

# 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.

South Ossetia and ethnic cleansing forced hundreds of thousands to flee. Sprawling camps now house these internally displaced persons (IDPs) near the Abkhazi and South Ossetian demarcation lines. Georgian politicians say that these people have lived in a state of dependency for the past eleven years as they are still suffering from post-traumatic stress as a result of the violent conflict. They cannot return to their homes and they are reluctant to integrate into the wider Georgian society. The difficult task of keeping a watchful eye on this tense situation has fallen to the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM), an unarmed peacekeeping operation with several hundred monitors from various EU Member States. The EUMM works with an annual budget of around EUR 18 million and has its headquarters in Gori, which, ironically, was also the birthplace of Stalin! Resolving the standoff with Russia; dealing with threats from Saakashvili who says from his current home in Ukraine that he intends to return to Georgia, where he faces instant arrest; responding to claims that the oligarch Ivanishvili is pulling the



*Meeting with representatives of NGO's acting in Georgia on Workers' conditions*

democratic strings in Georgia; and implementing a new and radical system of electoral reform, which will see a fully proportional system introduced at the next elections. These are just a few of the challenges facing the Georgian government and its newly elected president Salome Zourabichvili, a former Green and the first woman to hold the post. But Georgia has dealt with bigger challenges in the past. It has been occupied by the Mongols, Romans, Persians, Turks and Russians; even

Jason and the Argonauts travelled there in 2,000 BC in search of the legendary Golden Fleece. Georgia is the 'cradle of wine'. Ancient amphora used for wine-making, date back to 8,000 BC. Today their wines, mainly from the beautiful area of Kakheti in the foothills of the Caucasus, are eagerly sought by connoisseurs worldwide. With a glass of rich, dark ruby-red Georgian wine made from the rare and prized Usakhelari grapes in one hand, and a copy of the EU's fabled *acquis communautaire* or book of rules in the other, it would be difficult to ignore the pleas of the Georgians for EU and NATO membership. As they say in Georgia when glasses are clinked together "gaumarjos"!



*Picture of the Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Camp in South Ossetia*

**Struan Stevenson**  
 United Kingdom  
 EPP (1999-2009)  
 ECR (2009-2014)  
 struanmep@aol.com

## INDEPENDENT GEORGIA ON MY MIND

Georgia is very young and very old at the same time. Being an ancient nation may be one of the most important facts ingrained in the Georgian psyche. Schoolchildren read about relations with ancient Greeks and Rome, Arabs and Byzantium and every Georgian remembers his country was among the first in the world to adopt Christianity as its state religion, or that it had its Golden Age in the 11th -12th centuries. However, the country became fragmented after this period, and the first political umbrella under which the lands of contemporary Georgia were reunited, was that of the Russian Empire.

A brief interlude of independence in 1918-21 left behind a strong normative idea that an independent state is the only acceptable option. Unfortunately not underpinned by relevant political or institutional traditions, which started to emerge in the late 1980s in the twilight of the weakened Soviet Union. Political parties, independent media and genuine public associations (nobody as yet used the term "NGO") were created. The first multiparty elections

were held in October 1990. Six months later followed the declaration of independence. New state institutions started to take shape, although they were built on the basis of the Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, a part of the Soviet Union. Because the road that the country took these years was particularly bumpy, Georgia's record is probably more dramatic than that of any other post-Soviet State.

The new Georgia starts with the period of perestroika and glasnost, a fateful attempt to liberalize the Kremlin-regime undertaken by the last Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev from 1985 on. Georgians used the new liberties to launch a national-liberation movement. The inevitable tensions with the communist authorities came tragically to a head in the early morning of 9 April 1989, when the Soviet army dispersed a huge pro-independence rally, leaving twenty people, mostly young women, dead. This tragic event represented the moral death of the communist regime in Georgia: its legitimacy was fatally injured and never recovered. The Moscow-authorities were formally in charge for another year and a half, they were never able to implement any policies on their own. The controlling hand of the Kremlin was losing its grip as well.

