



PARLIAMENT OF GEORGIA
CHAIRPERSON

01/2293

To: Conference of the Speakers of the EU Parliaments
Bratislava, Slovakia

Dear Colleagues,

It is indeed my honor and pleasure to address the Conference of the Speakers of the EU Parliaments. First of all, let me express my appreciation for your support of my country's reforms and its ongoing democratic transformation. Since the Rose Revolution of 2003, Georgia has made remarkable progress in revitalizing its political and economic system. One of our core priorities has been to strengthen our relationship with the European Union, a commitment underscored by our new action plan within the European Neighborhood Policy framework.

In this context, it is critical for Georgia that we begin negotiations with the European Union on a visa facilitation agreement in the nearest future. The finalization of the Union's preferential visa agreement with Russia recently has added real urgency to this matter, underscoring the political importance of beginning negotiations as soon as possible.

As you may know, Georgian citizens living in the "frozen conflict" regions of South Ossetia and Abkhazia, Georgia, have been subject to a "passportization campaign" - the illegal distribution of Russian passports, in violation of Georgian, Russian, and international law. One dangerous and unintended result of the EU's decision to simplify the visa regime with Russia is that residents of the conflict zones who succumb to Russian passportization efforts will have easier access to the EU countries than those who insist on holding legal Georgian passports. In fact, the EU's simplified visa regime with Russia is likely to serve as an incentive for even more residents of these regions to illegally obtain Russian passports. It is clear that this will not contribute to a peaceful resolution of the conflicts on our territories, which is of paramount importance both to my country and to the EU.

Fortunately, there is a remedy that can be pursued with relative speed and that will redress the negative impact of the EU-Russia visa accord: The timely commencement of visa facilitation negotiations with Georgia in order to grant our country the same benefits that the European Union has extended to our neighbor.

I would like to ask for your indispensable support on this matter. Understanding the significant political underpinnings of the problem, I hope that you can voice the importance of the matter to the relevant EU institutions, since the timely commencement of negotiations is not secured at this stage.

Please accept, dear Colleagues, the expression of my highest consideration and please do not hesitate to contact me should you need additional information on this matter.

Sincerely,

Nino Burjanadze

VISA FACILITATION AND READMISSION ISSUES BETWEEN GEORGIA AND EU

Migration issues and the EU-Georgia Visa Dialogue are important cooperation areas defined by the EU-Georgia ENP Action Plan. Georgia welcomes the EU decision to establish the EU-Georgia cooperation sub-committee on Justice, Freedom and Security matters, which will tackle migration issues, including the visa dialogue.

Georgia also welcomes the Commission Communication on Strengthening the ENP, which calls on both the EU and its neighbors to build a much stronger and deeper relationship. Mobility of persons is of the utmost importance in strengthening those relationships. Promoting people-to-people contacts and making legitimate short-term travel easier will be an indicator of the strength of the European Neighborhood Policy. Simplification of the existing visa regime with the EU is a subject of Georgia's special attention.

Essential issue for Georgia in this realm involves the EU's preferential visa agreement with Russia. In adopting this regime, it is imperative for the EU to take sophisticated measures so as not to reward residents of the Georgian territories of Abkhazia and South Ossetia who possess Russian citizenship through illegal passportization. Our citizens in conflict regions are discouraged from opting for Georgian passports, since they benefit more from getting (*illegally*) Russian ones, while putting the rest of the Georgian population, including IDPs in a disadvantageous situation in terms of travel to the EU member countries. In this context, it gives us an additional incentive to request a simplified visa regime with the EU, at least for the specific categories of Georgian citizens.

Georgia is making great strides in improving its border-management capacities. Based on this progress, it seems reasonable to pursue visa-free entry to the EU for certain categories of Georgian nationals, as well as to work towards simplifying the general visa regime. We consider it of utmost importance to work with EU Member States on adopting a non-visa regime for diplomatic and service passport holders. Meanwhile, we are ready to intensify ongoing negotiations and conclude readmission agreements with EU Member States, taking into consideration all the provisions on readmission set out in the EU-Georgia Action Plan. Such negotiations with the EU member states have already started.¹

Georgia has unilaterally adopted a liberal visa policy that allows the Citizens of EU member states to stay in Georgia for a period of up to 90 days. At the same time Georgia has a simplified visa regime with the following EU member states: Estonia (foresees a 90-day visa-free regime that was introduced on November 20, 2006, for citizens of Georgia who hold diplomatic passports), Bulgaria (foresees a 90-day visa-free regime for diplomatic passport holders), Hungary (foresees a 30-day visa-free regime for the diplomatic and service passport holders), Romania (foresees a 90-day visa-free regime for the diplomatic and service passport holders) and Slovakia (foresees a 90-day visa-free regime for the diplomatic and service passport holders).

¹ Readmission Agreements have been signed with: Italy and the Republic of Bulgaria, Swiss Federal Counsel and Ukraine. Readmission Agreements are in the process of elaboration with: Germany, France, the Benelux countries, Lithuania, Czech Republic, the Kingdom of Sweden, the Republic of Latvia, Estonia, the Federal Government of Austria, Republic of Turkey, Kingdom of Norway