

BY LIZA MCHEDLIDZE

## Abkhazia's De Facto President Seeks Positive 'Neighborly' Ties with Georgia

Abkhazia's de facto president, Aslan Bzhania, reiterated his appreciation for the 'pragmatic' steps taken by the Georgian authorities, emphasizing Abkhazia's interest in fostering good 'neighborly' relations with Georgia in an interview with the Russian publication Tass.

"During the last few years, as the special war operation started in Ukraine, the Georgian government has taken a pragmatic approach to everything. They have not participated in the provocations imposed by Ukraine and did not support the Ukrainian leader's call to open a second front. Therefore, I consider it a sign of political maturity," Bzhania said.

The de facto president stated that they have 'determined' their future and that the government of Georgia must acknowledge the current reality.

"We have determined our future. The government of Georgia will have to recognize the existing reality. I don't think I'm saying anything new, but after the war, things are not the same as they were before the war. War changes everything radically. In 1992, before the start of the war



in Abkhazia, the Georgian government of that time should have known what would happen to all of this. This was probably

one of the irreparable mistakes from the point of view of Georgia's integrity," Bzhania stated.

De facto President Bzhania noted that, in general, Abkhazia desires good 'neighborly' relations with Georgia:

"I can say that we have no antagonism towards the Georgian people. We have grievances with those who started this war and also with those who participated in it. This issue radically changed everything," de facto president said.

Bzhania stated that Abkhazia is now an 'independent' country, with its 'independence' supported by the Russian government and people. He mentioned that Abkhazia is charting its own course of development while also aiming for positive relations with Georgia. Additionally, he acknowledged the complexities involved in fostering such relations.

"Today, there is an independent Abkhazia, whose independence is supported by the Russian government and people. We have our own path of development, and we follow it. At the same time, we are interested in good neighborly relations with Georgia. This is one story. The second story is that we understand how difficult it is," Bzhania said.

## Association Council Issues Joint Press Statement Following 8<sup>th</sup> Session

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In the joint statement published after the 8<sup>th</sup> session of the Association Council, it notes that the Association Council welcomed the historic decision of the European Council to grant Georgia the status of a candidate country, considering that the nine steps outlined in the European Commission's recommendation of November 8, 2023, will

be implemented.

According to them, this decision elevated Georgia-EU relations to a new strategic level. The Council emphasized the importance of meeting the conditions set by the European Commission through the implementation of essential and irreversible reforms, prepared and executed with the involvement of the opposition and civil society.

"The EU took note of the

adoption of the action plan to address the nine steps by the Government of Georgia in advance of the European Council decision and encouraged Georgia to further progress on reforms. It emphasized the importance of fulfilling the conditions specified by the European Commission through meaningful and irreversible reforms, prepared and implemented in consultation with the opposition and civil so-

ciety. The EU stressed that Georgia's progress towards the European Union will depend on its own merit in meeting the accession criteria.

The Association Council reiterated the EU's commitment to strengthening EU-Georgia relations, emphasizing the importance of fully exploiting the potential of the Association Agreement, including the Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area, and the effective implementation of the EU-Georgia Association Agenda 2021-2027," the document reads.

The Council emphasized the importance of fighting disinformation, as well as anti-European rhetoric and information interference by external forces. They called on Georgia to take substantial steps in this direction, while also acknowledging the efforts already implemented by the government.

The Association Council emphasized the importance of ensuring the full independence, accountability, and impartiality of all state institutions, aligning with European standards and the recommendations of the Venice Commission. This includes judicial, prosecutorial, anti-corruption, and monetary institutions. The EU also underscored the necessity to enhance

parliamentary oversight, particularly concerning security services, urging further improvements in implementation.

"The EU recognised that Georgia carried out significant reforms in a number of areas and successfully approximated its legislation with the EU acquis in many sectors as noted in the European Commission report on Georgia of 8 November 2023. It was noted that the objective of becoming an EU member, strongly supported by Georgia's people, the Government and across political spectrum has been a key driver in this respect. The EU urged all political actors in Georgia to demonstrate constructive cross-party cooperation and dialogue, overcome polarisation and refrain from actions that could further deepen the political tensions and hamper the country's reform agenda. The Association Council commended Georgia's vibrant civil society and underlined the importance of inclusive, meaningful and systematic engagement with civil society in the policymaking processes," the document reads.

The document underscored the Association Council's acknowledgment of Georgia's efforts toward deoligarchization, aimed at reducing undue influence in various sectors. It stressed the efficient implementation of the Action Plan and highlighted the establishment of the Anti-Corruption



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Exchange Rates: US Dollar - 2.6501; Euro - 2.8618; GBP - 3.3436; 100 Russian Ruble - 2.8612; Swiss Franc - 3.0098

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tion Bureau, emphasizing its independence and effectiveness. Further anti-corruption measures were encouraged, alongside continued progress in visa liberalization benchmarks and addressing European Commission recommendations.

The Association Council acknowledged Georgia's electoral

framework reforms and urged the completion of electoral reform before the upcoming elections, aligning with Venice Commission and OSCE/ODIHR recommendations to ensure a free,

fair, and competitive electoral process. The EU expressed appreciation for Georgia's invitation of OSCE-ODIHR long-term observers ahead of the 2024 parliamentary elections.

