

## **Speech by Tedo Japaridze, Chair of the Foreign Relations Committee of the Parliament of Georgia**

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### **Going To Vilnius With Riga On Our Mind**

I am delighted to be here with you today! Thanks for inviting me to that panel! I have been talking much recently about Georgia's FP trajectory, Georgia's way to Europe or the Euro-Atlantic space (the EU, NATO), on Georgia's future in general. I found out that we needed still to learn much and work hard to reach our goals on that uphill, tumultuous, bumpy way as it is not only to become – whenever it happens – a member of the EU or NATO but about likewise becoming mentally an European. And to remain also a Georgian - preserving and protecting our historic and cultural legacy, traditions, habits.

Besides my European colleagues reminded me that to get AA is very important but that's just the beginning! There would be more complex and comprehensive agenda ahead – a ratification process of that agreement by a Parliament of each EU member state.

So Georgia is ready for Vilnius, ready for Riga and ready for any step further that paves the way towards anchorage with the project of European Integration.

By the way, I had a dream that in an ideal world, at some point in the following decade, maybe a bit more, **we would be invited to sign an accession treaty in Ankara, in a very different Europe and in a very different neighborhood.** I know that is not likely, but does not make the vision any less desirable. Georgia is not perhaps “**ready**” but it is **committed.**

**Thinking the unthinkable is easier in this part of Europe, the Baltic region.** The mental map of Europe has changed. The Baltic States are intertwined with both a **Nordic and a Visegrad perception** of their own corner in Europe. These perceptions come with models and mentorship, formal or informal, in the process of **Europeanization**; they help reshape **policy** as much as **identity**. A Nordic model of parliamentary consultations or one that capitalizes on the Visegrad experience is telling of both identity and process. Having said that, calling spade a spade, there is nothing in this region that remains post-Soviet, either in terms of policy or in terms of identity.

So this complex and comprehensive process of transformation/modernization or “**Europeanization**» of Georgia should be about making Georgia a normal, functioning, relevant **regional democracy**, institutionalized democracy, based on rule of law and justice, a viable economy. That does not mean at all marginalization of Georgia, as some

say, but making Georgia a regional bridge, a hub, **a role-model country** in the immediate neighborhood and thus and from those very perspectives contributing effectively to the global security and stability, economic development and prosperity.

I have been reaffirmed in a more than robust way that model would be much better than to be a “**New Berlin Wall**” or a “**New Mannerheim Line**, as some loved to describe Georgia. Let’s make Georgia a real **Beacon of Democracy** and that would make Georgia more attractive and much more valuable to Europe, Europeans and specifically to the EU ... and for Russia as well. More than that - that would make much easier for the same Europeans - and the Westerners in general - to talk about our problems with Russians. If, indeed, there would be, even academically, an “easy talk” with Russians at large...

I would like to focus briefly on those problems but do that in a bit polemical manner and leave with you some pieces of food – for - thought. I think that conference is a timely event and venue to check one more time our notes, thoughts, compare them with views and judgments of our colleagues and friends, listen carefully to the messages from our opponents or even antagonists and thus to be engaged in a normal democratic discourse about the **future of Georgia**. Yes, we should be focused more about our future and less on plowing in our past. But, at the same time, not forgetting those mistakes we made here and there.

Just recently I was in Riga and then here, in Vilnius and had a very interesting exchanges with my Baltic colleagues. I came to the conclusion that the main difference, for example, between the Baltic countries and the South Caucasus is that in the former **Europeanization, regionalization and independence/sovereignty** were projects that proceeded hand-in-hand, **simultaneously and coextensively**. And regionalization, Europeanization and independence in this part of the world are still being cultivated as parallel projects, even following EU and NATO membership.

In this scheme, two questions are of paramount significance if Georgia wants to “make it to Estonia, Lithuania or Latvia.”

- a) First, how do we, in the South Caucasus, decouple inherent regional instability and unpredictability from domestic institutional development? This is a question Baltic countries did deal with, although in much more favorable circumstances. In Tbilisi, the **transposition** of an East-versus-West discourse in domestic politics has harnessed a “**winner takes all**” political culture. Often, eager to show we were on a western foreign policy radar, **form has taken precedence over substance**, paving the way for a “façade, manipulative format of democracy» - **we learned well what and how to say while talking to our Western counterparts.**

- b) Secondly, how do we **regionalize our path to Europeanization**? True, as in the Baltic Sea area, **Sweden** and **Poland** have taken the lead in our neighborhood as well to design the Eastern Partnership program. Yet, it still feels we are a long way from Europe. Perhaps, **Turkey** has the economic and political clout to play the role of Scandinavia in the Baltic Sea as mentors, investors and advocates of our cause, precisely because Ankara has invested in a “bridging” foreign policy orientation, being a NATO member, engaged in EU accession negotiations, whilst cultivating significant economic ties with Russia. In any event, **we need to make small steps, with tangible and bankable benefits**, before we make it to Estonia, Lithuania and Latvia thus to Europe and the EU.
- c) Overall, we need to face the fact - or at least acknowledge its existence - that unlike our Baltic partners we are engaging in what appears to be **“a transition within a transition”**, that is, fitting our own internal and regional transitions with a widening “North-South” cleavage within Europe. The significance of this divide for Tbilisi is quite controversial.
- From Tbilisi’s point of view, this goes hand in hand with the assumption that questions of internal integrity take precedence over bold enlargement for the foreseeable future. More worryingly, there is a larger concern, namely that the wider democratic deficit and the proliferating rise of populist forces in Europe will undermine domestically our path towards European Integration not merely as a “logistically impossible path,” but as a **vision** as such. We watch closely as events are unfolding, but with little influence. In this scheme, we count on partners to raise the issue that when Europe decides on its future, there is a wider and often neglected spillover.
  - Alternatively, from our own perspective, the north-south divide may be viewed as a mental map dividing the formerly Soviet Republics amongst those assimilated in the Euro-Atlantic structures and those that still have been relinquished, de facto, as “Near Abroad”.
  - So the issues **“enlargement or deepening”** of EU integration come again along in an altogether different context. We count on partners in Baltic States and Central Europe to keep reminding Brussels that the **“completion of Europe”**, despite the unfolding EU identity crisis, is an ongoing project.
  - We hoped for some time we can re-conceptualize our region, instilling a sense of European identity, **“with Russia” but not “of Russia”**, to paraphrase Winston Churchill’s vision of Britain in Europe. We hoped this vision would encompass Turkey, EU member states and, in some **shape-and-form**, Russia. For the moment, this is not workable. Make no mistake. Although still intend to make the

