

AT THE HARRIMAN INSTITUTE

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Knock, Knock, Knocking on Europe's Door: Georgia and the European Union

"EU accession is a very slow process, it takes forever, and for us, it is a challenge." stated Salome Samadashvili, the Georgian ambassador to the European Union, who spoke at the Harriman Institute on September 7, 2011. "However, I find that my life has become much easier since the 2008 war." Before the war with Russia, Samadashvili had concentrated most of her efforts on trying to manage "the crisis in Abkhazia and South Ossetia." She explained that after the war, she has been able to "focus on the more positive agenda of developing a relationship with the EU."

The region is still in crisis; Russia did not adhere to the cease-fire agreement mediated by President Nicolas Sarkozy in 2008, and continues to keep troops in the Georgian breakaway territories Abkhazia and South Ossetia. "There is no other word for what's going on in Georgia right now than 'occupation,' what would you call it if there was an unauthorized military presence on your soil?" the ambassador contended. But as the EU ambassador, Samadashvili faces fewer obstacles, because now the EU is finally paying attention to Georgia.

Samadashvili recounted Georgia's pre-war efforts to involve the EU in mediating the conflict with Russia, "Russia would get too upset about any European involvement," and, "there was no political will from the EU." After the war over

Abkhazia and South Ossetia, the EU began to participate. "Unfortunately, the war has forced the EU to do what we had been asking them to do before the war," the ambassador said. Over the past three years, "the EU has become a very important player in negotiating the conflict. It is the principal provider of security."

As a result, Georgia has begun to develop a relationship with the EU. "When I started my tenure five-and-a-half years ago, we were meeting with the EU about three times a year. Now we have about 15 meetings a month." In the post-war years, "the relationship has become very structured and intense."

Samadashvili noted that Georgia is located "at the crossroads of the Christian and Muslim worlds," emphasizing that it was never up for discussion which of these worlds Georgia wanted to belong to. According to Samadashvili, Georgia has been trying to "build bridges with Europe," since the times of Louis the XIV, and it will continue trying until it becomes an EU member; a goal that will take a very long time to achieve.

"Europeans are becoming more protective of their national borders—the majority of EU states don't want to hear about admitting new candidates." Samadashvili lamented. "The EU is based on the freedom of movement an idea, which I see from Brussels, is being

challenged considerably by the economic difficulties and by what is happening in the Arab countries.”

Samadashvili acknowledged that in this context, positive shifts in Georgia might be unwelcome—improvements will make Georgia seem like a more likely candidate for EU accession. “If I take the cynical view, I might say that the more successful we become, the more people are unhappy with our reforms.”

Samadashvili classified EU accession as a “long-term goal” for Georgia. “We have to be realistic, and right now, we aren’t facing the most welcoming environment.” Instead, Georgia is focusing on its short-term goals, which are to accomplish “everything but the institutions,” anything that Georgia can achieve without actually becoming a member. “We have signed a number of agreements, which are important building blocks. Our goal this year is to open the negotiations for a deep and comprehensive trade agreement.” Once negotiations begin, Samadashvili hopes they will proceed quickly.

“We are working up to accession step by step,” the ambassador said. “And we’ve taken some important steps over the past few years.” She recalled that a year ago she was unable to enter the EU without a visa, but with the facilitated visa program implemented this year, she no

longer needs one. She noted that it was becoming easier for Georgians to get visas in general. “We hope that soon, all Georgian citizens will be able to go to the EU visa-free.”

Another step forward (or backward, depending on how you look at it) is the Eastern Partnership—an EU initiated organization consisting of Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine—established in 2009, and headed by the EU Commission. The Partnership is designed to open dialogue in order to improve political, economic and trade relations between these six post-Soviet regions and the EU. “Some say that it was created to keep us out of the EU, a way to ensure that we will never actually become members. However, the context is difficult, and over the last few years even our Ukrainian friends have realized that it is the best we can get right now.” Georgia is now an active participant in this program. The country continues to build a foundation of other programs, agreements and institutions in hopes to prepare for potential membership. “The EU is all about homework. You do your homework and you come back for more. I hope that Georgia has been a good student these past five years.”

Reported by Masha Udensiva-Brenner