The October 1990 elections brought a tremendous victory for the anti-communist Zviad Gamsakhurdia. The political agenda was dominated by two ideas: nationalism and democracy. These years were marked by serious challenges to the creation of stable political institutions and had especially to do with the failure of the

different political groups and ethnic communities to reach a consensus beyond the twofold objective. On the surface disagreements were about tactics, but in essence the divisions were about personalities and ambitions of the different leaders. Gamsakhurdia had emerged as the most charismatic. His rule had a strong popular mandate but was soon denounced as too authoritarian. Many leaders failed to reach a consensus and considered each other enemies rather than competitors. Adding to the difficulties in achieving political pluralism was the problem of ethnic-territorial conflicts. The emergence of Georgian nationalism was paralleled by of counter-nationalist programmes in the autonomous regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Georgian society has demonstrated its commitment to democratic values and a firm resolution not to tolerate autocratic rule. However, several attempts at transitions have yet to lead to the creation of a system of consolidated democratic institutions. In these beginning years still a long way to go.<sup>1</sup>

**Jan-Willem Bertens**  
ELDR, Netherlands (1989-1999)  
bertens@hetnet.nl

*1. This resume has been grounded on a study of The Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy 2005. The writer was president of the Supervisory Board.*



*Exhibition of a traditional dance in Lagodekhi Region*



## 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 country<sup>1</sup>.

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 NGOs<sup>2</sup> 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 representatives<sup>3</sup> 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; År 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*

**Per Gahrton**  
Greens/EFA, Sweden (1995-2004)  
per.gahrton@gmail.com

## WE NEED A NEW HELSINKI CONFERENCE

Europe as a part of the Eurasian Plate has imprecise borders with both Asia and Africa.

After two World Wars, which affected nations all over the planet, there was an outcry in many parts of Europe: "Never again". This "never again" gave birth to one of the most innovative political constructions in human history, the European Union. It bases itself on the principle of sovereign equality of all its Members, but is resolved to a process of "creating an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe".

Seen from the outside world, the EU is widely perceived as the part of the world, where human rights and fundamental freedoms as well as social rights are best preserved. In this part of the world the Eastern Partnership links the EU to Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Moldova, Ukraine and of course Georgia. Georgia and the EU also signed an Association Agreement. The key trade component of this Association Agreement is the Deep and



*From the right to the left: Robert Goebbels, FMA member with Brigitte Langenhagen, FMA Board Member and Jan-Willem Bertens, FMA Vice President and leader of the FMA Delegation to Georgia*

Comprehensive Free Trade Area since 2014. It removed all import duties on goods and provides for broad mutual access to trade in services.

Thanks to this comprehensive cooperation the EU is Georgia's largest trading partner, even if the EU should be less bureaucratic towards farmers exports. In addition, the EU grants financial assistance to Georgia.

Under the European Neighbourhood Instrument funds up to 450 million EUR are earmarked for Georgia for the 2017-2020 period.

What started as an experience, the so-called « Schengen Area » allowing now free movements of people within 26 States, encountered an enormous success with citizens all over Europe.

With the migration crisis and with the terrorist attacks in many European countries some politicians attacked the freedom of circulation in the Schengen area. But in order to abolish free circulation, the Member States would need to agree to change the EU-Treaty in accordance with Article 7 TEU.

Since April 2017, Georgian citizens with biometric passports are able to travel to the Schengen area without a visa for stays up to 90 days in any 180-day period. Within the first year more than 250.000 Georgian citizens enjoyed visa-free travel to the Schengen area.

We can be helpful. During the



*A moment of the meeting with David Zalkaliani, Foreign Affairs Minister of Georgia*

## ON SECURITY AND COOPERATION



*FMA Delegation during the visit to the EUMM office in Gori*

Ossetian events in 2008 French President Nicolas Sarkozy, in his capacity as president of the EU-Council, was able to broker a ceasefire between Georgia and Russia. But up to now the European Union Monitoring Mission in Georgia was only able to help to prevent new incidents, not to solve the problem. Before the great EU-enlargement of 2004 the political mantra was, "deepening before enlarging". But the treaties were not adapted in order to allow a smoother functioning of the European Institutions. Neither the Nice Treaty nor the Lisbon Treaty achieved this goal. We need institutional reforms, a smaller but stronger Commission; better decision making in the Council; no more vetoes in Foreign Affairs.

