

INTERVIEW WITH ALEKSI PETRIASHVILI, GEORGIA'S STATE MINISTER FOR EUROPEAN AND EUROATLANTIC INTEGRATION

"We need a strong message from the EU"

Interview by Markus Bernath

With the Crimea crisis in mind, Aleksii Petriashvili, Georgia's state minister for European and Euroatlantic integration, calls for a signal from Brussels that EU membership is a real possibility for his country. This interview was conducted by Europolitics in Tbilisi.

Your government has made it clear on several occasions that Georgia and the other countries of the Eastern Partnership are expecting a clear perspective of EU membership. Is the association agreement not enough for the moment?

The association agreement – as it was stated by the European Commission in the case of Ukraine – should not be the ultimate goal. We would like to hear a similar strong message with regard to Georgia. Opening the European perspective – which does not mean an immediate invitation to negotiate membership – is a long process. Georgians understand this. But we need that message from the EU at a time when such grave developments as the annexation of Crimea take place in our region.

Would that be a message directed to Russia?

This would be in the first place a message directed to the peoples in the region – to the Moldovans, the Georgians, the Ukrainians. They urgently need this impetus.

Speaking of Ukraine: should Brussels have raised earlier the idea of EU membership?

Yes, it should have. But better late than never.

Seen from Georgia, from the other side of the Black Sea, what do you think about Russia's annexation of Crimea?

It is absolutely unacceptable. We live in the 21st century, and this is medieval conduct. Russia's move amounts to a complete disrespect for the principle of territorial sovereignty and for the European security architecture. In Georgia, we have gone through this in 2008.

Do you think Moscow could or would launch new military operations in Georgia from the occupied territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia?

Provocations have already occurred. A barbed wired fence is already being



Petriashvili: "Better late than never"

Unfortunately, at that time the signals from the EU and the US towards Russia were not as strong as they are today.

Again: better late than never. Russia is now more isolated than it was after its war against Georgia. I hope the sanctions that are in place will influence the businesses and the political establishment and force the Russian leadership to think twice before undertaking another aggressive move. The risk of this is real.

But having said that, we are in favour of maintaining normal relations with our Northern neighbour, as dialogue has no alternative. The Geneva process [launched after Russia's invasion of Georgia in August 2008 - Ed] continues even if it has not yet produced any ground breaking results.

erected along the administrative boundary lines. Russian helicopters violate Georgia's air space on a daily basis. We try to keep the situation calm. We believe that we will be able to sign the association agreement with the EU in June without further escalation.

Given the current volatile security context in the Black Sea region, why would it make sense now to invest in Georgia?

Because there are some very beneficial areas in Georgia's business environment: hydropower, tourism, agriculture or financial services, to mention but a few. We strive to guarantee stability and if you invest today, by tomorrow we will have completely harmonised our legislation with EU legislation – and after that you will have a chance to double or even triple your profits. ■