

**Address**  
**of the Prime Minister of Georgia, Giorgi Kvirikashvili**  
**to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE)**

Strasbourg, 21 April 2016

President of the Parliamentary Assembly,  
Members of the Assembly,  
Ambassadors,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today I am here to affirm Georgia's commitment to the vision of a Europe whole and free, at a point in time when everyone's faith in this vision is put to the test. For Georgia, the ships have long been burned. We have made our choice. We have come a long way to be part of a whole and free **Europe**.

It was in April 1999 when Georgia acceded to the Council of Europe. There are few institutions that speak of Europe as whole and free as the Council of Europe. Georgia has joined a number of organizations **to be accredited into a club of European nations**. That was a national strategy. But, in joining the Council of Europe **we have become European in a deepest sense of the term**: valuing historical roots, but also empowering individual citizens.

Being European is not a geographic statement. **It is chiefly a sense of security, dignity, freedom, and opportunity that reflects a particular social contract.**

**My country will not be free unless its citizens can live in dignity.** The idea that citizens have inalienable rights that are not subject to the tyranny of a majority is at the heart of Europe's democratic experience.

We are drafting a social contract of European quality. That is a contract not subject to ratification, veto, conditionality, approval or negotiations by anyone else.

**And we are moving ahead, despite certain internal or external problems and conditionality!**

Before 2012, regimes changed, but not by electoral means. Against all odds, in 2012 Georgian people achieved a peaceful transfer of power that amounted to regime change. Since 2012 we have delivered free elections in a level playing field, **local and Presidential**. This year we will complete the circle with parliamentary elections.

**We need competitive, but also uneventful elections, of the kind in which accounts are not frozen, no one controls what kind of news people watch, and each candidate has his or her day in the ballot box.**

We eagerly anticipate PACE monitoring this year for two reasons:

- First, Georgia has been served by international monitoring in times when elections couldn't be lost: **we counted on you when our voices couldn't be heard.**
- Secondly, elections in 2016 would be the most transparent, fair, and level playing;

**We want you to be there to celebrate the result, whatever that may be.**

- **We are moving away from democratic transition to democratic consolidation where winner does not take all and loser does not lose all.**
- **And we are proud of that.**

**We have delivered “*Europe*” to Georgians; and we have surpassed Europe’s expectations of democratic consolidation and democratization.**

**We are the proof that democracy promotion, conditionality, and institution/capacity-building works, when there is ownership of the objectives set before us.**

***If we can do it, so can others.***

We now have experience in the successful implementation of reforms: identifying objectives, defining tasks, keeping up with deadlines, and delivering on quality benchmarks.

We have recently delivered on Visa Liberalization prerequisites, which promise to open up a prospect of freedom of unhindered movement.

- For obvious reasons, every citizen in Georgia is eager to feel that kind of admittance in this space of free movement. To travel with dignity, to be welcomed and trusted would be the most meaningful and tangible statement of a “return to Europe” since our independence.
- The privilege to travel from Vilnius to Athens and from Madrid to Bucharest without a single stop is central to the experience of being European.
- 100 million Europeans that joined the EU in 2004 can empathize with **Georgian’s thirst for that kind of freedom.**
- **Freedom is an integral part of our identity.**
- After years of reforms and sacrifices, Tbilisi will turn to its citizens in the occupied territories with a solid proof that it pays to be pro-European and will be able to say “join us” and study, work, and flourish with us.

Each opportunity we deliver to our citizens is the product of hard work.

Each policy is a **value chain** that requires focus, coordination, definition of roles, initiative, sense of responsibility, and, of course, leadership.

**But, reforms are ultimately about chains made of values that anchor us to Europe, a civilization that places the citizen at the heart of political process.**

- Stakeholders' consultations, monitoring, reporting and evaluation, keeps everyone on their toes.
- But, **abiding to European standards is an obligation that has now become a habit.**
- The cumulative result of reforms, year on year, is that **citizens, civil society organizations, and media have real power.**

We are building a home with a place for all citizens of Georgia. By ensuring **strong protection of Human Rights** - we are building a home to come to, not to leave from.

