

## EU-Georgia people-to-people contacts

Since 2003, relations between the EU and Georgia have deepened, and at present the country is the EU's closest partner in the South Caucasus region. Relations have been strengthened further through the recent signing of an association agreement between the two parties and the deep and comprehensive free trade area (DCFTA) it introduced. The EU also seeks to promote more people-to-people contacts between its citizens and Georgians, as well as supporting the vibrant Georgian civil society.

### EU-Georgia relations

Georgia is committed to establishing ever closer relations with the EU, and is a [leader](#) in the democratisation process within the region encompassed by the [Eastern Partnership](#) (EaP) initiative. The country has been covered by the European Neighbourhood Policy ([ENP](#)) since 2004 and has participated in the EaP since 2009. Over the past 10 years, EU-Georgia cooperation has unfolded in numerous sectors. The EU's [association agreement](#) (AA) with Georgia, in force since 2016, and the preferential trade regime (DCFTA) it introduced, have given trade between the two parties a boost. According to some [studies](#), a DCFTA is an arrangement that surpasses the commitments undertaken in the [stability and association agreements](#) currently in place with Western Balkan partners. Today, the EU is Georgia's main trading [partner](#) (accounting for around 30 % of the country's trade), with a turnover of roughly €2.5 billion in 2016. A visa-free regime between the EU and Georgia entered into force in 2017.

As per Article 412 of the EU-Georgia AA, a [civil society platform](#) has been set up to promote regular meetings between the two parties' civil societies, keeping them informed about the implementation of the AA and gathering their input to it. The platform includes civil society representatives on the Georgian side, and members of the European Economic and Social Committee on the EU side.

The EU actively supports reforms in Georgia by providing expertise and financial assistance to its government. For instance, in December 2017 the EU made a [transfer](#) of €48.1 million to the country in acknowledgment of the progress it had achieved in implementing reforms; this amount was extended in support of trade, business, education, agriculture, integration and internally displaced people.

### The role of civil society

Following Georgia's bloodless 2003 [Rose Revolution](#) against the flawed results of the parliamentary election, the country has enjoyed well-organised [elections](#), in which the parliamentary opposition has played a clear role. In a regional context, where losing parties often disband, Georgia offers an example of democratic [consolidation](#) in the post-Soviet space, with the former leading party currently being in opposition. The fact that this party [accepted](#) the result of the vote without disbanding or protesting in the streets, is a clear sign of an ongoing [deepening](#) of democracy in the country. Nevertheless, some studies point to weakened support for democracy in some political parties' programmes and among the general public. The role of civil society in reversing this trend and supporting reforms is crucial.

### A vivid civil society

Georgian civil society is [vibrant](#) and active. There are around [26 000](#) registered NGOs, but it is hard to tell how many of them are active. While setting up a new NGO is easy and fast, winding it down is a bureaucratic challenge. This situation results in a big number of inactive NGOs. USAID [considers](#) that the Georgian legal environment is generally favourable for NGOs, but notes that they have difficulties in finding a sustainable economic model.

Since its election in 2016 as co-chair of the Open Government Partnership and as its [chair](#) in 2018, Georgia has committed to promoting transparency and collaboration between the state and NGOs. The country's civil society has been [involved](#) in setting up community centres, making public procurement and the hiring of civil servants more transparent, and introducing financial declarations for political parties.

Trust in NGOs is still low in Georgia. According to the Caucasus [Barometer](#) 2017, only 23 % of Georgians 'fully trust'/'rather trust' them, and roughly the same share 'fully distrust'/'rather distrust' them.

### **The 2018-2020 Roadmap for engagement with civil society**

The EU delegation in Tbilisi liaises with Georgian civil society on a regular basis, and in this context it organised [extensive consultations](#) with Georgian civil society organisations (CSOs) in 2018. This dialogue was a milestone in the 2018-2020 EU [Roadmap](#) for engagement with civil society in Georgia.

The first [roadmap](#), covering the 2014-2017 period, set three priorities regarding CSOs: improvement of the enabling framework, support for their involvement in policy dialogue, and capacity-building. The new roadmap focuses on the need to support NGOs' participation both across the country and in multiple roles (in particular, in organising policy dialogues and performing the role of watchdogs and social entrepreneurs). The roadmap further focuses on NGOs' role in promoting the benefits of the DCFTA, helping society attain a better quality of life (through improved air quality, health and road safety), contributing to public administration reform, and defending human rights. These priorities are closely related to NGOs' participation in the ongoing national [debates](#) on drug policies, freedom of the press, local and national government reforms and air pollution.

### **Mobility**

Since the entry into force of the [visa-free regime](#) in 2017, Georgian citizens holding biometric passports can enter the Schengen area visa-free and remain there for up to 90 days in any 180-day period. Since that moment, more than [500 000](#) Georgians have travelled to the EU. More intensive travel between the EU and Georgia has contributed to a considerable [increase](#) in the country's passenger air traffic. In response to heightened demand, the national airline has [opened](#) new routes to Barcelona, Bologna, Bratislava, Brussels, Berlin, Cologne and Paris.

Georgia has also become a tourism destination for EU travellers. According to the Georgian [Ministry of the Economy and Sustainable Development](#), there were nearly 300 000 trips by EU visitors to the country in 2017 (up 23.5 % from 2016), which is 4.7 % of total trips (excluding non-resident citizens of Georgia).

### **Education**

In the 2015-2018 period, 5 579 students and academic staff took part in the [Erasmus+](#) programme for the purpose of teaching or studying in the EU or Georgia. In addition, more than 5 200 Georgians, whether young people or youth workers, benefited from joint activities with their EU counterparts. Through Erasmus +, 32 Georgian higher education institutions [collaborate](#) with universities from 33 programme countries.

In the field of education, the [EaP European school](#) in Tbilisi opened its doors in September 2018 for its first 30 students from six Eastern Partnership countries. As one of the EaP's [20 deliverables for 2020](#) (20D2020), it will provide students from the EaP countries with an innovative academic programme, while fostering multicultural exchanges and cooperation. In 2017, the EU launched a call for [projects](#) under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) and the Civil Society Organisations and Local Authorities Instruments (CSO/LA), for a total of €4.35 million. Through the eight selected projects, the EU offers Georgia support on: equal opportunities for persons with disabilities; mental health; human rights; child care; and access to clean water, and also on a number of initiatives ranging from local participation to governance and inclusive policy making.

### **The role of the European Parliament**

In its 2017 [resolution](#) on the Eastern Partnership, the European Parliament called for regional cooperation, including through trans-national civil society platforms and cross-border projects. In its 2018 implementation report on the association agreement, the EP commended Georgia's efforts in combatting low and mid-level corruption. The Parliament has also [assisted](#) Georgia in organising a number of capacity-building activities in Brussels and Tbilisi, in support of the Georgian Parliament's work. In addition, in the framework of the Sakharov Fellowship, the Parliament invited a number of Georgian human rights activists to attend a two-week human rights training course. The Parliament also assists in building networks of human rights defenders across the region, and in organising [events](#) for the exchange of best practices.

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