

**Address of Sophie Katsarava,
Chairperson of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Parliament of Georgia
at the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence
Irish House of Oireachtas, Leinster House
March 29th, 2018**

Mr. Chairperson, distinguished members of the Committee,

I am honoured and delighted to be speaking at the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence. Let me extend my most sincere personal gratitude to the Chairman of the Committee Mr. Brendan Smith for giving me this unique opportunity to address this distinguished audience.

Today I want to talk to you about Georgia's aspirations for membership of the EU and NATO, I would like to reflect on ways to respond to existing security challenges in Georgia and the wider European region, and lastly, but I think, most importantly, I would like to suggest ways to further deepen bilateral relations between Ireland and Georgia in the future

The opportunity you have afforded me today, in inviting me to speak before this committee, is a sign of the positive current dynamic in parliamentary ties between our two countries, which have intensified since the visit of Chair of this Committee to Tbilisi in July 2017. The exchange of high-level parliamentary delegations is vitally important for achieving tangible results in different areas of cooperation between countries.

EU

Georgia's aspiration for full membership of the EU is a key foreign policy goal that will inevitably bring Ireland and Georgia closer in the future.

It is a declared choice of our citizens to see Georgia become a full member of the European Union and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. This decision is reaffirmed by the Constitution of Georgia.

Over the recent decade, Georgia has made great strides to bring itself closer to the European and Euro-Atlantic family. We have implemented a series of comprehensive reforms that transformed Georgia into a modern European country with vibrant political life, rule of law, open governance, media pluralism, growing economy and favorable investment environment. Georgia has improved its rankings in virtually all aspects, including democracy index, and economic liberalization.

All these was made possible by consistent and effective reforms developed and implemented in close cooperation with our partner countries and international organizations. Support received in this process from our friends and partners is invaluable. In that sense, I would like to, once again, express my deepest gratitude for the unwavering support of Ireland on our way towards EU and NATO membership.

The Association Agreement and the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (AA/DCFTA) with the EU is fully operational and applied. It provides a concrete roadmap for modernization across political, economic and social fields by introducing and applying the European standards. We believe that the revised **Association Agenda** for 2017-2020, which defines a set of ambitious priorities and reform objectives, will bring Georgia closer to the EU. Georgian citizens continue to benefit from the **visa-free travel regime**, which is the most visible and tangible benefit for the entire population of Georgia and an additional incentive for the Georgian government to continue the pace of reforms. The Government is fully committed to sustained reforms in all Visa Liberalization Action Plan-related areas, with particular attention to the prevention of possible abuse of asylum system in the Schengen countries. We continue effective cooperation with the EU member states in fight against the organized crime.

Introduction of the EU norms and standards has significantly stimulated economy in Georgia and boosted **trade relations with the EU**. As a single market, European Union has become the largest trade partner for Georgia - trade increased by 2% in 2017, while exports increased by 13%. Approximation with the EU policies has significantly upgraded our **sectoral cooperation**, while we continue extensive reforms in energy, transport, health care, agriculture, environment, research and innovations, education and other related fields.

Georgia-NATO

The upcoming NATO summit in Brussels in July 2018 presents an excellent opportunity for the NATO membership to reaffirm its commitment to Georgia's eventual membership, which was promised 10 years ago at the Bucharest Summit. Since then, Georgia has achieved significant progress on its way to NATO membership, especially when it comes to the practical aspects of the process, using the NATO-Georgia Commission (NGC), Annual National Program (ANP) and

NATO-Georgia Substantial Package. The Parliament is actively involved in the ANP implementation, as well as in elaboration of priorities of ANP.

We strongly believe that Georgia's accomplishments in democratic transformation, its commitments to NATO integration and shared Euro-Atlantic security, as well as its unprecedented practical cooperation with the Alliance, should be adequately reflected in the upcoming discussions and decisions on Open Door policy. We count on your strong support in this process.

