The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Georgia Signs On to Europe

By Paul Rimple

December 01, 2013



There should be no doubts about it. Georgia proved its commitment to a European trajectory when it initialed the Association Agreement, a comprehensive free-trade treaty with the European Union in Vilnius on Thursday. Still, there are many who doubt Georgia's pledge and fear the country could backslide on democracy — or like Armenia and Ukraine, buckle to pressure from Russia. But they are wrong.

First of all, there have been no substantial indications that Georgia is backsliding. Quite the contrary. Legislative amendments have freed the judiciary from its links to the executive and increased the court's independence. The government no longer influences private media. Businesses have never felt more secure from illegal government interference. Legislation is being discussed to finally reform local self-governance.

Sadly, these advances are overshadowed by the arrests of former government officials, which many observers see as a demonstration of regression — such as Polish Foreign Minister Radoslaw Sikorski, who likens the arrests to a "Caucasus vendetta." Apparently Sikorski, whose own ministry has been embroiled in corruption scandals, cannot fathom the idea that

the high Georgian officials he once praised committed real crimes.

Should these people be forgiven because they were ministers? The Georgian people do not think so. Sikorski hasn't bothered to look at the transparency of these cases. In today's Georgia, defendants are no longer pressured to make shady plea bargaining deals. The days of buying get-out-of-jail cards are over.

The irony is that for the past decade, Georgia's Western partners have continuously stressed that Georgia must follow the rule of law. Now they criticize it for doing just that.

People who agree with Sikorski also say Georgia's willingness to "normalize ties" with Russia is a signal that Georgia wants to return to Russia's fold, which proves how out of touch they are. Of course, most Georgians are happy that Georgian wine and fruit are back on the Russian market, but according to recent polls nearly three-fourths of the population feel Russia is a threat. Unlike Armenia and Ukraine, Georgian society unanimously supports the country's aspirations to join the EU and NATO. The nation will not permit their leaders to detour from this policy.

This does not mean the Russian threat is imaginary. It is very real, as people with razor wire now slicing their villages in half will testify. But what more could Russia do, short of an invasion? It has already recognized Abkhazia and South Ossetia. Moreover, Georgia is not totally energy dependent on Russia and has proven taht it can survive an economic embargo.

U.S. Senator John McCain, the man who famously said "today we are all Georgians" during the 2008 Russia-Georgia war, reminded the new government that "membership in the Euro-NATO community is not an inherent right."

McCain need not be so patronizing. No other country has worked so hard to make European-NATO integration a reality. Put another way, NATO member Albania suffers from endemic corruption and shares the 113th spot with Guatemala in the Transparency International corruption index, whereas Georgia is ranked at 51. Nevertheless, last year the European Commission recommended that Albania be granted EU candidacy.

Who's ready for whom? Europe will create more criteria, and Georgia will continue to rise to the challenges. In Vilnius, Georgia proved it is ready to be an active participant of the European community.

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Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2013/12/01/georgia-signs-on-to-europe-a30062