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*EU-Georgia Parliamentary Association Committee*

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Eighth Meeting

Strasbourg, 27 - 28 March 2019

**FINAL STATEMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Pursuant to Article 411(3) of the Association Agreement

The eighth meeting of the EU-Georgia Parliamentary Association Committee was held in Strasbourg on 27 and 28 March 2019, under the co-chairmanship of Ms Tamar Khulordava on behalf of the Parliament of Georgia and of Mr Sajjad Karim on behalf of the European Parliament.

The Parliamentary Association Committee heard Mr Vakhtang Makharoblishvili, Deputy Foreign Minister of Georgia, Ms Ketevan Tsikhelashvili, State Minister for Reconciliation and Civic Equality, and Mr Genadi Arveladze and Ms Natia Turnava, Deputy Ministers of Economy and Sustainable Development, on behalf of the Government of Georgia, Mr Giorgi Burjanadze, Deputy Public Defender of Georgia, and Messrs Dirk Lorenz and Nicholas Cendrowicz on behalf of the EEAS / EC.

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:*

Relations between the European Union and Georgia

1. Welcomes the continuous deepening of EU-Georgia relations; reiterates its unwavering support for Georgia's European and Euro-Atlantic integration and praises Georgia's steady progress on this chosen path; notes with satisfaction that these aspirations go beyond party lines and are supported by the overwhelming majority of its citizens; recalls that, pursuant to Article 49 TEU, and in line with the Rome Declaration of 25 March 2017, any European State may apply to become a member of the European Union, provided that it upholds the Copenhagen criteria; recalls the proposal of an "Eastern Partnership Plus" (EaP+) policy advocated by the European Parliament so as to unlock additional, intermediary perspectives on the path towards full EU membership;
2. Recalls that visa liberalisation for Georgian citizens holding a biometric passport remains the crowning achievement of comprehensive reforms and harmonisation efforts carried out by Georgia within the framework of the EU-Georgia Visa Dialogue; notes that the overall smooth functioning of this visa free travel system, which is in the interest of both the EU and Georgian citizens, has already brought tangible results in terms of people-to-people contacts and mobility for business, scientific, cultural,

- touristic and family purposes; welcomes active efforts of the Georgian authorities to prevent impediments to the visa-free regime; welcomes in this respect recent amendments to the Penal Code criminalising facilitation and organisation of illegal migration by the Parliament of Georgia; recalls the importance of a close cooperation in the areas of police and customs; calls on all the EU Member States that have not done so yet to recognise Georgia as a safe country of origin, as this would speed up the processing of asylum requests in the EU;
3. Welcomes the 5<sup>th</sup> EU-Georgia Association Council held on 5 March 2018, which acknowledged the excellent state of EU-Georgia relations and took note of the ambitious EU Integration Roadmap presented by the Georgian authorities, aimed at ensuring European integration at a faster pace, beyond the current scope of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement (AA);
  4. Welcomes the High Level Meeting between the Government of Georgia and the European Commission, held on 21 November 2018; underlines the importance of the continuation of this new format to deepen EU-Georgian bilateral cooperation in the areas of economy, trade, connectivity, transport and energy, education, research and innovation, justice and internal security, going beyond the scope of the Association Agreement; calls on the parties to follow up on the achievements through a series of concrete actions across the agreed topics;
  5. Welcomes the cooperation agreement in criminal matters between Eurojust and Georgia, as it offers the possibility to establish a practical partnership to prevent and fight organised crime;
  6. Welcomes the continuous efforts by both the executive and legislative power branches of Georgia to advance significant reforms under the Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area (DCFTA), in line with the revised Association Agenda for 2017-2020;
  7. Underlines that the adoption of the EP report on the implementation of the Association Agreement on 14 November 2018, marked a new milestone in the history of EU-Georgia relations; recalls that, while the overall picture remains positive on harmonisation, legislative and administrative steps, the report also pinpointed some areas where further approximation efforts were needed, such as labour law, environment protection, non-discrimination against vulnerable groups and the independence of the judiciary;
  8. Stresses that EU financial and technical support to Georgia will reach between EUR 371 and 453 million for the period 2017-2020, focusing on key priority areas such as economic development, institutional strengthening and good governance, energy efficiency, environment, mobility and people-to-people contacts; encourages the European Commission to further enhance its assistance and align it to the political ambitions of the EU-Georgia partnership;
  9. Notes with satisfaction that the EU is one of Georgia's largest trading partners, accounting for almost a third of its total trade; notes the significant overall increase and diversification of Georgian exports to the EU, as a direct effect of the implementation of the DCFTA; stresses the major role of small and medium-sized enterprises and farmers in boosting the country's economy; lauds recurrent information campaigns for citizens, companies and farmers informing them of all the benefits and economic opportunities

stemming from the AA/DCFTA and of the assistance available to manage necessary adaptations, and thwarting Russia-backed disinformation propaganda;