As a future member of the Alliance, Georgia is strongly committed to the common Euro-Atlantic Security. We have assigned 870 troops to the Resolute Support Mission that makes Georgia one of its largest contributors. We intend to keep the same volume and composition of forces in the RSM until the end of 2018, and to continue supporting NATO efforts in Afghanistan beyond that period too.

Georgia welcomes NATO's increased presence in the Black Sea region and stands ready to actively cooperate with NATO on **Black Sea Security**.

Occupation; De-occupation efforts

Georgia's cooperation and integration with organisations like the EU and NATO are directly linked with our efforts to meet common security challenges on the regional and national level. Conflicts in Europe share similarities and common patterns, particularly in terms of infringement of sovereignty and territorial integrity of neighboring states. European security is being significantly challenged by Russia's continuous aggressive actions against Georgia, namely by the ongoing illegal military occupation of up to 20% of integral parts of Georgia's sovereign territories. This dangerous pattern of arbitrarily altering international borders by force poses a significant threat not only to Georgia and Russia's other neighbors under illegal occupation, but to the strategic vision of Europe whole, free and at peace.

The security and human rights situation in Georgia's occupied regions is being further aggravated by continued installation of barbed-wire and razor-wire fences and so called "border" signs along the occupation line. Killings, abductions, arbitrary detentions, seizure of property, restrictions on free movement, as well as restrictions on education in the native Georgian language - all based on ethnic grounds - is a common phenomenon. These illegal actions is an illustration of Russia's deliberate policy towards the factual annexation of the Georgia's regions.

On February 23, a Georgian citizen Archil Tatumashvili's life was taken in the occupied Tskhinvali region, after being illegally detained by the Russian occupation forces. His body was returned home after a month of delay with multiple signs of torture on his body. The recent appalling fact of tragic loss of life is another reminder of the gravity of the situation on the ground, which calls for a joint, immediate, and consolidated international reaction.

In response to this tragedy, on March 21, 2018, the Parliament of Georgia adopted a bipartisan resolution "On the Gross Violation of Human Rights in the Occupied Territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia/Tskhinvali Regions of Georgia by the Russian Federation and on the "Otkhozoria-Tatumashvili List".

As we speak now, the 43th Meeting of Geneva International Discussions are taking place between the parties to the conflict – Georgia and Russia, with the participation of UN, OSCE and EU and the United States. This format has been running for almost 10 years since the end of the War in August 2008. The core mandate of the negotiations is to ensure that the Russian Federation fulfills its obligations under the August 2008 Ceasefire Agreement, which is not observed. Georgia is constructively and proactively involved in the negotiations in order to reach progress in the GID. Georgia's is fully committed to the peaceful resolution of the conflict which has been clearly demonstrated a number of times. However, there has not been any progress on either the establishment of International Security Arrangements (ISA) on the occupied territories, return of IDPs and refugees to their places of origin, **or** allowing UN Human rights mechanisms into the occupied regions.

It is essential that EU Monitoring Mission is given an unimpeded access to the occupied territories of Georgia. In this context, I would like to take this opportunity and express my gratitude to the Government of Ireland for dispatching three Irish Observers in the EU Monitoring Mission.

We believe, more needs to be done to deliver on tangible results, which, first and foremost, requires political will and commitment from all stakeholders in the process.

Bilateral Georgia-Ireland

I wish to extend sincere thanks for the first ever **resolution** "Motion on Support for the Territorial Integrity of Georgia and its Integration in to the European Union", which was adopted on February 23, 2017 by the Joint Committee on Foreign Affairs and Trade, and Defence of the Irish House of Oireachtas, in support of Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally recognized borders, as well as Georgia's integration in the European Union. This resolution is a clear

demonstration of genuine friendship between our nations and we highly value your steadfast support for Georgia's key national priorities.

