

Author: Lika Tchipashvili

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„The Dimitri Amilakhvari Georgian-French Dialogue“ – A New Stage and New Prospects for Bilateral Relations

„With the establishment of Dimitri Amilakhvari Georgian-French Structured Dialogue, the relations between the two countries have entered a qualitatively new level“ - this is the assessment of a joint declaration between Georgia and France signed by Presidents Salome Zourabishvili and Emmanuel Macron in February 2019.¹ Later, in December 2019, in Paris, the inaugural meeting of the above-mentioned dialogue was held at the level of the Foreign Ministers of the two countries, in the framework of which a new format of the partnership was discussed.² The Amilakhvari Dialogue covers all major aspects of Franco-Georgian relations, and aims to strengthen *political, economic and commercial co-operation, as well as work in the areas of defence, internal security and migration, education and culture*. The Dialogue foresees annual meetings alternating between Paris and Tbilisi. As the second round of the dialogue will be held in Tbilisi this year, the Opinion below intends to seek concrete ways in which Franco-Georgian partnership could be developed within the framework of the Dialogue.

Besides affording Georgia an excellent opportunity to upgrade cooperation and bilateral relations with France, this new format could also be used to gain more political support from Paris- a leading geopolitical actor - for Georgia's de-occupation and European and Euro-Atlantic integration, and to further develop the two countries' already excellent relations in the area of defence.

¹ The joint press conference of Presidents of Georgia and France: <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2019/02/19/conference-de-presse-emmanuel-macron-et-salome-zourabichvili-presidente-de-la-georgie>

² The Joint Declaration of the Inaugural Meeting of Dimitri Amilakhvari's French-Georgian Dialogue: Geo.- <http://mfa.gov.ge/News/dimitri-amilakhvaris-frangul-qartuli-dialogis-sain.aspx?CatID=5>
FR.- <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/georgie/evenements/article/georgie-premiere-session-du-dialogue-dimitri-amilakhvari-paris-02-12-19>

Although France is already one of Georgia's strategic partners³ in terms of bilateral and multilateral diplomacy, and notably regarding EU and NATO integration, given the dynamics of the relationship's development it is important *to increase the scope of Georgia's representation in France*. This could be done by *opening a consulate in Lyon* due to the high concentration of Georgian citizens there and *further using of the Honorary Consul Institute* in the major French cities in order to actively promote new economic and cultural relations with France - including attracting French investment capital, increasing Georgian exports to France or promoting ancient Georgian culture. Representing Georgia more widely across France through honorary consuls descended from Georgian emigrants of the 1920s, for instance, on the one hand, might be perceived as a part of historical regularity, and on the other hand, may address the somewhat problematic issue of the enactment of the Economic Envoy Institute (in relation to other countries).

In terms of the development of bilateral economic relations, the trend is dynamic but not privileged: among the countries Georgia exports to, France currently ranks 24th,⁴ and it does not even rank among the 20 largest investors in Georgia.⁵ The special role that Georgia's President Salome Zourabishvili plays in raising awareness of Georgia in France should be emphasized, but it is equally important to further increase the French media and business sectors' awareness of the reforms Georgia has achieved, of the country's favourable business environment and of growing investment opportunities by arranging on-site meetings or visits to Georgia. Georgia currently ranks 7th (of 190) in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business Index,⁶ and 12th (of 162) in the Fraser Institute's Index of Economic Freedom.⁷ In turn, Georgia should share France's experience in innovative business development, as in the latter the most attractive investment destination⁸ in Europe today is exactly the French republic.

