



EU-Georgia Parliamentary Association Committee

Fourth Meeting

Strasbourg, 15-16 February 2017

FINAL STATEMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Pursuant to Article 411(3) of the Association Agreement

The fourth meeting of the EU-Georgia Parliamentary Association Committee (PAC) was held in Strasbourg on 15-16 February 2017, under the co-chairmanship of Mr. Sajjad Karim on behalf of the European Parliament and of Ms Tamara Khulordava on behalf of the Parliament of Georgia; the Committee heard Mr Luc Devigne and Mr Mathieu Bousquet on behalf of the EEAS / EC, and M. Victor Dolidze on behalf of the Government of Georgia. Having thus considered the state of play of EU-Georgia relations, the Parliamentary Association Committee agreed upon the following final statement and recommendations:

The Parliamentary Association Committee:

1. Expresses its satisfaction at seeing the Visa Liberalisation Action Plan having been brought to its natural conclusion, on the basis of Georgia's own merits, on Thursday 2 February 2017, with the EP Plenary voting with an overwhelming majority in favor of lifting visa requirements for the citizens of Georgia, a front-runner country of the Eastern Partnership;
2. Notes that this positive outcome was the result of Georgia's consistent reforms and progress in all areas covered by the four blocks of the VLAP over the past years, and pays tribute to the impressive efforts made in this regard;
3. Expects that the Council will swiftly proceed with the finalization of the adoption of the related suspension mechanism, which the EP Plenary adopted at its February II session, under the terms of the December trilogues; thus expects visa-free travel to become a concrete reality during the month of March, demonstrating that the EU delivers;
4. Trusts that this development will facilitate people-to-people contacts, will include Georgian citizens residing in its breakaway regions, strengthen business, social and cultural ties between the European Union and Georgia, and demonstrate that closer relations with the European Union do bring concrete results and tangible benefits to all;
5. Notes with satisfaction that a bipartisan approach has consistently prevailed over this specific issue within both the European and the Georgian parliaments; values this common spirit of bipartisanship and the fact that, in Georgia, a core European and Euro-Atlantic policy orientation has been consistently shared by Majority and Opposition alike, as affirmed by Parliament's foreign policy resolution adopted with bipartisan support on December 29, 2016

declaring strong European aspirations of the Georgian people;

6. Recalls the key conclusion of the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final report, that the October elections were competitive, well-administered, and that fundamental freedoms were generally respected;

7. Stresses that, in terms of electoral standards, Georgia remains an unique example in the region and beyond; recalls, however, that according to the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission Final Report further efforts in some areas would improve confidence in the electoral process and trusts that the EU and the OSCE/ODIHR will assist the Georgian authorities in addressing such issues; expresses hope for meaningful investigation of all acts of violence during the 2016 election campaign;

8. Reaffirms that media pluralism remains a core shared value, together with freedom of the media and freedom of expression, which constitute the fundamental values of any democratic society; in this respect, notes with satisfaction that the OSCE/ODIHR election observation mission to 8 October 2016 parliamentary elections acknowledged improvements since 2012 in overall media pluralism; thus encourages further strengthening of the independence of regulatory authorities for the media, reinforcing media independence and professionalism and aligning the audio-visual legislation with relevant European standards; recalls the European Parliament Resolution on the implementation of the Association Agreements / Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements with Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine (2015/3032(RSP)) and calls, in this respect, on the Georgian authorities to further guarantee media pluralism, editorial independence and transparent media ownership;

9. Welcomes the results of the third EU-Georgia Association Council on 2 December 2016 and takes note of the first annual Association Implementation Report; further acknowledges the progresses seen in the effective implementation of the Association Agreement /DCFTA and welcomes Georgia's achievement in becoming a true regional leader in terms of developing business environment, and continuing to further improve in this field;

10. Underlines that it is important to maintain the pace and course of reforms and encourages Georgian authorities to continue making full use of EU assistance, hoping that the latter will further reflect the ambitious goals of the AA; sees in the Georgian example the proof that the EU "*more for more*" approach is delivering; thus encourages the Commission to further enhance the assistance including through supporting a participation of Georgia in EU Agencies and Community Programs as well as through considering the introduction of a new Assistance Instrument for the AA implementation;

11. Stresses the key role that civil society already plays in annual planning and monitoring the implementation of the AA, but also in reflecting on policy-making and reform processes; welcomes the fact that the Georgian government involved CSOs in the planning process of the revised Association Agenda for 2017/2020, and reminds of the value of addressing, in both substance and form, the observations provided in this respect;

12. Also recalls that many of these observations have focused on a number of fields already addressed in the landmark "Georgia in Transition" Hammarberg report; thus welcomes the ongoing reforms to achieve the full implementation, in letter and spirit, of these recommendations, especially in the criminal justice system; emphasizes, in this connection, the value of the steps being taken to fully achieve the depolitization of the Prosecutor's office and transparent judicial proceedings, free from political motivation and to further strengthen equality of arms; welcomes the efforts made to implement rehabilitation and to promote the

use of non-custodial sentences;