The document emphasized the need for Georgia to significantly enhance its alignment with EU Common Foreign and Security Policy positions and restrictive measures, urging progress to-

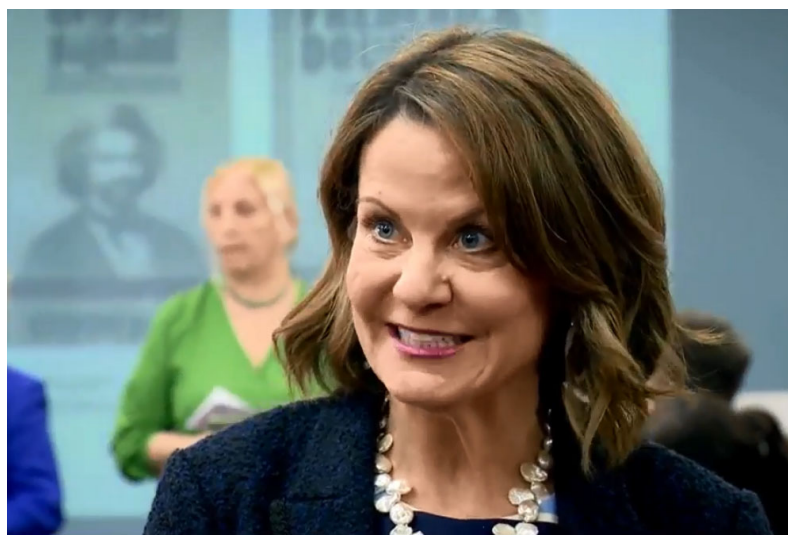
ward full alignment. The EU welcomed Georgia's proactive engagement and constructive cooperation in preventing the circumvention of EU sanctions against Russia.

# Association Council Issues Joint Press Statement Following 8<sup>th</sup> Session

## The News in Brief

PREPARED BY MESSENGER STAFF

### US Ambassador Robin Dunnigan Emphasizes Importance of Fair Elections for Georgia's Democracy



Robin Dunnigan, the US ambassador to Georgia, spoke about the strategic partnership with Georgia, emphasizing that their primary focus is to support Georgia's accession to the European Union.

The ambassador also addressed the topic of elections, highlighting the importance of fair elections as the cornerstone of a strong democracy. Dunnigan emphasized that the US is dedicated to assisting Georgia in guaranteeing free elections.

"Let me talk more generally

competitive elections.

We are working closely with civil society groups, opposition parties, and the ruling party, and especially with the Central Election Commission, to ensure that the citizens of Georgia know that their votes will be counted fairly, that their votes are secret, and that the process is free and fair. So, I look forward to Georgians exercising their democratic right and voting," Dunnigan said.

### Georgian PM Irakli Kobakhidze Meets NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg

Prime Minister of Georgia, Irakli Kobakhidze, met with NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg.

Jens Stoltenberg congratulated Irakli Kobakhidze on his appointment as Prime Minister. The Prime Minister thanked the NATO Secretary General for his support.

The meeting, held at NATO headquarters in Brussels, focused on the Euro-Atlantic integration of Georgia. The Prime Minister emphasized that NATO integra-

tion remains a foreign policy priority for Georgia, as outlined in

phasized. Irakli Kobakhidze expressed gratitude to Jens



the country's constitution.

During the meeting, both parties discussed the NATO-Georgia agenda, reviewed the progress made towards integration, and outlined concrete plans for future cooperation.

Attention was focused on security issues in the Black Sea region. In this context, the importance of stability in the Black Sea region for ensuring common Euro-Atlantic security was em-

phasized. Stoltenberg for his support and personal efforts towards NATO integration, as well as his strong support for Georgia's sovereignty, territorial integrity, and non-recognition policy. Discussions also encompassed the complex security environment both regionally and globally. The Prime Minister and the Secretary General of the Alliance explored potential solutions to the existing challenges.

### Empowering Women in Georgian Politics

UNDP and Sweden Assist Political Parties in Bolstering Women's Political Organizations

TBILISI. 21 February 2024 – Ahead of the parliamentary elections in Georgia, the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and Sweden are supporting political parties to empower women politicians and explore effective strategies for attracting, engaging, and promoting women candidates.

These targeted efforts envision consultations and training on introducing internal gender

policies, while also fostering professional development opportunities for party members.

Additionally, UNDP and Sweden assist in strengthening women's wings within political parties and support the establishment of these entities where they are lacking. As of 2023, parties such as "For Georgia",

"Georgian Dream", "Lelo", and the "United National Movement", have initiated the integration of Women's Political Organizations into their structures, with more planning to follow suit in 2024.

According to H.E. Anna Lyberg, Ambassador of Sweden to Georgia, women play a criti-

cal role in political representation, constituting half of the population in a country. In Georgia women are significantly underrepresented in parliament, holding only one-fifth of the seats. "Political parties can change that by implementing robust internal gender policies to ensure meaningful equality for women politicians."

Douglas Webb, UNDP Resident Representative a.i. in Georgia, noted that "Electoral gender quotas play a vital role in enhancing women's political participation in Georgia, garnering support from citizens and political parties alike. However, for this mechanism to truly empower women in politics, political parties must actively seek improved methods for attracting, engaging, and promoting women candidates."

Research conducted in 2022 by Sweden, the United Kingdom, UNDP, and the National Demo-

cratic Institute examined the impact of electoral gender quotas on Georgia's political landscape. Despite broad support for gender quotas among political parties, the research highlights the need for stronger internal democratic mechanisms to advance gender equality and women's participation effectively. It offers a comprehensive set of recommendations for political parties to identify and support active and talented women candidates, bridging the gap from party roles to political positions.

#### Background Information:

The Sweden-funded UN Joint Programme for Gender Equality is a flagship initiative assisting Georgia in achieving meaningful gender equality in social, economic, and policy realms. The programme is jointly implemented by three UN agencies – UNDP, UNFPA, and UN Women.



Photo: UNDP Georgia/Leli Blagonravova

## Weather

Thursday, February 22

Day Mostly Cloudy  
High: 8°C

Night Mostly Cloudy  
Low: 3°C

Friday, February 23

Day Mostly Cloudy  
High: 9°C

Night Mostly Cloudy  
Low: 2°C

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