10. Highlights Georgia's key role as a partner for European energy security; stresses the country's transit role for Caspian hydrocarbon resources to reach European markets, notably via the Southern Gas Corridor and the Black Sea; welcomes the joint commitment to further support the roll-out of energy efficiency standards, based on legislative reforms in key areas;
11. Highlights Georgia's strategic role in the field of transport and connectivity and increasingly as a transportation and logistics hub in the region; commends the EU for its commitment to continue engaging closely with Georgia on the connectivity agenda and to further extend the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T); welcomes the first EU-Georgia High Level Transport Dialogue held on 29 January 2019, where both sides highlighted the importance of Black Sea cooperation as a step towards enhancing connectivity and international trade between Europe and Asia;
12. Recommends the European Commission to pursue its efforts to promote the participation of Georgia in EU-supported programmes and agencies that are open to non-EU countries, under a legally appropriate status;
13. Highlights that it is in the interest of both the EU and Georgia to strengthen their cooperation in the area of security and defence, including through their high level Strategic Security Dialogue; commends Georgia for its continued participation in the EU Military Training Missions in the Central African Republic and in Mali;
14. Notes with satisfaction that accountability and transparency in the Association Agreement implementation process remain top priorities for the Georgian authorities, may it be through parliamentary scrutiny over the government's activities or through the empowerment of citizens and involvement of civil society organisations;
15. Acknowledges the Parliament of Georgia's efforts to increase the scrutiny on legislative approximation with EU law, as well as the political oversight of the executive power in the implementation of the Association Agreement; welcomes the adoption of the new Parliamentary Rules of Procedure and introduction of new oversight mechanisms, such as Prime Minister's annual and extra ordinary reports, ministers' hour, thematic inquiries, interpellation, etc.; recalls the importance of continuous improvements in terms of oversight
16. Welcomes the fact that Georgia is on the European Parliament's list of priority countries for democracy support activities, and notably welcomes the ongoing capacity building programme for the Parliament of Georgia; recommends the continuation of this programme based on the exchange of expertise and best practices; acknowledges the importance of EU-funded projects aimed at strengthening parliamentary oversight and need for the development of constructive cross-party dialogue;
17. Acknowledges that the last direct presidential elections were an important milestone for Georgia, marking the conclusion of the shift to a fully parliamentary system: notes the symbolic and substantive importance of the first international visit of the President of Georgia to Brussels;
18. Welcomes the assessment by the OSCE/ODIHR-led International Election Observation

Mission - in which Members of the European Parliament participated, that the presidential elections of October - November 2018 were overall competitive and well-administered, that candidates were able to campaign freely and that voters had a genuine choice; is nevertheless concerned by instances of misuse of administrative resources, undue pressure on voters and intimidation, and sporadic violent incidents which have been pinpointed by the international observers, and by the high level of polarisation of the public and of media, negative campaigning and verbal attacks on civil society; notes the Georgian authorities' commitment to implement the OSCE/ODIHR-led International Election Observation Mission's recommendations and review relevant legislation to address the identified shortcomings with a view to improving the framework for future elections;