I am particularly delighted by the establishment of the **Ireland-Georgia Friendship Group** in the Irish Oireachtas, as a result of our meeting in Tbilisi in July 2017. I am confident, that the effective work of the Friendship Group will give additional impetus to further deepening bilateral cooperation between the legislative branches of our countries.

My special thanks goes to the Irish government for its continued support for Georgia's annual Generally Assembly resolution on securing the right of safe, dignified and voluntary return of internally displaced persons and refugees from Georgia's Russian-occupied regions of Abkhazia and Tskhinvali, as well as for overall support of Ireland towards Georgia's positions and initiatives within international organizations.

Against the backdrop of this growing bilateral political dynamic, what we are missing is a comprehensive **trade and economic relations**.

Strategic location connecting Europe and Asia, robust economic reforms, politically stable and corrupt free environment, free business environment, low taxes – are among the key variables that contribute to making Georgia an attractive investment destination.

A solid track record of successful reforms bolstering the rule of law, reducing corruption, building effective, transparent and accountable institutions that focus on improving citizen's lives through excellent public service delivery, has earned Georgia a reputation of a state with modern, innovative approaches to good governance, anti-corruption strategy and participatory democracy. As the current Chair of the global initiative Open Government Partnership (OGP), Since September 2017, Georgia intends to share its experience and best practices in combating corruption and creating institutionalized mechanisms for anti-corruption policy coordination and monitoring. These actions aim at ensuring people's opportunity to influence government decisions that affect their daily lives.

The advantage of being a transit country is increasing more and more in light of intensified infrastructure development in the country, which serves the purpose of raising awareness about the role of Georgia as a key link at the **East-West Corridor** and the **logistics hubs**. Development of the only deep-sea port of Anaklia and Anaklia Free Industrial Zone on the east coast of the Black Sea, as well as building

International Railway Line "Baku-Tbilisi-Kars", and a new transport corridor to be developed between Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey "Lapis Lazuli" will breathe a new life to the East-West trade route. In this context, Georgia is very much interested in the global economic project "One Belt - One Road" initiated by the President of China.

All these achievements and advantages of Georgia's investment environment are clearly reflected in almost all international economic rankings, which improve every year.

With that, I wish to call for deeper bilateral trade and economic cooperation between Georgia and Ireland and kindly request the Committee to mediate with the Government to initiate and facilitate Irish Business Delegation visits to Georgia in order to get a first-hand information about investment opportunities.

The Irish Footprint Program could serve as another effective mechanism for enhancing the bilateral cooperation between our countries. More specifically, as Ireland plans to increase the number of its embassies worldwide, we hope that Tbilisi will be considered as one of the priority destinations for opening the Irish Embassy in the foreseeable future.

There is another area, where we have considerable space to improve people-to-people relations between Ireland and Georgia. As I mentioned above, since March 2017 Georgian citizens travel visa free to Schengen Area. Easing visa regime for Georgian citizens travelling to Ireland will considerably facilitate people-to-people contacts and enhance business, tourism and cultural ties for the mutual benefit of our countries. As a starting point, we would welcome Ireland's decision to waive visa requirement for holders of Georgian diplomatic and service passports considering that the holders of these passports are Government officials traveling to Ireland for official meetings. We are convinced that diplomatic and service visa waiver will facilitate visits and intensified cooperation on both sides.

In conclusion, let me underline one more time the vital importance of strong ties between Ireland and Georgia. Our countries are not only alike in terms of geographic size, or our historical struggles for independence. Our two countries share a similar experience of acting as bridges between different continents. Ireland has long functioned as a bridge between Europe and the Americas, while Georgia, throughout its history, has acted as a bridge connected Europe and Asia.

Ireland celebrated one hundred years of independence only two years ago – This year, Georgia marks 100 years since the founding of the first Georgian democratic Republic. As I speak to you now from this floor, I realize how much more there is to be shared between a mature European democracy like Ireland and a younger, but rapidly progressing European democracy like Georgia.

Thank you once again for your kind attention, and I look forward to your questions.