

A new European partner

With the signing of an association agreement with the EU, Georgia is now taking its place among the European family. As the wine-producing country in the Caucasus opens its doors to partners from the West, myriad opportunities abound in sectors from logistics to energy and tourism.



★ Georgia's progress toward EU integration	1992 EU-Georgia relations begin, as Georgia regains its sovereignty following the break-up of the Soviet Union	1999 A partnership and cooperation agreement (PCA), which regulates EU-Georgia bilateral relations, enters into force	2006-2011 An action plan from 2006-2011 involved a significant degree of economic integration and deepened political cooperation	2014 Negotiations of the association agreement, including a deep and comprehensive free trade agreement, concluded in July 2013 and came into force in June 2014
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Georgia upgrades its ties to the West

Writer: Eleanor Wragg

RELATIONS Georgians have high hopes for the impact of a recent strategic agreement with the European Union, and are now setting their sights on NATO membership

After more than a decade of economic, social and political reforms, Georgia's signing of the EU association agreement on 27th June this year marked a key milestone along the country's journey towards European integration. Coupled with a deep and comprehensive free trade agreement (DCFTA), the deal is tipped to boost Georgian exports to the EU by around 12 percent, and also creates attractive conditions for European exports and investments in Georgia. On the political front, the agreement is seen as a nod from Europe for Georgia's young democratic institutions and legal framework, although for Alex Petriashvili, the country's minister of European and Euro-Atlantic integration, this is not the end of the process, but rather the starting point for a country which sees its future as an EU member state.

Georgia's European aspirations are backed, according to the minister, by 85 percent of its population, although this does not mean the country has turned its back on its neighbours. Boasting excellent relations

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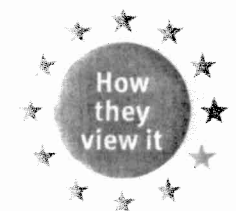
Alex Petriashvili
Minister of European and Euro-Atlantic integration

with Turkey, Armenia and Azerbaijan, Georgia plays an important role as a regional intermediary. "We are the only country in the region that has good relationships with all three neighbours," says Maia Panjikidze, minister of foreign affairs.

While the association agreement is not a guarantee of future membership of the EU, it is seen as a step closer, and according to Petriashvili, Georgia's place is in Europe. "Georgia in Europe is not a recent idea," he explains. "Culturally and historically, Georgia has always belonged to Europe." Now, this Caucasian nation, which has been assisting the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) in Afghanistan since 2004, is looking to further cement its links with the West by seeking full membership of the alliance.

"We want to move forward," says Panjikidze. "We are ready to contribute more to international security and we are ready to go with our allies wherever we are needed."

JOINT DIALOGUE Georgian leaders are adamant that their European and Western aspirations will not impede good relations with their neighbours, including Russia



Are you concerned that Georgia's ambition to join the EU and NATO will damage relations with Russia? Look at the Eastern European countries and the Baltic States. It was possible for them to join the EU and NATO and still improve their relationship with Russia. This can happen in the Georgian case too.

What challenges do you foresee for Georgia as it moves towards economic integration with Europe? I see a lot of challenges. We know that it's not an easy process; nor is it a cheap process. We need to transform many things. However, we will improve our production, and this will bring more jobs for the country and the better quality will allow us to be in competition with others. It's very good that the association agreement foresees some financial and technical help because it's very difficult for our economy to transform everything in a very short period of time.

What does Georgia represent for the EU and NATO? The enlargement of the European Union, and at the same time NATO, enlarged the zone of democracy, peace, rule of law, protection of human rights and economic prosperity. I believe that it's not only in the interest of countries like Georgia to join the EU and NATO but also for both of these unions to enlarge the zone of stability because it makes this



Dr Maia Panjikidze
Minister of foreign affairs

part of the world more secure. The EU and NATO can be sure that with this enlargement they will transfer this democratic development to the wider region and see fewer problems.

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Alex Petriashvili
Minister of European and Euro-Atlantic integration

How can Georgia balance its aspirations of NATO membership with the normalisation of relations with Russia? This can be done if we manage to convince Russia that none of the integration processes are aimed against them. The prime minister, when he entered office, appointed a special representative and opened an additional channel of communication with the Russians. They have held four bilateral meetings and as a result we have got Georgian goods back into the Russian market and we have also made some progress on transport issues and air communication issues.

In the context of EU economic integration and potential NATO membership, what will the approach be with regards to the occupied

regions of Georgia? We are hoping that the EU will make a decision on visa-free travel for Georgians. This will permit the Abkhaz and Ossetians who are ready to take a Georgian passport to travel visa-free to European Union and to the Schengen Zone. This is a very important signal and message for them and will help to build trust and confidence. We have to demonstrate that we are serious that the only solution is a peaceful solution. We will never again try to regain territorial integrity by military means.

Is the signing of the association agreement with the EU a turning point for Georgia? The signing is not the end of the process. It is in fact a starting point. This is the beginning of a very challenging but worthwhile journey which will end in the democratic family of European nations, and this is where we believe we belong. The basic democratic values and fundamental rights which are appreciated in the European countries are appreciated by us.

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Photo: Miranda Goderdzishvili