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European Union and Georgia in a New Reality: Views of the Leading Political Parties of Georgia

After the Russian-Georgian War in August, 2008, the European Union has become a chief mediator in conflict. The European Union's role in the Caucasus region has significantly increased after elaboration of a peace plan by President Sarkozy and some other moves. EU monitors are already observing the implementation of Sarkozy's plan. Besides, the European Union has pledged € 500 million aid for the reconstruction of Georgia.

What are the views of the leading political parties of Georgia on the future of EU-Georgia relations? What are the key issues that the political parties outline in this cooperation? What are the steps that Georgia itself should take for the rapprochement with the European Union?

A round-table discussion with participation of Georgia's leading political parties¹ and representatives of the EU member states was organized on October 10, to address the aforesaid issues.

Parties' Views

In general, the leading Georgian political parties are unanimous in the opinion that (1) there is no other alternative to Georgia's European choice and (2) the European Union is a natural partner to Georgia.

The point of view of the Labor Party is, that:

¹ Various political parties were invited: The Labour Party, the United National Movement, the Conservative Party, the Republican Party and the Christian-Democratic Movement attended the round-table discussion.

- Open confrontation with Russia has brought grave consequences to Georgia and posed it against the national catastrophe. Under such circumstances, the European Union's support is of vital importance. The Labor Party called on the EU as early as on August 10, to mediate between Russia and Georgia.
- Georgia has always shared European values and should follow its European integration path. The Labor Party, which is based on Universal Europeanism ideology, believes that EU and Georgia should deepen their political, economic, social and cultural relations.
- The Labor Party's concrete proposal for deepening those relations lies in facilitating visa regime.
- The Labor Party expects EU to support Georgia at the international level on October 15, at Geneva meeting, where the discussions on the future of Georgia's conflict regions will be launched.

According to the United National Movement:

- The conflict cannot be considered finished and any development of events can be expected, until Russia complies with the commitments under President Sarkozy's plan. From this point, EU's mediation takes on national security importance to Georgia.
- The Russian-Georgian conflict has influenced all Georgia's political directions, including EU-Georgia relations. The latter can be divided into normal and extraordinary parts. Here should be mentioned, that those relations have become more intense.
- Apart from the existing formats of relations (Neighborhood Policy Action Plan and Partnership and Cooperation Agreement), Georgia, in a certain form, may join the ESDP (European Security and Defence Policy).
- For the further advancement of bilateral relations Georgia should comply with the ENP provisions.

The most important is the first priority – rule of law and development of democracy. Though, the democracy in Georgia is not perfect, the democratization process is underway and there is a corresponding will on the government's part. Democratic development is Georgia's response to the current challenges.

- In terms of integration into the European Union, the Georgian Parliament has been working on the issues as follows: (1) accedence to the international documents on genetically modified products; (2) United Nations Convention against Corruption, which will serve as a basis for trade facilitation; (3) development of preferential trade system.
- Major expectations on part of the European Union are:
 - Expansion of the EU peace-keeping format;
 - Assumption of leader's function in conflict resolution;
 - Financial assistance (ratification of € 500 million package for the Republic of Georgia regardless the global financial crisis), which is of particular importance to Georgia, especially amidst a decrease in investments in the aftermath of war;
 - Facilitation of visa regime.

The point of view of the Conservative Party is, that:

- Even though, there is a political consensus on Georgia's European choice, there is still lack of corresponding will in the government. The latter formally assumes commitment to take steps to promote integration and does not follow the corresponding recommendations: a number of recommendations within the ENP, especially those related to the rule of law, have not been implemented; EU (European Parliament) guidelines provided after November 7, 2007 have not been even considered; conclusions and recommendations with regard to the constitutional changes, introduced by the Venice Commission, have not been taken into account; OSCE's recommendations presented after January 5, 2008 elections have not been taken proper account of. Recommendations of other European institutions concerning self-government, judiciary reforms etc. have been also ignored.