Brexit is an inspiring shock for a lot of anti-Europeans from the extreme right and the extreme left. Even in France the extreme right has already abandoned their claim to leave the Euro. The lessons Europe

will learn through Brexit will hopefully pave the way for an institutional reform.

Before the European institutions will have adjusted to the needs of a much larger Union, there will most certainly be no further enlargement for the foreseeable future.

That is no enjoyable news to the many European countries that want to join the club. They will have to wait. Even Georgia.

I'm personally convinced that we need a "Common House", as Gorbachov coined it. The EU cannot be a closed shop, must be open to all serious candidates fulfilling the democratic criteria. But before any enlargement of the actual house, we first need to consolidate the foundations. And above all: We need new rules about financing the EU.

The EU has a budget, which represents less than 1 percentage point of the combined GDP of the 28 States. This is ridiculously low. The US budget is around 30% of their GDP. The budget of the Federal Republic

is above 40% of German GDP. Even the Swiss Confederation has a budget around 20% of GDP. Without a normalisation of relations with Russia, the European Union and all other independent States of our region will not be able to resolve the many conflicts that take their origin from the implosion of the Soviet Union.

It is neither possible nor desirable to come back to the "status quo ante". But only a new equilibrium will allow the desired peaceful development of our region. The security interests of all the European nations have to be guaranteed. We need a new Helsinki conference on security and cooperation in Europe.

And we have to remember the words of one of the very best diplomats the US ever produced: George Kennan. Kennan wrote in 1985 that Nations have "to admit the validity and legitimacy of power realities and aspirations, to accept them without feeling the obligation of moral judgment, to take them as existing and inalterable human forces, neither good nor bad, and to seek their point of maximum equilibrium rather than their reform or their repression."

**Robert Goebbels**  
S&D, Luxembourg (1999-2014)  
robertg@pt.lu



## THE EU IS IN THE EYES OF MANY PARADISE ON EARTH

Getting to know the country in a Study Visit of the FMA delegation is a remarkable opportunity. Georgia was occupied by the Russians in 1922 and annexed to the Soviet Union and became independent on April 9, 1991. It has had several wars with Russia and still has a conflict today over the occupation of South Ossetia and Abkhazia. It is a country of about 800,000 emigrants, 3.5 million citizens and one million capital Tbilisi. After independence, it was marked by individual periods of internal unrest, especially during elections. It is a land of diversity in terms of architecture and the differences between rich and poor. It is the world cradle of wine production and the invention of amphorae. According to tradition, Prometheus is said to have brought the first fire under the Caucasus. The vast majority of the population supports and wants to join the EU and NATO. The EU also reciprocally promotes integration through, inter alia, financial assistance of EUR 120 million. Economic growth is 4.7%, inflation is around 3%. Opportunities are presented to them



*Tamar Khulordava, Chairperson of the European Integration Committee and Archil Talakvadze, Chairman of the Parliament of Georgia during the meeting with the FMA Delegation*

in historically established industries, the furniture industry and also in the military aviation industry. Favorable climate conditions call for the development of year-round local food production, which is also a hotbed for the development of culinary-related tourism. During the period of independence, the share of tourism is increasing. An interesting project supported by EU funds is the development of hiking in the Caucasus, where the biodiversity area is protected.

The government is committed to developing the country towards the gradual introduction of European standards. The ruling party and the opposition agree on two points: they support integration with the EU and NATO and advocate a peaceful resolution of the conflict with the Russians. They already have an integration agreement and a trade agreement with the EU. Georgia is a leader in the region in terms of development, with regard to Azerbaijan, Ukraine, Armenia and Moldova.