Our national seven-year plan for the promotion of human rights aims to enshrine the democratic values which we stand for at the very heart of our society:

- We have outlawed discrimination on the basis of color, national identity, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation.
- We are making a state in which national minorities have their right to their culture, religion, language, security and opportunity. We are committed to ensuring the full engagement of minorities in the on-going developments and decision-making processes in Georgia.

We are building a society where women are not only protected by law, but in practice. Since July 2015, civic organizations can file cases on behalf of victimized women. We have signed the Istanbul Convention. We have a national action plan for Security Council Resolution 1325. When I look at the Davos gender economic equality indicators, it is clear that Georgia has some way to go. **But, we are looking at the indicators, and that is the beginning of every serious policy.**

We have transformed the Ministry of Internal Affairs into a community-oriented organization and enacted the new law on police, which sets the highest

standards of protection of human rights, and enshrines the principles of legality, equality, proportionality and political neutrality. **You cannot outlaw intolerance, but you can make it unacceptable.**

Looking ahead, the priority of the Government of Georgia is to ensure decent living conditions and opportunities for Georgian citizens. Our agenda is as comprehensive as ever. After having introduced a national healthcare program and doubling welfare services, we have adopted a Four Point Reform Agenda with the following priorities:

- First, facilitating jobs creation by liberalizing business and investment environment further, including, *inter alia*, by implementation of tax reform and by supporting entrepreneurship;
- Second, empowering people by supporting skills creation through education reform targeted at bridging the gap between professions supply and demand.
- Third, strengthening Open Governance by ensuring the inclusive decision-making process, where voices of opposition, civil society and private sector are heard, and by improving and modernizing public services, including by introducing “single Window Principle” unified front office for all government services for individuals, as well as for companies.

Together with the implementation of relevant soft policies, we are investing in core infrastructure development supporting expansion of the east-west and south-north trade corridors, utilizing Georgia’s potential of a transit country between Europe and Asia, as well as its massive touristic potential, thus creating economic opportunities for all of our citizens.

Ladies and gentlemen,

One of the biggest challenges the Georgian Government faces is the situation in the occupied regions of Georgia – Abkhazia and Tskhinvali region/South

Ossetia. As a human rights organisation rather than a security organisation, the Council of Europe has an important role to play in protecting human rights in the occupied territories of Georgia.

One of the causes of violations of human rights in the areas affected by the conflict in Georgia is the so called “borderisation”, namely, the artificial obstacles along the occupation line installed by the Russian Federation, dividing families and significantly affecting the everyday life of the local population. The people residing within the occupied regions and in the adjacent areas are deprived of their fundamental rights and freedoms, including, but not limited to the freedom of movement, the right to property, family life, right to education in native language and other civic and economic rights.

Another important issue which is of our concern is the access of the Council of Europe to the areas affected by the conflict. Despite his efforts, the Human Rights Commissioner of the Council of Europe has not been granted access to the occupied regions of Georgia.

We seek to break the deadlock in Russian-Georgian relations by pursuing pragmatic policies. These policies include taking steps to restore relations in trade, transport, humanitarian and other fields. But our efforts to normalise relations with Moscow are insufficient without due respect to our independence, sovereignty and territorial integrity.

We are also greatly concerned by the plan of Tskhinvali/South Ossetia’s *de facto* authorities to hold a referendum on joining the Russian Federation. Such illegal developments would not only undermine Georgia’s sovereignty and territorial integrity, but would have potentially dire consequences in an already fragile South Caucasus region.

***At all times, security and empowerment is a priority.*** We are no longer a country that each family has someone in prison, as it was only a few years ago, or the country that holds the shameful record of more prisoners per capita in Europe, where each government can shake you down for your money and your vote, threatening to deprive you of your dignity, or that of your loved ones.

**We are European, but with the dignity this terms carries, which lies at the heart of being a Georgian.**

We have worked and are working closely with the Council of Europe, with the Venice Commission, EU Special Advisor Thomas Hammarberg and Council of Europe's current Special Advisor Michael O'Boyle, the European Commission, and with this forum to provide what should be taken for granted:

- a depoliticized police force; a prosecution that goes after offenders of any social class;
- a justice system that cannot be arm-twisted; a plea-bargaining process that does not shakeup and blackmail; a plea-bargain system that serves justice, not power; a penitentiary system that is not an instrument of revenge and mass terror.

