at recovering bilateral relations. The second meeting between the Georgian and Russian sides took place in Prague on 1 March 2013.

I would like also to stress that the Geneva Discussions format is the only forum for the dialogue with Russia in conflict. We will remain committed to this process.

In conclusion, let me once again underline that Georgia's pursuit for establishing a full-fledged democracy and its European and Euro-Atlantic aspiration is steadfast. We are moving forward, but there is still road to cover. The support of our friends, through both valuable recommendations and voicing our common interests, is of vital importance along the way.

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