- After the August war, the West has seen exactly what was already clear for the civil society and the opposition: democratic development is the only way for the revival. In response to that, the authorities have declared a new wave of democracy. However, its implementation is rather doubtful.
- For the development of bilateral relations: (1) Georgia should revise its assumed commitments and ensure their implementation in due time-frame; (2) positive tendencies should be introduced in a number of spheres (elections, self-government etc.); (3) format of monitoring of international financial assistance should be established (e.g. EU's special representative shall be assigned to cooperate with the authorities, parties and the public).
- The European Union shall elaborate an action plan on how it is going to introduce European values and support democracy in Georgia.

The point of view of the Republican Party is, that:

- Today Georgia's chances for European integration have considerably diminished compared with those it used to have in previous years. Current deep crisis has been conditioned not only by the Russian aggression, but also by the lack of democracy in the government and the mistakes made in the USA by President Bush's Administration, which unambiguously and unconditionally supported Georgia's present authorities. Another reason for the aforesaid is the insufficient involvement of the European Union in the ongoing processes in Georgia.
- Today, one part of Georgia's sovereignty is in Russia's hands, whereas another part – in the West's. Thus, the most important issue is country's security.
- External relations and domestic policy need to be synchronized. EU's close cooperation, involvement and participation in domestic policy are very important for ensuring political dialogue. A possible dialogue format can be determined as follows: opposition, government and EU representative.
- Georgian can be EU's partner. It is not just a problem-maker country that constantly applies for help. The European Union should only encourage it to become a partner.

According to the Christian-Democratic Movement:

Today, the European Union's role has become more significant in the following three spheres:

- Economic and visa aspects - deepening of new economic ties, free commerce, development of new business projects, facilitation of visa regime;
- Support for democratic development – distribution of authority between the branches of the government and creation of effective control and balance mechanisms; freedom of media, including the formation of new TV broadcasting entities, guarantee of independence of the judiciary; strengthening of civil society; encouragement of dialogue between the government and the opposition;
- Conflict regions - internationalization and rehabilitation of the peacekeeping process.

Views of the EU Member-States

On the Georgian-Russian conflict:

- Regrettably, the escalation of conflict could not be prevented and the EU turned out not to have been ready for its timely prevention;
- The European Union members are unanimous about the territorial integrity of Georgia and involvement in the peacekeeping process;

On the integration and democratization process:

- Georgia is part of Europe but sharing of values is hardly enough for a complete European integration. European standards should be introduced;
- Compliance with the commitments assumed by Georgia will considerably promote that process. The August developments opened a new chapter in EU-Georgia relations;
- Common efforts of all political forces are necessary in order to overcome the current crisis. Internal political dialogue is highly welcomed, yet it is difficult to imagine how a dialogue can be organized from the outside;
- Democratization is a long-term objective and can be attained irrespective of crisis;

- It is also important to make a better use of regional formats, including in the Black Sea region.

Summary

The round-table discussion has demonstrated that there is consensus among the parties on the necessity of (1) rapprochement with the European Union, (2) Georgia's further democratization and, for that purpose, carrying on internal political dialogue. At the same time, the oppositional parties and the ruling party have different opinions about the present situation and future prospects. While the ruling party is pinning hopes on its own new wave of democratization, the opposition parties talk about an imitation of democracy by the government party and consider the August developments as a state catastrophe.

With regard to the European Union it becomes clear, that beyond the declared agreement on values there are still no clear-cut strategic visions or specific political themes. Issues prevailing in political discourse (visa regime, free commerce, support for democracy etc.) are given in the formal documents on EU-Georgia relations or are introduced in discourse mainly by Europe. Consequently, no substantial difference in parties' positions with regard to the aforesaid issues can be observed.

To a certain extent, this issue can be related to the lack of conditionality and absence of the so-called "endpoint" in the EU-Georgia relations. Georgia's political elite will not have any differentiated visions, until the EU-Georgia relations itself become differentiated. Though, the European Union's role and importance to Georgia have significantly increased after the August events, they are still not of such an importance as to consider the European Union a determining factor of Georgia's domestic political processes.