19. Underlines that the transparency, integrity, independence and efficiency of the judiciary are essential, not only to guarantee the fulfilment of the citizens' rights, but also to create conditions favourable to economic growth; calls on the Georgian authorities to consolidate the reforms carried out so far and to complete and implement the 4<sup>th</sup> wave of the justice reform; stresses the importance of citizens' unwavering trust in the judiciary; calls on the pending process of lifetime appointment of judges to the Supreme Court to be carried out on the basis of clear and objective criteria and through a competitive process developed through meaningful dialogue with the civil society and main political forces;
20. Welcomes the positive results achieved by the Human Rights Department of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, a body mandated to investigate hate crimes, discrimination, gender-based violence, human trafficking and crimes committed by or towards juveniles; notes the adoption of the law on the State Inspectors' Service, an independent authority tasked with the impartial investigation of human rights violations committed by representatives of law enforcement agencies, which is due to start its operations in June 2019; highlights the importance of holding the perpetrators accountable and avoiding any political impunity;
21. Underlines the importance of the ongoing public administration reform aimed at creating a more competitive, professional and transparent civil service; welcomes the effective system of monitoring of public officials' asset declarations, in compliance with the Law on Conflict of Interest and Corruption in Public Service that created new tools to audit the economic interests and assets disclosed by public officials and aims to improve the accountability and financial transparency of senior government officials;
22. Recalls that media freedom and freedom of expression are fundamental rights and that a vibrant and pluralistic media environment, offering a diversity of views is ensured in Georgia, albeit professional media standards need to be further promoted;
23. Underlines that gender equality is a key precondition to sustainable and inclusive development; commends in this regard the work of the Georgian Parliament's Gender Equality Council and welcomes its initiative to identify sexual harassment as a form of discrimination, in line with relevant EU legislation and the Council of Europe's Convention preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the "Istanbul Convention"); calls on the Georgian authorities to take all necessary steps aimed at ensuring gender equality, empowering women and protecting women against all forms of violence;
24. Notes with concern that, despite the overall enrichment of the Georgian population

since the restoration of the country's independence, one fifth of Georgian children remain poverty-stricken; calls on the Georgian authorities to adopt targeted measures to curb down the proportion of children who live under the poverty line;

25. Welcomes the new Organic Law of Georgia on Occupational Safety, as it is in full compliance with relevant EU directives, expanding health and safety standards to all economic sectors as of September 2019; notes that the mandate of labour inspection has been enhanced, enabling it to monitor labour conditions in all places of employment without prior approval of a judge;
26. Welcomes the Georgian authorities' efforts, for the past two years, to gradually upgrade labour rights, including by promoting equal treatment and non-discrimination with relevant legislation, in line with commitments of the Association Agreement; notes, however, that further progress needs to be made, including through further refinement of the Labour Code, so as to tackle all the existing challenges;
27. Welcomes the downward trend observed in the unemployment rate for the last decade; calls on the Georgian authorities, nevertheless, to implement further macroeconomic reforms aimed at fostering job creation and further reducing the gender gap in labour market participation;

#### The peaceful settlement of the conflict in Georgia

28. Reiterates its unwavering support for the independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia, within its internationally recognised borders; emphasises that the Association Agreement covers the entire territory of Georgia, including the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, and aims to promote the well-being of its whole population;
29. Condemns the ongoing illegal occupation and rampant steps towards the factual annexation of the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia by the Russian Federation, in blatant violation of the fundamental norms and principles of international law in an attempt to undermine the rules-based international order; calls on the Russian Federation to fulfil its obligations under the EU-mediated 12 August 2008 Ceasefire Agreement, notably to withdraw all its military forces from Georgia's occupied territories and remove all impediments for establishment of international security mechanisms therein; calls on EU institutions to comply with the recommendations encompassed in the European Parliament's resolution on the occupied territories of Georgia ten years after the Russian invasion of 14 June 2018;
30. Condemns strongly all illegal steps taken by the Russian Federation resulting in further deterioration of the security and humanitarian situation in the occupied Georgian regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, particularly the intense military build-up, installations of barbed wire fences and different artificial barriers along the occupation line, the tendency of deprivation of life, restrictions of freedom of movement and education in native language, arbitrary detentions and kidnappings of peaceful villagers, as well as severe human rights violations and intensified ethnic discriminations; notes that all these destabilisation tactics by Russia threaten peace and security in entire Europe; stresses that Russia's illegal steps undermine the efforts of the EU and Georgia towards peaceful conflict resolution, further divides communities that once lived in harmony, and exacerbates the already dire socio-economic conditions of the local population on both sides of the occupation line;

