



PRESIDENT OF GEORGIA

Address to the Third International Silk Road Symposium

It is my pleasure to welcome the growing depth of relations between Georgia and the European Union, exemplified by the Action Plan of the European Neighborhood Policy. Not long ago, the European Union was something distant and abstract for most Georgians. Today however, we live in very different times and in a very different Georgia.

Following our Rose Revolution three year ago, Georgia returned to the path of reunification with our European family - a family with strong and broad historical links. In Georgia today, many higher education institutions have started teaching classes about the European Union, non-governmental organizations and European studies centers take part in conferences, publishing and disseminate knowledge about the European Union. Taken together, this has resulted in a tangible advancement in public awareness about the benefits of greater European integration - something that is good for Georgia and the Member States of the EU.

It is difficult to understate the importance of these developments for our country, as Georgians should be aware of the developments in the EU because in today's world, everything that takes place in Europe has implications for us as well.

Just recently the European Commission recommended that Romania and Bulgaria become members of the Union in 2007. This is excellent news because soon we will have maritime borders with the EU, creating even stronger linkages. We also support Turkey's European aspirations as Turkey has undergone remarkable progress. It is our belief that our neighbor's accession to the EU is an irreversible process and will add even further strength to our relations given that Georgia will also enjoy a land border with the EU as well.

In addition I believe that just like Romania, Bulgaria and Turkey, other states of the Black Sea region - Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia will one day join the European Union. This is of course a part of our long term vision but we are ready for this challenge. The countries of the Black Sea region do not want to become members of the European community only because Europe is "good," or because membership means wealth and a better life. Rather, we want to be members of the EU because we are Europeans, and to be a member of the Union is our natural mission.

Today, Georgia has already taken the first steps on this road. Georgia and the European Union recently negotiated an Action plan within the European Neighborhood policy, which will guide Georgia's reforms for the next several years. We understand that there is no direct link between membership of the EU and implementation of the Action Plan, but we hope that after its successful implementation Georgia and the European Union will move to a higher level of integration.

I want to note that Georgia is not a country that seeks to be well-off at the expense of others, or is looking to benefit from the umbrella of economic development

and security at someone else's expense. On the contrary, our goal is to create synergies and linkages that create clear benefits for all parties - inside and outside the EU. In this respect, we share the mutual goal of peacefully resolving the territorial conflicts in Georgia because separatism is a threat not only to Georgia, but to the EU as a whole. In this regard, the Black Sea region has a unique chance to become a model of peaceful co-existence and economic development for many other parts of the world. Our region is democratic and committed to further strengthening the institutions of democracy, especially following the non-violent revolutions in Ukraine and Georgia. The pace of economic development in our region is one of the fastest in the world, and maintaining this record is clearly in the interest of the EU.

I would like to note other converging issues. Specifically, it is our common interest to develop secure sources of energy supply and transit through diversification. To meet that goal, all Europeans should be able to make choices and operate in a market-based environment and dependence on a single energy supplier makes that harder to achieve. Current and planned linkages between the Caspian Basin and Black Sea region provide that alternative, and together we make all of Europe stronger and more stable.

There are many other important issues in EU-Georgia relations, among them I believe the issue of European identity and public awareness is one of the most significant. The greatest asset a country can have on the road to the EU is a population which understands where we stand, and what the implications of such process are. Public support and a high degree of awareness is a crucial instrument that helped many Eastern European countries, among them our Baltic friends, to integrate into the EU.

Therefore, I believe that events such as this symposium are important for Georgia and the region as a whole, because they serve the noble purpose of raising public awareness, establishing new links and intensifying academic debate. Dialogue among the experts-from the Black Sea countries about the EU is a mechanism that will further contribute to mutual understanding among our nations and strengthening our common Europe identity and destiny.

I wish you good luck and a productive day.

Warmly,
Mikheil Saakashvili