When the autonomous provinces of Abkhazia and South Ossetia declared independence in August 2008, only Russia recognized them and occupied them within a few days. The then President of the European Council, Nikolas Sarkozy, was able to negotiate an agreement with the Russians on a peace agreement and on the activation of the European Peacekeeping Mission ([www.eumm.eu](http://www.eumm.eu)). Today, there are about 300 members who help people on both sides of the border. Even after eleven years, there is no visible progress between Russia and Georgia. In 2018, they elected Georgia

President Salome Zurbishvili, who was born in France to Georgian parents and returned to Georgia a year after studying and having a successful career. The Georgia Dreams Party, which has a majority in parliament, is politically dominant. Parliament has 150 Members, of which the ruling party has 115. There is minimal representation of women. Georgian Dreams is one of the observers of the European Group of Social Democrats and at the same time has party leader Ildiz Ivanishvili, the richest man in Georgia, estimated to have 30% of GDP, which could amount to about 4 billion euros. The opposition joining the observer in the European People's Party is small and very critical. It points to the abolition of television channels that reflect the views of the opposition, as well as to judicial bias and corruption. The government is accused of leading her from a background of Ivanishvili, who is not elected but is the leader of the DG party. More tension is also generated by the planned change in the electoral system and the 2020 parliamentary elections. Our FMA delegation was very well received, the hospitality of the hosts was above expectations. I was personally impressed by the injustice that happens to children on both sides of the borders of occupied areas that they do not have access to education. The world has remained insensitive to such injustices for far too long!

**Zofija Mazej Kukovič**  
EPP, Slovenia (2011-2014)  
[zofija.mazejkukovic@gmail.com](mailto:zofija.mazejkukovic@gmail.com)

## DREAMS, NIGHTMARES, AND A TALE OF TWO BORIS'S

After his success in Russia as an oligarch during the Russian era of privatisation, Boris Ivanishvili returned to his native Georgia with dreams of entering politics. He founded the Georgian Dream Party and became Prime Minister of Georgia.

Back in Georgia he dropped the name Boris by which he was well known in Russia for his original Georgian name of Bidzina. He launched his Georgian Dream Party, became its leader, and his new party attained victory in 2012.

He became prime minister of Georgia on October 2012 but in November 2013 gave up the position to return to civic life. He has now returned to politics and is chairman of the Georgian Dream Party.

Ivanishvili was ranked number 153 in Forbes magazine's list of world billionaires with an estimated worth of \$6.4 billion, making him Georgia's richest person and an influential and controversial figure in Georgia politics.

He was not the only Boris whose name was written large during our visit to Georgia. Each day in Georgia we were asked by our hosts about the UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson and Brexit and the decision to take

the United Kingdom out of the European Union.

All four UK former MEPs, three Conservative and one Labour, agreed that Brexit is madness and the withdrawal of the UK from Europe led by Boris Johnson is a nightmare. It is ironic that Georgia and its influential chair of the governing Georgian Dream Party are desperate for Georgia to join the EU, whilst the UK is moving in the opposite direction with its prime leading the country out of the EU.

The Georgian Dream party chief dropped his Boris name when he returned from Russia to Georgia and the current UK prime minister known as Alex as a child also used his other name Boris since attending the prestigious Eton private school. Ivanishvili has built a luxury palace overlooking the Georgian capital Tbilisi with grounds dotted with sculptures of Henry Moore, a helicopter pad, and an open air swimming pool. He has 4 children including Bera who is a well-known rapper in Georgia.

Boris Johnson was educated at Eton which has provided 20 UK prime ministers, besides the royal princess William and Harry, grandsons of

Queen Elizabeth 11, and even the present Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby.

His brother Joseph is also a Conservative MP described by The Times Guide to the House of Commons as "nicer and saner than his elder brother Boris" and his sister, Rachel, a journalist, and candidate in the 2019 European elections for the anti Brexit Change UK party.

It is interesting that the chair of the Georgian Dream Party, then known as Boris Ivanishvili, made his wealth in Russia and now wants Georgia to look West to the European Union. Boris Johnson attended the European School in Brussels, worked as a journalist in Brussels, and his father, Stanley, is a former MEP and worked at the European Commission. And now Boris wants the UK to abandon links with Brussels and the European Union.

In a world dominated by such political bullies as Trump of America, Putin of Russia, and Erdogan of Turkey, in Europe it's a tale of two Boris's, Dreams and Nightmares.

