



**EUROPEAN COUNCIL  
THE PRESIDENT**



Tbilisi, 14 May 2014  
EUCO 109/14

PRESSE 293  
PR PCE 99

### **Speech by President Herman Van Rompuy at the Europe House, Tbilisi, Georgia**

I am pleased to be here in Europe House in Tbilisi, to share a few thoughts with you on relations between the European Union and Georgia.

This morning I had a good discussion with the Prime-minister, and I will be meeting your President later today. I should like to thank them both for their invitation and their kind hospitality on behalf of the people of Georgia.

It is good to be here in your capital city a few days only after the celebration of Europe Day – the 9<sup>th</sup> of May. That day, back in 1950, the foreign minister of France, Robert Schuman, invited the countries of Europe and in particular Germany to share a new beginning, to put an end to decades, centuries even!, of European wars. It was the founding act of the European Community, the first seeds of today's Union.

So “Europe Day” is not about war, not about victory and defeat, not about frustration and revenge. No, it celebrates the successful building of an area of peace, stability and unsurpassed prosperity on our continent – a continent, which is and remains immensely diverse, where different cultures, traditions, languages, religions, histories meet.

Here in Georgia, I should like to underline that the generous idea of Europe is not an invention of some Western European statesmen in the 1950s.

# **P R E S S**

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It is an ancient, venerable idea, going back centuries. Many poets, thinkers, writers have expressed the inspiring notion that the peoples and nations on this continent have something in common. There are many differences among them, we know that, but also something ungraspable that unites them. A notion of civilisation, identity, culture. The word “Europa” – describing this continent west of Asia, north of Africa – goes back all the way to ancient Greece. Perhaps even to the days when, according to mythology, not only the god Zeus seduced the princess Europa, but also when Jason, leader of the Argonauts, on his quest for the Golden Fleece, crossed the Black Sea and landed in the Kingdom of Colchis, in today's Georgia...

I will not say that the marriage between Jason and Medea that ensued was the happiest of all..., but their encounter was certainly impressive...! And it gave rise to one of these tragic love stories that are the pride of European literature ! There were more strong-willed women from these lands that captured the public imagination – not least your famous Queen Tamar!

The European Union of today is in a way a political expression of this long history of our continent of unity and diversity – nothing more, nothing less.

Among our countries, no nostalgia for a ‘glorious’ past that will never return, no border conflicts that seek strength at the expense of one’s neighbour, no cycles of defeat and revenge – all have turned the page and look with confidence to the future.

Cooperation and democracy, our values, do not only guide the European Union's own policies at home, but also our external action, our approach in the wider world. Nowhere is this more important, and nowhere are the people in partner societies more engaged, than in the countries closest to us, especially those on the European continent.

Your country's ties with this adventure will soon become even stronger, with the signature at the end of June of the Association Agreement we have jointly developed to pursue these goals. Your country decided to follow a democratic path, as a guarantee of freedom, prosperity and national unity. The Agreement is just a means to that goal.

Signing it does not just mean strengthening relations between Tbilisi and 'Brussels'; but between your country and all the member states of the European Union. That is why this document will be signed by the Presidents or Prime-Ministers of these 28 countries, when they will all gather in Brussels in June for the European Council summit I have convened. And on their behalf, as European Council president, I can say we are all fully behind this and I want to congratulate you on this step.

I have just come from Moldova, which will sign at the same moment as Georgia; and two days ago I was in Ukraine – I will say a bit more on the situation there in a moment.

I am very pleased that in Georgia there is broad consensus on the country's European trajectory. Your country has set the pace in the Eastern Partnership for a number of years and under successive governments. Georgia has now enjoyed two democratic transitions in two years. The will and the message of the voters have to be respected. Of course, another election is taking place already in June, the municipal ones.

The Association Agreement will open a new chapter in EU-Georgia relations. The implementation will be challenging, not least that of the DCFTA. It is not the time to let efforts go. But your country has a track record of reform; and a strong political commitment.

These efforts are worth it, for their own sake, for the citizens of Georgia. They will bring great benefits both in the short and the long term. There will be clear economic benefits within a reasonably short space of time.

Other benefits, perhaps less tangible but just as real, will improve the quality of life for all Georgians. They are not about immediate financial gains, but about values and wellbeing. The Association Agreement will serve as a compass for reforms to achieve better environmental standards, or better health and safety standards; a predictable business environment, which is good for investors, employers, consumers. And also, good governance structures, reliable state institutions. In the end, such deep changes can have a profound economic impact too. So the Agreement will not magically fix the economy overnight and make everyone prosperous – but will in time lead to a higher standard of living for all.

