

Welcome Speech

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Excellencies, Dear Colleagues,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Today I will use this opportunity and speak about our understanding of regional cooperation in the wake of the enlarged Europe. Undeniably the new European security system based on transformed European and Euro-Atlantic organizations cannot develop without establishing a reliable Black Sea Security system and economic cooperation systems. This is a unique opportunity for NATO and the EU to work together to assist Black Sea nations in ensuring sustainable regional stability and security.

Today we are talking about the new shapes of the enlarged Europe, enlisting 27 members already starting from January 1st, 2007, as the European Union has moved further eastward to become a Black Sea player. Undoubtedly, EU enlargement pushed Georgia much closer to the EU both in terms of geography and shared values. Stemming out from this argument, I reiterate that strengthening cooperation with and among the Black Sea states is of utmost importance for Georgia, especially once Bulgaria, Romania and Turkey become the EU Member States. In this respect, Georgia attaches special importance to the cooperation within the Organization of the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), the only regional initiative which gathers these states under a common legal umbrella. Furthermore we sincerely welcome the ongoing integration of the Black Sea countries into NATO and the EU.

Today we gladly admit that the EU-Georgia ENP Action Plan, which is a political document of an utmost importance for us, has been finalized. It lays down strategic objectives of partnership, which envisages enhanced regional cooperation within the Black Sea inter alia in education, energy, transport, environment, border management, etc. The Black Sea regional cooperation especially matters in terms of growing importance of the European energy security. We believe that with a view to regional integration and progressive integration with the EU energy market and system, Georgia's role as energy transit country is to support the development of diversified infrastructures connected to the Caspian energy resources and facilitate transit to the EU.

We genuinely believe that in the contemporary Europe the borders should not become barriers between neighbors but instead they ought to facilitate economic, trade and cultural interactions between them. Given the fact that the new shapes and the new borders of the European Union, very shortly enlisting Bulgaria and Romania on board, the EU has strong

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economic incentives to equip not only Georgia but the whole region with favorable conditions to facilitate economic development at large. In this context, we sincerely believe that Georgia as well as other Black Sea countries, needs to explore alternative markets for its products. We welcome the EU-Georgia fruitful dialogue on trade issues and look forward to launch negotiations on EU-Georgian bilateral Agreement on recognition and protection of geographical indications of wine, spirits and other foodstuff. Through the harmonization of Georgian legislation with that of the EU and by establishment of respective EU standards and norms we encourage our export to redirect its activities to the EU markets. Although we are beneficiaries of the new Generalized System of Preferences of the EU (so called GSP+) we aim at further lowering of customs tariffs and non tariff barriers to trade with the EU for strategic Georgian export products.

In the framework of regional cooperation, years already Turkey represents Georgia's one of the largest trade partners. In this context, we attach a paramount importance to the possible Free Trade Agreement with Turkey, simultaneously discussing possible Free Trade Agreement with the European Union. It might be underlined that the ENP Action Plan envisages the feasibility study of such an agreement.

The neighborhood especially that of having a wider connotation, is not, of course, only about trade and energy, but rather far reaching goal – ensuring and increasing security dimension. Therefore if, we take major new challenges and threats that Europe faces today – be it illegal immigrants, drugs trafficking, unsettled internal conflicts, etc. – the Black Sea region and Georgia in particular is a new front-line to fight with them.

Dear friends,

I sincerely believe that regional cooperation, a successful implementation of the action plan hand in hand with the persistent and steady reform process in Georgia should bring Georgia to the position of a genuine democratic, stable and prosperous state. Our ambition is to play our role in the European prosperity and security and to be accepted in the European family of Nations as a reliable and valuable partner.

Finally, we highly appreciate your participation in the event and the contribution to the work of the symposium. Your input is highly valuable for the continuous discussions over the Black Sea Regional problems and challenges. We strongly believe that the information exchange between the event participants will be a value added step in terms of further cooperation on the Black Sea Region issues. We wish you fruitful work and enjoyable stay in Georgia.

Thank You