**Michael McGowan**  
PES, United Kingdom (1984-1999)  
mcgowan.michael@ntlworld.com

### UK Prime Minister Johnson on the late Jo Cox

The words of UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson in a recent exchange in the House of Commons that "the best way of honouring Jo Cox is to get Brexit done" are inaccurate.

Jo Cox MP who was murdered by a far right terrorist whilst attending a surgery in her Batley and Spenborough constituency in the north of England was an active supporter of the UK's membership of the European Union. Before becoming an MP, Jo Cox had worked in Brussels where the city council have named a public square in her honour as the Jo Cox Square in the centre of Brussels adjacent to a favourite music venue she frequented.

I was born, brought up, and went to the same school as Jo Cox in Yorkshire where I was also a public representative and can confirm her commitment to European co-operation.

**Michael McGowan**



## VISIT TO A GEORGIAN PRISON

Our delegation visited the Minister of Justice of Georgia, Ms Thea Tsulukiani, on 1 October. She belongs to the Georgian Dream-Democratic Georgia party, led by the billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili. She too sees the Russian occupation of Abkhazia and South Ossetia as the 'greatest challenge' for her country. The Minister regards her main tasks as being to prepare reforms of the legal system and amendments to the Constitution. The Public Prosecutor's Office has been given autonomous status and is no longer subject to the control of the Minister of Justice. Judges are appointed by the judiciary itself and no longer by politicians. Parliament has also adopted an amendment to the Constitution which will make the electoral system simpler and fairer. At present, the 'mixed system' of party lists and districts one-sidedly favours the Georgian Dream party. As from 2024, the President will also be elected indirectly and will have less power than now.

The Minister was aware of her country's poor record on corruption. She has created a special unit designed to combat unacceptable practices on all fronts. Significant results have already been achieved, particularly among the lower social classes. In response to a question from us as to whether her party's President, Mr Ivanishvili, determined her policy, she replied that she had never received any instructions from him in all her seven years of ministerial office.

During our interview, I had asked about the situation in the prisons. Afterwards she asked me whether I wanted to visit one of them. I



*From left to right: Jan Mulder, FMA member with Thea Tsulukiani, Minister of Justice of Georgia and Bob van den Bos, FMA member*

was certainly keen to. On Friday morning, a car from the Ministry of Justice collected Jan Mulder and myself and took us to Tbilisi's largest prison. The Minister was there in person to escort us. The prison housed 3 000 detainees. We visited the department where the most serious offenders were held: those serving life sentences. An experiment had been launched there which involved allowing convicts to work in a vegetable garden for six hours a day. Seven men were doing this. They seemed to be pleased to have the opportunity to go outside, and told us that the work was not too hard. Rehabilitation programmes had been organised in those departments where prisoners were serving determinate sentences. Afterwards, unaccompanied by the Minister, Jan Mulder and I spoke to an individual prisoner who had been sentenced to 18 years. He described the situation in the prison as 'medieval'. The cells were small, and each housed six people, who were locked up together day and night. When the prison had been

built, eight years ago, no provision had been made for any outdoor exercise! The toilets were not cleaned and it was only possible to take a shower twice a week. This life in captivity was inhumane. The prisoner we spoke to said he was innocent. According to him, the judges were corrupt and it was possible to avoid conviction by offering a large bribe, but he had not been rich enough to do that. His family visited him once a year...

Faced with our findings, the Minister said that she was working hard on prison reform, but that it took money and time. Many improvements had already been made. Previously, prisoners used to be systematically tortured by the guards. She is therefore very grateful for the EU's support for the reforms of the justice system in Georgia. 'We are part of Europe'.