13. Warmly welcomes the cooperation of the Georgian authorities with the Venice Commission of the Council of Europe, particularly in the fields of justice and constitutional reform, and looks forward to the continuation of a pattern of constructive engagement in this respect; expresses hope that the Georgian authorities will respect its recommendations in particular with regards to the election legislation;

14. Reiterates its congratulations for Georgia's innovative e-procurement system in order to substantially increase transparency, efficiency and accountability – key factors in the fight against high-level corruption, which presents different challenges when compared to dealing with petty corruption, which has largely been eradicated already;

15. Welcomes the adoption of the new Juvenile Justice Code; is particularly encouraged by Georgia's imminent ratification of the Istanbul Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and calls the numerous EU Member States that have regrettably not done so already to follow this example;

16. Notes positively the comprehensive reform of the labour code during the past legislature, as a first step to allow the full compliance with the labour rights and standards set out by the International Labour Organization, inter alia ILO Convention 81; calls Georgia to consider accession to this Convention, and to step up efforts in order to transform the labour inspection into a fully-fledged effective mechanism, with adequate financial and administrative resources and unrestricted access to the workplace; calls on the Government of Georgia to effectively use the mechanism of social partnership -Tripartite Commission and seek solutions to labour disputes in the framework of tripartite dialogue to promote social peace and sustainable development;

17. Emphasizes that the AA covers the entire internationally recognized territory of Georgia, for the benefit of the whole population and reiterates its firm support for the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia, within its internationally recognized borders;

18. Welcomes the fact that, despite a challenging geopolitical environment, Georgia is taking steps in adopting a flexible and pragmatic approach towards engagement with its breakaway regions; reiterates its calls to the EU to also step up efforts to concretely reach-out to civil society in Georgia's occupied territories of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia, exploring all the possibilities the AA/DCFTA could offer;

19. Strongly condemns all steps Russia has been taking in promoting so-called agreements of "partnership and integration" with these territories, as they can constitute a further step towards annexation; further condemns the continuation of the Russian-driven process of so-called borderisation along the administrative boundary lines (ABL) with Abkhazia/Georgia and South Ossetia/Georgia to the detriment of local population, as hindering any confidence building; particularly deplores the new restrictions of freedom of movement alongside the Abkhazian ABL, with the closing down of several crossing points;

20. Strongly condemns the planned Referendum and Presidential Election in Georgia's occupied territory of Tskhinvali Region/South Ossetia to be held on 9th April and stresses that such actions may not be implemented on the territory occupied by a foreign state. These actions violate the principles of international law and are directed against the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia;

21. Stresses the need of intensification of efforts by the international community in order to ensure access of international human rights monitoring mechanisms to Georgia's occupied territories ; at the same time, repeats its calls to the Russian Federation to fulfil its obligations under the Ceasefire Agreement of 12 August 2008 and the Implementing Measures of 8 September 2008 to withdraw all its military forces and to allow full access to the EU Monitoring Mission to Abkhazia and South Ossetia;
22. Welcomes the strong commitment of the EU to remain engaged in the stabilization and conflict resolution efforts, including through its co-chairmanship of the Geneva International Discussions, the efforts of the EUSR for South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia and the continued sustained presence of the EUMM; further welcomes the decision of the Council to prolong the EUMM mandate;
23. Recalls the need to recognise and expose Russian disinformation and propaganda, in Georgia as well as in the EU, as identified in the EP plenary resolution of 23 November 2016 on EU Strategic Communication, and also welcomes the steps taken to successfully implement the Communication and Information Strategy in the sphere of EU Integration (2014-2017) in Georgia; stresses the need for a close cooperation between the EU and Georgia on Strategic Communication;
24. Underlines the role the parliament of Georgia has to play in the adoption of the required AA/DCFTA legislation as well as in the political oversight of the executive in the implementation of the Agreement; stresses that fulfilling these functions requires the development of cross-party constructive dialogue and good coordination mechanisms within parliamentary structures with the assistance of a depoliticized permanent civil service, and welcomes the joint efforts about to be initiated under the EP's *Comprehensive Democracy Support Approach* scheme;
25. Reiterates that, in order to be able to meaningfully exercise its parliamentary oversight role, the Parliamentary Association Committee should further be kept informed about the proceedings taking place in the setting of both the Association Committee and its three Sub-Committees; recalls in this precise context the EP resolution of 21 January 2016 on parliamentary scrutiny, calling in particular the European Commission to facilitate the regular and detailed monitoring of the implementation of the AAs/DCFTA in a timely manner;
26. Reaffirms its principled position that the Association Agreement does not constitute a final goal in EU-Georgia relations; points out that pursuant to Article 49 TEU, Georgia, like any other European state, may apply to become a member of the EU provided that it adheres to the principles of democracy, respects fundamental freedoms, human and minority rights, and ensures the rule of law¹;

Adopted in Strasbourg, 16 February 2017, by meeting the double majority required by the Parliamentary Association Committee's Rules of Procedure (14 votes in favour, zero against, and zero abstentions on the EP side; 8 in favour, zero against, and two abstentions on the Georgian side).

¹ EP Plenary resolution 2014/2816, adopted 18.12.2014