

## A thaw in the South Caucasus

Written by Sajjad Karim on 13 December 2018 in Opinion  
Opinion

Europe should recognise and support the political breakthroughs currently underway in the South Caucasus countries, writes Sajjad Karim MEP.



*Photo credit: European Parliament Audiovisual*

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The South Caucasus may be relatively unknown to the average EU citizen, but its strategic importance should escape no one.

Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia all celebrated centenaries of one sort or another this year, each marking the value that each places on its independence and destiny defined by its peoples.

As I write, Russian tanks are massing on the border of Ukraine and again we are reminded of the acute nature of the situation on Russia's borders.

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With Armenia's peaceful "Velvet Revolution", Nikol Pashinyan rode the wave of popular discontent to become Prime Minister and will soon face pivotal parliamentary elections.

This change of leadership provides a huge opportunity; imagine the South Caucasus if Armenia's security was guaranteed, with Turkey and Azerbaijan's Armenian borders opened up and trade facilitation provided.

In recent times, EU-Azerbaijan relations have been transformed, with cooperation between the European Parliament and the country's national assembly - the Milli Mejlis - resuming in 2015 and President Aliyev undertaking a successful visit to our institutions.

When I look around Europe today, with the growing scourge of Antisemitism and Islamophobia plaguing our EU societies, I think we as Europeans can learn from the tolerance and openness that unites Azerbaijani citizens, with Christians, Muslims, Jews and Zoroastrians coexisting in harmony.

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Unfortunately, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict between Azerbaijan and Armenia remains a sticking point.

At the final EU-Azerbaijan Parliamentary Cooperation Committee of this parliamentary mandate, we insisted the status quo was unsustainable and that there was no military solution. We reiterated the EU's support for Azerbaijan's territorial integrity and sovereignty within its internationally-recognised borders.

The EU believes that a resolution to the conflict can be found.

In Georgia, no one could have predicted such progress. The Association Agreement, which includes a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement component, entered into force in July 2016.

Since then, Georgia has strived to align its legislation with EU standards. This led, among other things, to the waiver of visas for Georgian citizens for short stays in the Schengen area from March 2017.

Georgia's recent reforms demonstrate the progress made by the country. It has now elected its first female head of state and - led by the highly capable Justice Minister, Thea Tsulukiani - is making its judicial system fully transparent and free from political influence.

On the Georgian-occupied territories, we remain firmly committed to Georgia's sovereignty and territorial integrity within its internationally-recognised borders.

In June this year, the European Parliament adopted a resolution reiterating this position, making clear that any further aggression in Georgia would not be tolerated.

At the end of November, I hosted a reception in the European Parliament celebrating the work of the Delegation. Ambassadors and representatives from all three countries shared the same stage, something unthinkable just a few years ago.

None of this would have been possible, however, without the Parliamentary dimension and my Co-Chairs Armen Ashotyan, Tamar Khulordava and Javanshir Feyziyev, as well as Ambassadors Markarian, Sabanadze and Isgandarov, who have been essential interlocutors.

I must also thank those in our sister institutions, Luc Devigne, Vassilis Maragos, Lawrence Meredith, Dirk Scheubel, to name a few, who provided invaluable support and direction throughout.

We managed to establish great working relations between all our institutions, demonstrating that the South Caucasus Delegation is a paradigm for co-working; I hope that it will continue long after this mandate.

### **About the author**

Sajjad Karim (ECR,UK) is chair of Parliament's Delegation for Relations with the South Caucasus

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