**Bob van den Bos**  
ELDR, Netherlands (1999-2004)  
bobravandenbos@gmail.com

## TEN YEARS OF THE EASTERN PARTNERSHIP

### Future challenges in the region.

The 10th anniversary of the Eastern Partnership is a good time to both take stock of the partnership as an example of cooperation, and look ahead to see how it should develop in the future. The Eastern Partnership, thanks to the conclusion of a series of agreements, has led to closer links being forged between the EU and Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine. At the celebratory dinner marking the 10th anniversary of the Eastern Partnership, President Donald Tusk said: 'This means that 10 years on, there is more Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine in the EU, and – I believe – there is more EU in all of your countries than ever before. We are not only neighbours – we are members of the same European family'. And every family has to think about its future, which is why I would like to focus on the challenges that the Eastern Partnership is facing. The European Union and the Eastern Partnership countries are committed to stabilisation and security. This is natural and in every country's national interest. In this context, the ability to resolve conflict situations like those that are, unfortunately, ongoing in the majority of the Eastern Partnership countries – Donbas and Crimea, Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Nagorno-Karabakh and Transnistria – will have a major impact on the future of the region. Hybrid threats, and the need to tackle those threats effectively, are a relatively new challenge, and the EU has a number of options in this regard, e.g. involving the Eastern Partnership countries in the European

Centre of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats in Helsinki (Hybrid CoE), or granting them observer status within the European Union Agency for Network and Information Security (ENISA).

The differing expectations of the various Eastern Partnership countries are also a challenge. Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine, which have association agreements with the EU, are keen for further integration to take place, whereas Azerbaijan, Armenia and Belarus do not necessarily want that. Individual countries will therefore have to decide where they stand, for example, on an initiative for a 'two-speed partnership' known as Eastern Partnership Plus. The idea here centres around the possibility of the outstanding Eastern Partnership countries joining the Customs, Digital and Energy Union and the Schengen Area (without EU accession). The EU can increase integration with associated countries drawing on experience gained in the operation of the European Economic Area, the customs union with Turkey and the potential agreement between the EU and the UK. A number of constraints, mean, however, that none of those models can be applied directly. The EU, on the other hand, needs to resolve the extremely difficult dilemma of whether it wants at least the leading countries in terms of Eastern Partnership cooperation to one day become full EU Member States. The prospect of membership can stimulate reform and the adaptation process as long as it is perceived as a real prospect, and one that is not too far off in terms of time.

A key challenge for both sides of the Eastern Partnership is Russia's relationship with the initiative. Russia sees the Eastern Partnership as a tool to weaken its influence in the region, and therefore does not support it. And the influence that the EU and the Eastern Partnership countries have in terms of bringing about a change in Russia's stance is extremely limited. Deepening mutual cooperation among the countries most closely involved in cooperation with the EU – Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine – is, however, possible and easier to achieve. As a group of associated countries, they could set up a format similar to that of the Visegrad Group. This would enable them to speak with one voice in dealings with the EU, and make them stronger politically. The internal policies of the various Eastern Partnership countries vary widely. There is no doubt that future relations with the EU will depend heavily on progress in the area of essential EU values such as the rule of law, upholding human and citizens' rights and democratic standards, the independence of the judiciary, solidarity and good governance. Among the many specific challenges, emphasis should be placed on those that relate to the facilitation of people-to-people contacts, including helping the EU institutions cut roaming prices between Eastern Partnership countries and the EU, and increasing funding for the Erasmus+ programme.

**Filip Kaczmarek**  
EPP-ED, Poland (2004-2014)  
filip.kaczmarek@ue.poznan.pl

## THE EU DEVELOPMENT FUND

Ongoing efforts are being made to forge closer ties between Georgia and the European Union with a view to Georgia perhaps joining the EU in the future. Discussions between the European Commission and the Georgian Government have resulted in specific action being taken in a number of areas, including the economy, education and security. Billions have quite rightly been invested in transport projects in Georgia. I say 'quite rightly' because, owing to its geographical location, Georgia can play an important role as a transit country between Europe and Asia.

On education, more than 2 500 Georgian students were studying in the EU in 2015 as part of the Erasmus+ programme. Additional technical and financial support will also make it possible to boost the number of students, exchanges, and scientific and academic projects. Lastly, the support provided for preventing and responding to natural disasters such as forest fires and floods is absolutely vital. It is also necessary that the security of Georgian citizens is ensured, and that action is taken to combat crime and improve civil protection.