31. Condemns the murder of Georgian citizens – David Basharuli, Giga Otkhozoria, Archil Tatumashvili in Sokhumi and Tskhinvali; expresses particular concern over the recent death of another Georgian IDP – Irakli Kvaratskhelia in uncertain circumstances at a Russian military base in the occupied Abkhazia region; calls on the Russian Federation, as an occupying power, to remove all obstacles to bringing the perpetrators to justice;
32. Calls on the international community, particularly the competent international organisations and partner countries to support the “Otkhozoria-Tatumashvili list” adopted by the Government of Georgia in line with the resolution of the Parliament of Georgia on the Gross Violations of Human Rights by the Russian Federation in Occupied Abkhazia and Tskhinvali Region as a preventive measure to avoid further human rights abuses, ethnically driven violence and deprivation of life in Georgia’s occupied territories and impose all the possible restrictions (e.g. travel bans or assets freezes) against the individuals included in the abovementioned list;
33. Supports Georgia in its pursuit of a peaceful conflict resolution policy through diplomacy, negotiation and dialogue, including through Georgia’s compliance with the EU-mediated 12 August 2008 Ceasefire Agreement, affirmation and implementation of the non-use of force commitment unilaterally, still awaiting the reciprocity from the Russian side, as well as the constructive engagement within the Geneva International Discussions; underscores the necessity to reach tangible results in the Geneva International Discussions on core agenda items such as the non-use of force, international security arrangements, and the safe and dignified return of the hundreds of thousands of Internally-Displaced Persons and refugees from the occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia to their homelands;
34. Commends Georgia for its steady and resolute endeavours to maintain any possible forms of dialogue and outreach towards the populations of the occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia, in order to foster people-to-people contacts and build up confidence between divided societies, to reduce their isolation stemming from the ongoing occupation by Russia and improve their welfare; recalls its appreciation of Georgia’s far-sighted “A Step towards a Better Future” peace initiative aimed at facilitating trade, education and mobility between the population living on both sides of the occupation line;
35. Welcomes the strong commitment of the EU to remain effectively engaged in the peaceful resolution of the conflict through its valuable instruments, including the EU Special Representative for South Caucasus and the Crisis in Georgia who co-chairs the Geneva International Discussions, the EU Monitoring Mission as well as the policy of non-recognition and engagement; stresses nevertheless that it is utmost regrettable that the EU Monitoring Mission still remains deprived of the access to the Georgian regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South Ossetia; reaffirms the need to intensify efforts by the international community in order to restore Georgia’s full sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognised borders;
36. Is deeply concerned that Russia continues to pose a significant threat to the security of Georgia; recalls that reinforcing the resilience of Georgia and other partner countries would ensure stability and strengthen the internal security of the European Union; condemns the subversive policies of propaganda, disinformation and social media infiltration aimed at weakening democracy and society in Georgia by discrediting institutions, manipulating public opinion, spreading false narratives, and feeding social

tensions; denounces, in this context, the information warfare being conducted by Russia, as it uses its State-controlled media outlets to influence domestic politics and undermine the European integration processes;

#### Eastern Partnership and regional cooperation

37. Recalls the goals of the Eastern Partnership towards promoting stability, confidence-building and cooperation, supporting democratic reforms, good neighbourly relations and regional cooperation, enhancing people-to-people contacts and boosting trade; commends the effective contribution of Georgia to the achievement of those objectives, which makes the country a “front-runner” of the Eastern Partnership; recalls, in this context, that the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Eastern Partnership provides an excellent opportunity to assess the perspectives of this platform beyond 2020, taking the ambitions and aspirations of the partner countries into account;
38. Welcomes the first EU-DCFTA partners’ informal Ministerial Meeting on Trade that took place in September 2018; stresses the importance of the continuation of EU & associated trio discussions focusing on issues of specific interest to the EU and associated countries;
39. Welcomes the opening of the first Eastern Partnership European School in Tbilisi in September 2018 as one of the 20 Deliverables for 2020 endorsed at the Eastern Partnership Summit in Brussels on 24 November 2017; calls on the development of international curricula that would allow pupils and students from Eastern Partnership countries to enjoy education and mobility across Europe, on the model of the “Eastern Partnership European School”;
40. Underlines the pivotal role of the Parliamentary Association Committee in the monitoring of the implementation of the EU-Georgia Association Agreement; calls on the Association Council and its Sub-Committees to continue informing the Parliamentary Association Council about the proceedings taking place at the executive level;

#### Next meeting

41. Intends to hold the next meeting of the EU-Georgia Parliamentary Association Committee in the autumn of 2019, at the Parliament of Georgia in Tbilisi.

*Adopted in Strasbourg, on 28 March 2019, by meeting the double majority required by the Parliamentary Association Committee's Rules of Procedures (three votes in favour, zero against, and zero abstention on the EP side; seven votes in favour, zero against and two abstentions on the Georgian side).*