This Association Agreement is about more than the economy. If I think of the demonstrators on the Maidan – they were ready to die, not for a trade agreement with the European Union, but to break a corrupt political culture, to live in a country with rules made for the benefit of all, not for the few.

Georgia has already come a long way on this path, and with this next step it will go further. The European Union acknowledges the European aspirations and European choice of Georgia as well as that of other countries of the Eastern Partnership. As I said at my press conference just now: the Association Agreement is not the final goal in our cooperation.

But first things first. There are other challenges related to the Association Agreement. Recent events in the region have shown that there is a clear external challenge. Georgia has faced it in the past. I stress that choosing the path of political association and market integration with the European Union should not be seen as a rejection of close relationships with other partners. It should not be seen as a zero-sum game. Russia is a neighbour. But good neighbours respect each other's borders. Respect of territorial integrity is a precondition for stability, here and elsewhere in Europe. Of course, balanced trade ties can help to foster relations. The Association Agreement, with its free trade aspect, is fully compatible with improved trade across the Caucasus; it will make Georgia a more attractive business destination for all its partners.

Nevertheless there are security challenges faced by Georgia. There is always a risk that these could be played on to scare you – but your country knows how to resist such pressure. You are the ones who are best placed not to let such risk happen. Don't let yourselves be abused by appearances: violence is not strength. Don't let yourselves fall victim of those who want to 'divide and rule'. Your way of life as a free society is your greatest strength.

And the European Union continues to stand by Georgia. We also have a real commitment to the peaceful solution of territorial conflicts. Think of the on-going presence of the EU Monitoring Mission, our co-chairmanship of the Geneva International Talks, and our firm policy of respect for Georgia's territorial integrity within internationally recognised borders. At the same time, we know that only engagement and reconciliation can achieve a lasting solution. Here I welcome the pragmatic approach of the Georgian government. Above all, we hope that the Association Agreement will help to establish Georgia as an attractive place that all Georgians will wish to call home. After all, nothing is more attractive than an open, democratic and prosperous country. You can build such a fatherland!

On this path, the European Union is and will remain by Georgia's side. We will help your country in many ways – we offer financial and technical assistance to help preparing and implementing the Agreement. We offer visible political support.

However, the challenge which Georgia faces is not only external – it is also from within. As I said, the Association is about much more than a trade agreement – it is about values. The countries of the European Union look to Georgia to uphold these values and to reflect the spirit of the Association Agreement in the way in which political life is conducted and the institutions are functioning.

This relates to the independence of the courts, the respect of the presumption of innocence, pluralism, and the fight against abuses. This also relates to a normal interaction between opposition and majority, away from polarisation. All this gives content to the notion of a mature and healthy democracy.

Today I expressed my strong appreciation for the efforts the President and the Prime-Minister have made to implement an ambitious reform agenda. The recent adoption of anti-discrimination is part of these reforms. Modern societies defend human rights and the dignity of all human beings, irrespective of their skin, colour, religion, gender or sexual orientation. This is not about “traditional values” or “European values”. It's about universal human values. By adopting the anti-discrimination law, Georgia has demonstrated that it shares those values and is prepared to defend them to the benefit of all Georgians.

Before concluding, let me say a few words on the situation in Ukraine. Two days ago I was in Kiev and met with Prime Minister Yatsenyuk and President Turchynov. In Kiev I reiterated the European Union's firm commitment to Ukraine's unity, sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity. After the illegal annexation of Crimea, the European Union has introduced sanctions against a number of individuals and entities. In case of further destabilisation, the European Union remains committed to further increase the cost for Russia should it take more steps to destabilise the situation. For now the immediate goal is to ensure free and fair presidential elections on the 25th of May. The European Union will continue to insist on and work for dialogue and negotiations as this is the only way forward to come to a stable, democratic, inclusive and modern Ukraine. And we will continue our support for the necessary political, economic and security reforms in Ukraine.

To sum up: 2014 is a big year for Georgia. You will be marking huge progress on the path to political association and economic integration with the European Union. Georgia faces many challenges, and we will stand by you. The potential gains of our deeper ties are enormous, but no-one can take success for granted. I know that Georgia is committed to this path and have confidence that it can succeed for the benefit of its citizens and future generations.

*Didi madloba!*

Thank you.

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