The major efforts that the Georgian Government has made must nevertheless continue, or indeed receive extensive support, if there is to be a better policy to pave the way for Georgia to join the European Union.

I am thinking in particular about the development of agriculture. The European Union wants to help Georgia improve its export opportunities, as Georgian agriculture is still developing.



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Since 2013, cooperatives established under the European Neighbourhood Programme for Agriculture and Development (ENPARD) have provided significant support for Georgian farmers in two phases. EUR 24.5 million was provided in Phase I, between 2013 and 2017, and EUR 27 million was provided in Phase II, between 2016 and 2020. Many of the visits we made during our fact-finding trip provided us with insights into agriculture in general, such as the tour of the Wine Tunnel: hewn into a granite mountainside in the Caucasus, it is a cellar used to store 25 000 bottles of wine. The wine is stored below ground in earthenware storage vessels. This production method should be preserved and promoted in order to further develop Georgian businesses in the European Union and the wider world.

The export of agricultural products such as honey through collective farms for beekeepers should be improved, as Georgian honey is distributed in EU countries via Germany.

Our visit to an EU-funded rural development initiative in which

cucumbers were grown in energy-efficient greenhouses was interesting, but the use of fungicides could be problematic in the long term for Georgians' health.

At Georgia technology park we saw how 3D prints and other models were made free of charge for start-ups. The company concerned is promoted by the EU (and funded by the government) and boasts a business incubator, a printed circuit board room, iPhones, gadgets, prototype cards, etc. Businesses can stay on the site for six months. Grants and subsidies are given to companies that sell their wares around the world: currently, there are 58.

The main aspects on which the EU needs to focus its attention are: media independence, employees' working conditions, and the extent of rural poverty despite EU support, which has not achieved the desired result.

**Mireille D'Ornano**

ELDD, France (2014-2019)

blanchedornano@gmail.com



## WE NEED YOU - YOU NEED US

The World is unknown, and Georgia, as a country, has to find, where it is and where it has to go. Some may say that we already found our place - it's Europe. But, how can anyone be sure about it, when many, even in my generation, believe that we always belonged to Asia. This ideological diversity is so risky because, where there is no unity about the idea like this, there is no chance of finding a place in eternity.

Our behavior very often is the same as the people of Western Asia. For example, betraying from a husband is forgivable, because he is a man, and for a wife - it is unacceptable. I, of course, strongly disagree with them. But what about orientation, it's a little bit harder to decide. Being border between two continents makes you a multicultural centre and does not allow you to be free with your decision about culture, orientation or even behaviour. So, I, as a future journalist, want to have a huge impact on it, on this undecided course of us, and with everything. I'll do, I want to show my country, where we want and have, I repeat, have to go. I want and I'll do everything to be the one, alongside my ideological friends, to take our



*FMA Delegation with students of the Tbilisi State University*

country to the long-awaited home - European Union.

As I mentioned up there, my homeland is a multicultural center on the border of two continents, but don't forget that I also said, that we are still on the way of searching for the final destination. We need a better place, like the EU, to introduce to the world, sell in the world and produce for the world, our own culture, culture, and culture. The culture. This word, for me, means - music, sport, dance, love, hospitality and fresh products. Everything you read here is our own and we want to show it to the world. The only reason why the EU and the whole world needs us is that they, I think, will

never be fulfilled unless we finish this fulfilling process.

I would not be right if I miss one important detail. Many of my friends think that Georgia can't compete alongside European companies, and most of our businesses will shut down, our dance will no longer be in a spot, our music will lose its diversity, as soon as we become part of the EU. My answer to this negativity is that the European Union, as the home of diversity and equality, never tries to "kill" someone's culture. Opposite that, they will show us, how to compete, how to be better, will teach us, what are the key ingredients of success. We are children and you are our teachers, we are students and you are our lecturers. So, as one well-known phrase says "We all learn. Learn from each other and this is not the shame to learn".

We need you - you need us!

**Erekle Poladishvili**

Student of the Tbilisi State University

erekle.poladishvili825@sps.tsu.edu.ge



*A moment of the keynote speech of Robert Goebbels at the Tbilisi State University*