appointment in Vilnius, despite various threats, everyone knows that the bottom-line discussion is not about trade. **It is all about identity.**

- The EU has signed Comprehensive Free Trade Area Agreements with South Korea, Chile, Indonesia and Canada. That is not what we are after. **We are after anchorage, of the type than an Association Agreement entails, which is economic, political, normative, infrastructural and, not least, identity-driven.** I do not need to expand here in the domestic difficulties of the transitional political period that Georgia finds itself in.
- If I do, I will have to counter a number of misperceptions that do not do justice either to Brussels or to Tbilisi. Suffice to say that there is one theme over which the current Georgian Government and the opposition are in consensus: “we are go” for an Association Agreement.
- But, we, citizens of Georgia, also need to understand that **the world is not divided amongst Georgia’s friends and foes;** we live in a more complex world, **where alliances are built on mutual interest rather than vague convictions of “right” and “wrong;”** whoever is not with us, is not necessarily against us. Our allies are not **our rescuers.** They are, at best, **our partners.**

In this scheme, the question of **whether the South Caucasus constitutes a “shared neighborhood” or “the Near Abroad” is a not high on everyone’s agenda in Europe in general and specifically in the EU.** It is, primarily, our concern; perhaps, it is also Baltic States’ concern, maybe for some Central Europeans. Maybe...

In this commitment, we are perhaps uniquely committed in the Eastern shores of the Black Sea, also because there is little that can happen to Georgia that has not happened yet. Our issues are sadly but also fortunately less “interconnected.”

As for Georgia, **the ships have been burned and there is no return.** We realize that Europe will for some time focus on a more inward-looking agenda. Luckily, Europe is multi-centric. And we still hope that **post-Soviet means something, in terms of commitment from our friends in New Europe.**

What we are here to suggest is this: **coming to Vilnius, but going beyond Vilnius to Riga.** We need a sense of regional identity and in the short-to-medium run the Black Sea framing will not suffice.

So, we ask that you reflect on the idea of building upon **the precedent of a “Visegrad plus” framing,** so as to include Georgia, in recognition that Warsaw, Vilnius, Riga and other capitals in former Eastern Europe are emerging as new centers of European leadership. **I am certain that in a future we will be discussing in terms of a**

**Vilnius/Riga foreign policy trajectory for Georgia.** That is another food for thought I leave with you.

Meanwhile, we hope that a vision of “**a Europe with Russia**” is not dead and buried. Technically speaking, Georgia could stick to technicalities and very well argue that its trade relations are geared towards Europe and Turkey; but, of course, the same could be said of Russia, paradoxically. This encounter between negative and positive conditionality – “**more for more**” in the Eastern Partnership versus “**more or else**” in the Custom’s Union counterproposal – **is detrimental for Georgia.** Let me bring this all together and be clear.

- The consensus in Tbilisi is that a good opening step for a less timid anchorage in Europe, after Vilnius, would be for us to join **the Polish-gestated “Visegrad plus” grouping.** In Georgia's case, this proposal signals our desire for Europeanization, coupled with a hope for mentorship and inter-institutional cooperation, a trajectory that was made clear on the 27th October Presidential elections: a strong push in the direction of the extant European institutional frameworks, new as well as old ones.
- Above all, we want as much as possible to add **a regional and multilateral dimension of engagement** to the largely bilateral framing of the Eastern Partnership. While Brussels may not be able to focus in the region, which is understandable, we know that Warsaw, Riga, Vilnius does. And we think this **multi-centrality** is an asset we want to build on. Our identity is European and, following your example, we want to be fully recognized as such.

Let us be clear, **wanting to be in Europe is not an anti-Russian statement, but more of a statement about Georgia: competitiveness, rule of law, respect for cultural diversity, solid multilateralism, consensus driven policy, a reliable social safety net, a social partnership culture, respectable institutions, and a commitment to human rights.** This makes sense for us, in terms of what we want to be. The point of what we don’t want to be comes by defect, not in principle. European values are for Georgia. That is what we want.

The essence of our challenge is that we must return to “a Europe” that is on cross-roads regarding “What is Europe.” This set of dilemmas is not for the lighthearted. Again, we need a mixture of Estonian pragmatism and Lithuanian romantic heroism, Polish sobriety and faith. We must live long enough and work smartly enough to see the day when returning to Europe will be possible. **All we ask from Europe is to be aware of this reality and to avoid “either or” dilemmas while the “or” is not clearly defined.**

Thank you!