**Now, are we perfect yet?**

No, we are not. No one is in Europe. We have utopias that are unreachable. That is very European; but the commitment to such a constructive utopia lies at the heart of a nation that discovered wine and is determined to build a Republic.

**All this is hard work, but descent work.**

The new 2016-2019 Action Plan agreed between Georgia and the Council of Europe focuses on the promotion of penitentiary and judicial reforms. We have moved from the general to the specific. And we have moved with resolve.

- The independence of the judiciary and prosecution has been armored with life tenure and peer-to-peer regulation and oversight. Our

administration did this from 2013 to this day, in three successive waves of reforms.

- The transparency of the judicial process has been reinforced to create a level playing field between prosecution and the defense; we have consolidated best European practice for the safety and impartiality of jury trials.
- We have halved prison population; we are treating imprisonment as a measure of last resort; and we have put in place guarantees for juvenile offenders.

**We are the first government since Georgia's independence that is not feared.**

And perhaps that is the achievement we are more proud of, although shamed by the fact that rule of law cannot be extended to the occupied territories.

We can only do what we can for Internally Displaced Persons and Refugees, invest in confidence-building measures, outreach, and hope for a bottom up solution.

**We are delivering what we can and where we can.**

And in delivering we will be criticized and monitored, **as we should be.**

**Our work is not technocratic. It is political.**

As representatives of the Georgian people we set an agenda, prioritize, allocate resources, assume responsibility or – in a word – **lead.**

**This Government believes – with good reason – that confidence in rule of law requires not only reforms, but also restorative justice. And we want to make Georgia a better place to live for the citizens, and not to show off.**

**In the history of democracy, there has never been restorative justice without controversy. The balance between restoration and lustration is thin and the criticism inevitable.**

- **We want unity, but not at the expense of justice; we want justice, but not at the expense of unity.**
- **This is the essence of our Gordian knot.**
- But we will not cut through this knot with silence. *“Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter,”* said Martin Luther King.
- **We must unloose this knot.**
- **To be silent is to be an accomplice in injustice.**
- **And Georgia needs to believe in justice. That is the essence of democratic consolidation for us.**

No one should be forced to be silent. And no one is in Georgia.

- Reporters without borders suggest Georgia in 2015 was a leader in Eastern Europe.
- Freedom House continues to provide glowing reviews of Georgia over the last four years.
- And when it comes to freedom on the internet, Georgia is 9<sup>th</sup> in the world, at par with Britain and France.

Since 2012, we have created one of the most liberal digital broadcasting regimes in the world. **We go the extra mile.**

- The Board of Public Broadcasters is a truly independent body that engages stakeholders, including NGOs, and monitors.
- Cable TV providers must guarantee media pluralism, **must carry and must offer alternative voices.**

**As I admitted above, we are celebrating a 17 years relationship with the Council of Europe in April, and 25 years of restoration of independence in May. 25 years is a generation. One generation of moving towards the**

**essence of Europe, to complement independence with significance, for each Georgian.**

In pursuing democratic consolidation and building a European state, we are opting for a certain kind of civilization. That is the essence of our choice.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Council of Europe is at the heart of the essence of being European and of the kind of social contract we want to have, as a polity.

**We understand that PACE is a partisan forum, about politics as much as about policies. But, for our friends and foes, this year, we ask for one thing: make decisions for which you can be proud. By all means be critical, but also be helpful.**

**Help us build on the foundations we have laid together. Help us be all we can be in a country that is partly occupied but fully European.**

Georgia has responded to expectations. We are the proof that democracy promotion, institution building, civic empowerment, conditionality, and reforms work.

**We hope that together we can set a faster pace towards democratic consolidation. Together, against the odds, against the forces that want to take Europe apart, stand on the right side of history.**

**For everything that Europe stands for, let's stand together. We are European, which is the essence of dignity at the heart of every Georgian. European is the dignity of a citizen that every Georgian deserves. And dignity is at the heart of our identity.**

**Thank you!**