

# Lifting the visa barrier for Georgians should be the EU response to Russia's bullying tactics

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**A first and immediate step to respond to Russia's objective to annex the territory of the former Soviet Union is visa liberalisation, writes David Bakradze.**

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The signature of [last week's "treaty" between Russia and South Ossetia](#) was only the last in a series of events showcasing an extremely alarming trend: the objective of Russia's so called Near Abroad policy is to annex as much as possible of the territory of the former Soviet Union. To achieve this, Russia has no hesitation in using hard power – bullying its neighbours and undermining their territorial integrity. How should the West respond? Realize a new vision of regional relations that is based on freedom, and not the threat or use of force. A first and immediate step to this end is visa liberalization.

In the case of Georgia, visa liberalization can help towards conflict resolution. The citizens of Georgia, including those of occupied Abkhazia and the Tskhinvali Regions, will be able to benefit from a “freedom” – that will be actually and immediately perceptible. In addition this will also be a concrete manifestation of the “more for more” approach, which awards those partners who are willing and able to deliver on their commitments. For the people of the occupied regions, it will be a symbol of what stands to be gained from removing the barbed wires across our land. For other Eastern Partnership countries, it will offer a clear incentive for further reforms.

Georgia has been recognized as a front runner and a success story of the Eastern Partnership Initiative. Benefiting from the EU’s principle of “more for more”, we negotiated and concluded the Association Agreement, including a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement, in record time. We are determined to take full advantage of this agreement and implement fully our association agenda, because there is a strong belief in the EU’s transformative power and a political consensus that this is the objective worth pursuing against all odds. That is why Georgia stands out in the region as a stable and vibrant multi-party democracy, a reliable partner for the EU and NATO and contributor to international security, and an attractive and safe destination for foreign investment. Trade volumes are rising vis-à-vis EU partners. Reforms over recent years have completely overhauled every aspect of the Georgian political, economic, judicial and social landscapes.

In this context, visa liberalization for Georgian citizens is the next logical step, facilitating tourism, business travel and academic mobility. Georgia is a country with transparent governance, low levels of corruption and crime, a trustworthy efficient justice system, a sound corporate tax system and a business friendly environment. The European Commission acknowledged our progress in 2014, concluding that we meet the first-phase requirements of the Visa Liberalization Action Plan (VLAP). We are currently in the second, implementation phase of the VLAP and we hope to be ready for the Riga Eastern Partnership Summit in May.

Georgia, the EU and the wider region have much to gain by completing this process sooner rather than later. Visa-free travel will mean more tourism, more cultural and student exchanges, and more civil society partnerships. It will help further develop Georgia and anchor the next generation’s aspirations on the developing of a “European Neighbourhood.” And this is precisely why visa liberalization is so significant: it has a grassroots effect.

As the shadow of a new Iron Curtain threatens Europe, it is crucial that we offer an alternative, qualitatively different, vision of the future to the people of the EU’s Eastern neighbourhood. By opening borders, promoting travel, trade, professional, student and cultural exchanges, we can drive real change

at the level of communities. This course of actions responds to threats with tangible prospects for democratic, economic and cultural development in an environment of peace and stability.

As Russia continues to hand out passports on the one hand and close borders on the other, it is no exaggeration to say that the future of a Europe that is truly free and whole depends upon it.

**David Bakradze**