³ Georgia's Foreign Policy Strategy 2019-2022:

<http://www.mfa.gov.ge/MainNav/ForeignPolicy/ForeignPolicyStrategy.aspx>

⁴ External Trade of Georgia, January-September 2019:

http://www.economy.ge/uploads/files/2017/foreign_trade/trade_turnover_2019_9_month_final.pdf

⁵ Direct Foreign Investments in Georgia, 3rd Quarter, 2019: <https://www.geostat.ge/ka/single-news/1722/pirdapiri-utskhuri-investitsiebi-2019-tslis-iii-kvartali-tsinastsari>

⁶ World Bank Doing Business Index Data 2020: <https://www.doingbusiness.org/en/reports/global-reports/doing-business-2020>

⁷ Fraser Institute Economic Freedom of the World Index data 2019:

<https://www.fraserinstitute.org/sites/default/files/economic-freedom-of-the-world-2019.pdf>

⁸ <https://www.ey.com/fr/fr/services/advisory/ey-barometre-de-l-attractivite-de-la-france-2019>

It is also worth noting the *agreement signed between Georgia and France on circular migration*, which entered into force in February last year. Consequently, it is important to launch an active information campaign to raise the level of awareness of citizens of Georgia upon the opportunities envisaged by the agreement, on the one hand and to enhance the awareness of employment agencies or private organizations in France, on the other.

In terms of informing the general public of the abovementioned and Georgia's image as a European country, it is necessary to actively and consistently employ *digital diplomacy*. This would also contribute to the better service of our fellow citizens living abroad, including to increase the awareness of Georgian citizens of the French immigration policy on the prevention of illegal migration.

The recent establishment of the *Georgian-French University (Université franco-géorgienne, UFG)* was also a significant step forward in bilateral relations.⁹ France is currently the 4th most popular destination in the world for foreign students, and the 1st for hosting non-English speaking students. Thanks to her internationally recognized *high quality education and science system*, the country now ranks 7th in terms of hourly labour productivity, thus outperforming both Germany and the United Kingdom.¹⁰ Georgia therefore needs to increase the limited number of scholarships currently available under the joint annual scholarship programme offered by the French and Georgian governments (and implemented by Georgia's International Center for Education). Increased investments in the above field with France may serve as a prerequisite for training highly skilled personnel that in the long run will significantly contribute to the advancement of the Georgian state, for instance, by their recruitment in the public service, the lack of which, by the way, today, is considered a hindrance by the European Union on the path to the country's integration into the EU.¹¹

A further positive trend can be observed in the *increasing number of young French people arriving in Georgia* through European exchange programmes for education, internships or volunteer projects. As a form of public diplomacy, the Georgian government should establish and maintain close contacts with these young people after they return to France, for instance by creating a network of „Alumni of Georgia“ that would bring together all the young people who have visited Georgia through various educational and volunteer programmes.

⁹ The languages of instruction at the Georgian-French University will be Georgian, French and English (according to the diploma chosen): <https://fgu.ge/>

¹⁰ <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/venir-en-france/entreprendre-et-investir-en-france/>

¹¹ "Report on the Implementation of the EU Association Agreement with Georgia" by the European Parliament, p.7, paragraph 7: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/A-8-2018-0320_EN.pdf

Considering the experience of other countries, in the long run such a network would serve as an effective tool for raising awareness of Georgia abroad. In addition, it is important to support the positioning of French youth living in Georgia in the French media once they leave for their country in order to increase Georgia's popularity as an educational, scientific and cultural hub in the region. Holding meetings and public lectures about Georgia with French students in academic circles - in various research or higher education institutions - is also important to promote the attractiveness of Georgian education, research or cultural space.

As a means of increasing *contacts between young people*, Tbilisi should seek to join the Young Ambassador Project which Nantes and Saarbrücken have been running annually since 2008.¹²

The involvement of Tbilisi in the program, as a sister city with Nantes and Saarbrücken, would to some extent promote the development of Georgian-French-German relations within the existing trilateral format.

Instead of Summary

„And if all is not right, blame the Georgian paper for everything and not ...”¹³

¹² Program „Young Ambassador - Nantes-Saarbrücken“: <https://www.ccfa-nantes.org/jeune-ambassadeur/>

¹³ An excerpt from Alexandre Dumas „The Adventure in the Caucasus“:
<http://www.dumaspere.com/pages/bibliotheque/sommaire.php?lid=v3>