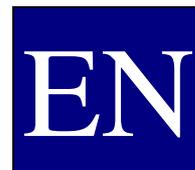




**COUNCIL OF
THE EUROPEAN UNION**



Council conclusions on the South Caucasus

*3149th FOREIGN AFFAIRS Council meeting
Brussels, 27 February 2012*

The Council adopted the following conclusions:

- "1. The EU welcomes the significant progress made in the framework of the Eastern Partnership to strengthen the European Union's relations with Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia. In this regard, the EU underlines the importance of the Eastern Partnership as a specific Eastern dimension of the European Neighbourhood Policy.
2. Recalling its core interests in the region, notably related to security and stability, democratic reforms, energy and economic investments, the EU remains committed to promoting prosperity, security, democracy, rule of law, respect for human rights, good governance, sustainable development and regional cooperation throughout the South Caucasus, and is ready to enhance efforts to support confidence building and peaceful settlements to the conflicts in the region, in close cooperation with all relevant parties.
3. The EU emphasises the importance of the continued implementation of the commitments made in the Joint Declaration of the Warsaw Eastern Partnership Summit, Warsaw 29-30 September 2011, and reiterates that the pace of reforms will determine the intensity of the cooperation, and partners most engaged in reforms will benefit more from their relationship with the European Union, including closer political association, deeper gradual economic integration in the EU Internal Market, enhancing mobility of citizens in a secure and well managed environment and increased EU support.

P R E S S

Armenia

4. The EU welcomes the progress made in the negotiations on the Association Agreement (AA) between the EU and Armenia. The EU notes that the conditions have been met for the start for the negotiations on DCFTA and looks forward to the launch of the negotiations in the first semester of 2012. The EU emphasises that Armenia should continue to advance sectoral reform and regulatory approximation in trade and trade-related areas, building on the achievements of the preparatory process for the DCFTA and that EU stands ready to provide continued support in this regard based on jointly identified needs of Armenia. The EU welcomes the imminent start of Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreement negotiations.
5. The EU stresses the utmost importance of ensuring that the Parliamentary elections in May 2012 and the Presidential elections in 2013 meet internationally recognized democratic standards and will closely monitor developments in Armenia leading up to the elections.
6. The EU encourages Armenia to pursue further reforms in strengthening democratic institutions, enhancing the independence of judiciary, encouraging political pluralism, freedom of and equal access to media as well as ensuring protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms and the EU will continue to support these reform efforts.
7. The EU underlines the importance of effectively fighting corruption and welcomes Armenia's declared commitment to address corruption. Real progress in this area remains fundamental for economic growth and development.

Azerbaijan

8. The EU takes note of the progress made in the negotiations on an Association Agreement between the EU and Azerbaijan and encourages enhanced efforts to make further progress. The EU also expresses its commitment to upgrading the trade and investment provisions of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which would serve as a basis for Azerbaijan's future WTO membership and a possible DCFTA with the EU. The EU also welcomes the imminent start of Visa Facilitation and Readmission Agreement negotiations.
9. The EU emphasises the need for progress in democratic reform, the rule of law and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, especially in freedom of expression and assembly, as well as principles of international law as a crucial factor for the further deepening of the EU's bilateral relations with Azerbaijan. The EU notes that further efforts are required in this regard. The EU will closely monitor developments in Azerbaijan leading up to the Presidential elections in 2013.
10. The EU calls on Azerbaijan to extend an invitation to the Special Rapporteur of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe for political prisoners.
11. The EU also stresses the importance of making further efforts in fighting corruption, as a key condition for the success of all reform and modernization efforts, especially those affecting economic development.
12. The EU recalls the importance of energy issues for EU-Azerbaijan relations and notes recent intensified cooperation. The EU welcomes progress in the realisation of the Southern Corridor in this regard, including the launching of negotiations between Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and the EU on the development of a Trans-Caspian Pipeline.

Georgia

13. The EU welcomes the progress made in the negotiations on the Association Agreement (AA) between the EU and Georgia, and the launch of negotiations on a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Area. The EU emphasises that Georgia should continue to advance sectoral reform and regulatory approximation in trade and trade-related areas, building on the achievements of the preparatory process for the DCFTA and that the EU stands ready to provide continued support in this regard based on jointly identified needs of Georgia. The EU also encourages and stresses the need for continued effective implementation of the Visa Facilitation and Readmission agreements in order to open a visa dialogue between EU and Georgia.
14. The EU reconfirms its readiness to promote mobility of citizens of Georgia and to take gradual steps, including establishing a two-phased Visa Action Plan, towards a visa-free regime in a secure and well managed environment in due course. Under these conditions, the EU is committed to the shared objective of visa free travel.
15. The EU acknowledges the European aspirations and European choice of Georgia and its commitment to build deep and sustainable democracy. The EU welcomes Georgia's efforts in modernizing and reforming its society and fighting corruption.
16. The EU stresses the utmost importance of ensuring that the Parliamentary elections in 2012 and the Presidential elections in 2013 meet internationally recognized democratic standards and will closely monitor developments in Georgia leading up to the elections. The EU stresses the need for consolidating democracy in Georgia, including strengthening democratic institutions, allowing for genuine political pluralism and freedom of assembly, freedom and equal access to media as well as further strengthening of the independence of judiciary.

Peaceful settlement of conflicts in the region

17. The EU emphasises the importance of finding peaceful settlements to the conflicts in the region and calls for strong commitment by all concerned parties in this regard. The EU believes that the strengthened relations between the EU and the three countries in the South Caucasus have opened new avenues and opportunities for the EU to support conflict settlement efforts in the region. The EU Special Representative for the South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia will continue to play a significant role in this regard.
18. The EU reiterates its firm support for the sovereignty and territorial integrity of Georgia within its internationally recognized borders and reiterates its concern about the continuing Russian military and security-related presence and infrastructure reinforcements in the Georgian breakaway regions of Abkhazia and South Ossetia. The EU calls on Russia to fulfill its obligations under the ceasefire agreement of 12 August 2008 and the Implementing Measures of 8 September 2008, including by providing access to EUMM to the breakaway regions.
19. The EU calls on the participants of the Geneva International Discussion to the conflict to continue to work together towards sustainable security arrangements. In this regard, a clear non-use of force commitment by Russia would be necessary.
20. The EU confirms its commitment to remain engaged and involved in the stabilization and conflict resolution efforts in Georgia, including by continuing its engagement as co-chair in the Geneva Discussions, the efforts of the EUSR for South Caucasus and the crisis in Georgia and the continued presence of the EU Monitoring Mission (EUMM).

21. The EU welcomes the steps undertaken by Georgia in implementing its strategy on engagement with the breakaway regions and encourages Georgia to pursue a more effective engagement policy and to take a pragmatic, positive and constructive approach to encourage trade, travel and investment across the Administrative Boundary Line.
 22. The EU also underlines that it will enhance its engagement with the two breakaway regions, including to the benefit of the people living in these regions. This includes achieving greater EU visibility in the regions and active work to promote economic and trade relations, facilitate travel and start transformative and approximation work in line with its non-recognition and engagement policy, in full respect of the principle of territorial integrity.
 23. The EU reiterates its commitment to help improve the situation of Internally Displaced Persons in Georgia and refugees from the conflicts and their unconditional right to safe and dignified return, while underlining also the need to enhance efforts to provide livelihood options and to provide conditions allowing those Internally Displaced Persons who choose to stay in Tbilisi administered territory to integrate fully into society.
 24. The EU expresses its concern at the slow progress in the negotiations between Armenia and Azerbaijan to resolve the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict. In this regard, the EU continues to support the OSCE Minsk Group and acknowledges in this context the efforts of the President of the Russian Federation Dmitry Medvedev to achieve progress in trilateral talks. The EU reiterates its support for the Madrid principles and calls on Armenia and Azerbaijan to step up their efforts to reach agreement on those principles as a basis for peace. The EU recalls the joint statement of the presidency of the OSCE Minsk Group co-chair countries at the G8 Summit in Deauville on 26 May 2011 and the commitments made by the Presidents of both countries in the framework of the Minsk Group, most recently in Sochi, and calls for their full implementation. In this regard, the EU expresses concern on increased tension along the Line of Contact and underlines the importance of urgent steps to implement the ceasefire and to adopt appropriate confidence building measures.
 25. The EU stands ready to provide enhanced support for confidence building measures, in support of and in full complementarity with the Minsk Group, with a view to facilitating further steps towards the implementation of peace. In this regard, the EU underlines the need for unconditional access for representatives of the EU to Nagorno-Karabakh and surrounding regions. The Council invites the High Representative and the Commission to develop, in close consultation with the OSCE, post conflict scenarios for Nagorno-Karabakh as a basis for future EU engagement."
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